



## **'Any Questions' Sermon series**

### **Week 6: What about other religions?**

I have been asked this many times. I think the essence of the question is, 'Is Christianity the only 'true' religion?' Or perhaps, 'Is Jesus the only way to God?'

#### **The way, the truth and the life....?**

Firstly, I want to affirm what I believe to be the uniqueness of Jesus. Jesus is unique in history because, at least in my small understanding, he claimed things of himself that no other person has claimed or demonstrated and, for those who believe those things, he is surely unique. For example:

*Incarnation:* This is one of those big words we use mostly at Christmas time. It means that God reveals himself as a human in Christ, 'the Word became flesh'. It is true that Jesus didn't always go round saying the words, 'I am God.' Yet when one looks at all he taught and claimed, there is little doubt that he was conscious of being a person whose identity was God. For example, by the way he claimed to be able to forgive sins (Mark 2:5); by the way he claimed that he would one day judge the world (Matthew 25:31-32); by the way his teaching centred on himself ("I am the way, the truth and the life; I am the light of the world, I am the bread of life, I am the true vine ... , Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father...etc.")

A little child was drawing a picture of God in class one time. The teacher said, 'What are you doing?' The child said, 'I'm drawing a picture of God.' She said, 'What do you mean? You can't draw a picture of God. Nobody knows what God looks like.' The child said, 'Well, they will do when I have finished!' Jesus said: 'If you want to know what God looks like, look at me. If you've seen me, you've seen God.'

*Indwelling:* Jesus promised that, in the same way that God dwells in him, God dwells in his people too, that the same spirit that raised Jesus from the dead is alive in us. Jesus told his disciples, 'I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever—the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you.' (John 14:16-17). The mystery of incarnation is that God dwells in humans and, because of that, humans dwell in God! Union with God is always the goal.

*Atonement:* Not only does Jesus claim to be God, he also claims to atone for the sins of the world. Has anyone else ever claimed that? 'Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world,' to quote John the Baptist's description of Jesus. Or, in Jesus's own words, 'I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep,' (John 10:11) and, 'For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.' (Mark 10:45)

*Resurrection:* There was a headline in The Onion, the satirical magazine: 'World death rate holding steady at 100 per cent.' That's the reality! We British don't talk about death. It's just something you don't mention. Even in hospitals now they try to avoid using the word 'death'. I heard of one hospital where they said: 'You must never use the word "death".' They had a politically correct way of describing it: 'negative patient care outcome'.

But people die nevertheless! And when you go to a funeral, and the coffin goes into the ground, it looks absolutely final. And it is – unless death has been conquered; unless when Jesus died and was buried he was raised to life. If he was, then there's hope beyond this life. And, if you believe the evidence for the resurrection, of which there is plenty, then in Jesus we see someone who has conquered death and has come back to tell us we need not be afraid. Who else in history has done that?

So, I want to affirm the uniqueness of Jesus; his incarnation, his indwelling, his atonement and his resurrection. I've never met anyone else like him. He holds my attention in a way that no other has ever been able to. I want to follow him and I hope others do too.

**But....** You may have sensed there was a 'but' coming! I wonder if Christians have sometimes made the uniqueness of Jesus into a bit of a problem for non-Christians, people of other faiths or none. What do I mean?

### **Jesus in the way!**

In his book 'A New Kind of Christian,' Brian McClaren recounts a conversation between his two main (fictional) characters, Pastor Dan Poole and his daughter's very wise and humble science teacher Neo Oliver (the whole book is the story of their conversations about faith, doubt, reason, mission, etc. in today's world, and is well worth a read). Neo is a lovely Christian man but holds views that Dan begins to struggle with as a pastor. Neo says to Pastor Dan, of Jesus, "*I really believe he is the truth. He is reality; he is authentic; he is genuine and real and not fake or false in any way. And I really believe that he is the life, that fullness of life is in him.....but....I think some Christians use Jesus as a shortcut to being right. In the process they bypass becoming humble or wise. Too often, when we quote the verse about him being the way, it sounds like we're saying he's in the way – as if people are trying to come to God and Jesus is blocking the path saying, 'Oh no, you don't. You have to get by me first.' I really don't think that's what he meant when he said he was the way.*" I've used Jesus as a shortcut to being right! Have you?

### **The truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth**

Another mistake I have been guilty of making in the immaturity of the past is to assume that 'the truth' can be found *only* in Christianity. Can that really be right? Surely we are free to affirm God's truth wherever and whenever it is found, as Paul does on his visit to Athens when he finds God's truth in what the Athenian poets have written and, believing that anyone is capable of speaking 'truth', he allows it to enlarge his own faith (Acts 17:28). Isn't truth everywhere and available to everyone? Has not God given himself away in Christ? And, talking of poetry, and music and art and drama, do we have to label all these things as 'Christian' in order to find something of God in them? Similarly, is it not the case that other religions can reflect, at the very least, a ray of truth that brings enlightenment to all people?

Ultimately, 'the truth' is located in a person, Christ, not in a set of religious doctrines or dogmas or rituals. And I can't imagine a place (or person) where Christ isn't. It might be that awareness of the life-giving spirit of Christ in our midst needs to be brought to our awareness, like Paul does in Athens. But Christians often adopt the language of 'taking Jesus to those who don't have him,' as if God is absent from a place until they get there. American theologian and speaker Rob Bell points out in his excellent book 'Velvet Elvis', "If

you do see yourself carrying God to places, it can be exhausting. God is really heavy.”

### **Jesus has left the Trinity!**

Let me leave you with one final thought to ponder, one that comes from the reading I have been doing recently about the Trinity, and the sense that relationship is at the heart of who God is and that we are invited into that union (remember Rublev’s icon?) Emphasising the uniqueness of Jesus may have caused Christians to pull Jesus out of the Trinity. Richard Rohr, in his book ‘Silent Compassion’, writes *“We have to prove Jesus all the time and in contradistinction from Buddha, Allah, Hindu gods or even the (Old Testament) God of Israel. In doing so, we pulled Christ out of the very union that he talked about, that he enjoyed and invited us into.....we made Jesus into the founder of our new religion...but he was trying to reform his own, and all religion, from its idolatries.”* Food for thought!

### **Summing up**

Jesus is amazing and unique. I feel as sure as I can be that he will always captivate me and hold my attention. But, let’s not let our need to be right ever put him ‘in the way’ of others. And he is present in ways we can barely imagine until we are given eyes to see and ears to hear. So, let’s affirm God wherever, whenever and in whomever we find Him, remembering that, ultimately, human beings have a common single origin and a common final goal.....God!

Revd Chris Martin, July 2017