

LOCAL FRIENDS

Helping ordinary people care for one another

The Good News

Introduction

We could spend time arguing about whether there is a God, but let us instead ask the far more important, interesting and useful question: what is God like?

Some people believe that God created the universe billions of years ago, set it in motion and then sat back to see what would happen – rarely (perhaps never) getting involved in the ongoing story. This is, for all practical purposes, indistinguishable from the situation where there is no God, so there is not a lot of point in arguing the difference.

Other people believe in a God Who is constantly interfering in ordinary life: making some people sick, healing others, finding parking spaces for busy and devout people and maybe causing earthquakes in remote places. This raises all kinds of questions about why He gets involved some times but not others, why some prayers are answered and some are not – but our questions are not proof that such a God does not exist. Some believe in multitudes of gods with varying characteristics.

The truth is that there have always been people who believed in each of these kinds of God, and other people have believed in many others. Some people seem to fashion the kind of God they want to believe in, while others believe in a God they have been taught about, or one they are afraid might be waiting for them somewhere.

Whether our ideas come from wishful thinking, childhood stories, subconscious fears or careful investigation, almost everybody believes in something. We have a reason for getting up in the morning, we value some things as more important than others, and we recognise that some actions are right while other actions are wrong, even if sometimes we struggle to tell them apart: all these things are beliefs, and are based on *something*, however insubstantial. The basic reality we believe in generally functions as our God, even if we choose not to use that word.

Knowing God

The question of what God is like matters – partly because of its philosophical and theological significance, but mainly because our lives are shaped by the nature of the God we believe in. So whether (and how) we can get to know God matters deeply.

Our beliefs do not change God – reality is what it is – but they do change *us*, they affect our present choices and determine our future path. And it is hard to have a healthy relationship with someone if you are deeply mistaken in your beliefs about them, no matter how sincere your beliefs may be.

Christians have found three good ways to get to know God better: through the world He created, through the Bible, and through Jesus of Nazareth.

The World

We can look at the world God created. He created a world that was good and beautiful, and when He created people it became ‘very good’. He created people like Him, so that we could freely choose to live in a loving and creative relationship with Him: that is what He wanted from the start, and what He still wants.

We can get to know something of God by looking at what he has created: the world is full of wonderful and beautiful things, and people who are kind and loving, working to establish peace, truth and justice; but it also contains things which do not show us what he is like: there is also much that is wrong, sickness and disease, people who are cruel and destructive, things which cause a great deal of pain and misery.

The world is not simply divided into the good and the bad parts: the wrong things are not just out there in the world: they are also in our own hearts, we find both good and bad within each of us. We need to be protected and set free not only from natural calamity and the malice of others, we also need to be rescued from our own stupidity, short-sightedness and bad choices: creation alone cannot show us how.

So we can see much of God’s wonder, creativity and majesty in creation, but other things we need to understand are unclear from creation alone. To understand God better, we need to hear Him speak to us; and this is what Christians believe He does through the pages of the Bible.

The Bible

The Bible is a collection of documents which many people have found to be helpful in getting to know God better. It talks about getting to know Him as a journey we follow in company with others, and as an activity which is vitally connected with the way we live and relate to the people around us. Most of the Bible is about the stories of people who have travelled on this journey, their accounts of what they believe He has called them to do and say, and their reflections on this experience.

We want to make the world a better place, and ourselves better people, but we cannot work out how to do it. Some people claim to have found the answer, but the answers they offer us generally create other, sometimes worse, problems. Through the pages of the Bible, God promises us there is an answer, but it is not quick or easy, and it can only be discovered as we seek to follow Him and live in a healthy relationship with Him and with each other.

The first part of the Bible – the ‘Old Testament’ – describes some of the important steps which take us towards finding this answer. One new step began with a man called Abraham. God called Abraham in order to bless him, and in order to bless many others (‘all the nations of the earth’) through him. God’s calling is always good, never selfish, and it is always costly.

God loves everyone, but those who recognise His words and respond to His love become members of His family in a specially close way. Abraham and his family responded to God’s voice, and God chose them to be His people.

Abraham’s family became a nation, enslaved in a foreign land. The story of the ‘Exodus’ tells how God heard their cry for freedom, set them free and taught them

how to live. This story is presented not only as a historic narrative, but also as a picture of the trapped, powerless state that we all feel ourselves to be in at times, of God's desire that we should be free – and how we can know that freedom.

The rest of the Old Testament describes how people in and around this family and nation sought at times to follow God, and at other times to avoid following Him.

The second part of the Bible – the 'New Testament' – is about one of Abraham's descendants, Jesus of Nazareth, and about the impact He had on other people. Over the centuries, many people have come to believe that God was present in Him in a unique way, and that the best way to discover what God is like is through Jesus.

Jesus

One of the central messages of the New Testament reflects the story of the Exodus: God has heard our cry, He has promised to set us free from the things outside which oppress us and from the things inside which diminish us. The full, complete freedom we are looking for can only be found in the Kingdom of Heaven.

The Kingdom of Heaven is a place where everybody matters, no matter how large or how small their skills or their intellect or their money, a place where sins are forgiven and vengeance is left to God, a place where God's justice and peace are known, experienced and lived.

The good news that Jesus taught is that the Kingdom of Heaven is not far away, but near at hand; one day it will come in all its fullness, but right now you can experience it; you can choose to live in it today.

Jesus 'went about doing good', teaching people about the Kingdom of Heaven and helping people discover what it is like through His words and actions. His whole life was about enabling people to experience, understand and be a part of the coming Kingdom of Heaven. This is not about what happens to us when we die, but about the way we live today, about the way we relate to one another, about the way we use our money. It has eternal consequences, but it is mostly about the here and now.

Jesus called people to follow Him; He still does. He invites us to join Him in His mission to establish the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth – to see the will of our Heavenly Father be done 'on Earth as it is in Heaven'.

You can choose to live as part of the Kingdom of Heaven, accept God's rule over your life and live according to His ways. The benefits of choosing this are immense, both here and now, and on into eternity; one day soon, the Kingdom of Heaven will fully arrive, will take over completely; and when that happens, if you are not part of the Kingdom, there will be no place left for you.

Jesus warned people that if they wanted to be a part of the Kingdom of Heaven, to enjoy the good things we can find there, we have to be prepared to change: change our minds and change our lives.

You can't love God and hate the things He says; you can't love God and disobey Him. He knows what is right, He knows what is best for us; to ignore Him or pretend that we know better is just foolish and destructive. The only way to fully live is to live in a relationship of loving obedience to our Heavenly Father.

Jesus taught that the Kingdom of Heaven is for everyone: nobody is excluded, everyone is welcome. We need to be loved, so we must show God's love to others – even our enemies; we need forgiveness, so we must extend forgiveness to the people who hurt us. The price of receiving the Kingdom, of enjoying the benefits freely offered to you, is simply that you have to offer it equally freely to everyone else.

Jesus invited people to join His family, to share His life and receive a new start, a new life which is fit for eternity: this new life is about love, mercy, grace, light, truth and forgiveness. Jesus summed up God's rules for living in two commands: love God with everything you have got, and love your neighbour as you love yourself.

This is really hard, for two reasons: we don't really understand how to love either God or our neighbour; and, when we do understand what the really loving thing is, we find we don't have the strength to do it. Jesus promised us help: if we follow Him, the Holy Spirit will guide us and strengthen us.

Jesus taught many things which go against our normal understanding, experience and expectations: surely God cannot be so good, kind and generous? Many people disliked Jesus and what He taught – people who thought they knew what God was like and wanted to hold on to their mistaken ideas, and people whose wealth and power was threatened by His teaching. When Jesus died on the cross, it seemed like He had failed and His enemies had won.

The early Church taught that 'Jesus is Lord'; an astonishing and deeply political claim in a state which required you to acknowledge that 'Caesar is lord', claiming absolute power over you and demanding absolute allegiance from you; and somehow we see the Lordship of Jesus being expressed as he hung on the cross, demonstrating sacrificial love for all, including His enemies.

It seemed the ultimate absurdity: the one Who claimed to be able to save us all needing to be saved, but left abandoned; the one Who promised that God will rescue us is left unrescued; the one Who proclaimed love ends up a victim of hate. The cross seems to prove that the things Jesus taught were just empty words based on wishful thinking. And that would have been true if the cross had been the end of the story.

But God raised Jesus from the dead. This astonishing event can be understood in many ways: here are just a few.

- Jesus chose to love His enemies, rather than fight them; to suffer and die rather than disobey His Father – showing how we, too, can live.
- Through the resurrection, God acted to confirm that Jesus had got it right. Jesus had claimed to act and speak on behalf of His Heavenly Father, and that is exactly what He had been doing; He had claimed that people could get to know God through knowing Him – and so they can.
- The resurrection tells us that we do not have to be afraid of death: it is not the end; there is a new life, a new creation awaiting us, if we choose life in Him.
- The cross and resurrection help us understand Jesus' teaching that it is better to suffer wrong than to commit it: we now know that, in the end, God will have the last word.
- Given the way the world is, sometimes it is necessary to suffer if we want to see the Kingdom of Heaven made real.

Following Jesus

If you follow Jesus, He calls you to join His mission, be a part of His work making the Kingdom of Heaven a reality here and now. You begin to serve as best you can, no matter how weak, limited or damaged you are; and, as you serve, you grow.

Following Jesus is not easy: you are setting yourself against the way the world is, and against all those who benefit from the current injustice – which means most people who have any form of power. You will probably suffer as a consequence of following Jesus, which is why He tells people to count the cost of following Him, and warns that as His follower you must expect to ‘take up your cross’.

Following Jesus is not something you can do on your own: as His follower, you become a part of God’s adopted family. Despite all the family problems, we get to know Jesus better as we live, and discover how to live, as a member of this family.

Jesus calls us to follow Him, so we have a choice: to respond to His call, or to reject Him. But if God, the source of all life, has made Himself known through Jesus, then rejecting Him is the same as rejecting God and rejecting life. How we respond to Jesus really matters; and, one way or another, we all make some response, even if we decide not to respond.

Following Jesus is really tough; but, in the long run, living without God and without grounded hope in the world is even harder; and following Him, joining in His mission to build God’s Kingdom on Earth, is the most fulfilling and worthwhile life anyone could possibly have.

Summary

- **The Kingdom is coming.** God’s Kingdom of mercy, justice, truth and love is coming, and is already present in Jesus.
- **Jesus is Lord.** Jesus is the resurrected Lord over all this new Kingdom, and over us if we belong to it; His joyful but costly life is the only life worth having and is available to all.
- **Living is a choice.** You have to turn away from your old life and follow Jesus, join Him in bringing the Kingdom, if you want to experience the fresh start and share in the new life He offers.
- **The cost is worth it.** Following Jesus is hard, but the price is worth paying; whatever the cost, the life He offers is worth living.

If you want to follow Jesus, just tell Him! He has promised that He will never turn away anyone who comes to him. Your own words will be fine, or you can use or adapt a prayer like the one below.

Lord Jesus, I want to be a part of Your family and Your Kingdom; I want to give you all I have, to follow You and learn from You; I want to love my Heavenly Father with everything I have, and to love the people around me the same way I love myself; I know I am not strong enough or good enough to do any of this myself; but I believe that Your life in me is all that I need. Thank you for Your promise to take me just as I am, give me a fresh start and a new life, and turn me into the person You created me to be.