

**26/9/07 John 14:1-14 midweekchurch Questions 4 (mid)**

There's an old story about an elephant and it is standing before a number of people who are all blindfolded. And one of the people goes up to the elephant and feels its long trunk and says you know I think this elephant is like a fire hose, long and rubbery and water comes out of it. And another of the people feels the elephant's legs and says its not like a fire hose, an elephant is more like a tree trunk, strong and solid. A third goes forward and grabs hold of the elephant's tail and says no, you're both wrong its more like a stringy rope.

Now imagine you were watching the whole scene and you had perfect vision. You would say to them, you know you're all right, you're all describing a part of the elephant, but none of you has the whole thing. But together you can find the full picture. If you just listened to one another and were tolerant of one's another's beliefs, you would find out that none of you has a mortgage on truth And together you would find out what an elephant is really like.

Now I tell that story because many people will say that is what religion does with God. The Buddhist, learns about the peace of God, the Hindu about karma, the Muslim points to the teachings of Mohammad and the Christian about the gospel and together, together you get the whole picture of God. On your own you might get some whacky ideas but if you guys would all just listen to one another, then you might actually find out that all religions are right, all religions lead to God but all religions are incomplete with each other. Thus we need to be tolerant of people who believe something different to us.

For many people today think it doesn't matter what you believe as long as you are sincere and tolerant. So you can be a Christian, a Buddhist, a Satanist, a New Age guru, it doesn't really matter. It's not what you believe in that is important, just that you have faith, you believe in something. You need to be sincere about your faith.

And the reason that this way of thinking is so popular is that we rub shoulders with so many different nationalities, with so many different cultures, with so many different religions and we need to live with these people. So its not helpful to say that one culture is better than another. That one colour is stronger or fitter or smarter than another, even that one religion is better than one another. And so many have come to the belief that it doesn't matter what you believe, as long as you are sincere. In this way we can easily co-exist with one another, we can live in a multi cultural, multi racial, multi religious society.

Now I want to agree that there is much virtue in tolerance. None of us are any better than the other. We all have different and valid experiences that shape us into who we are. Each nationality has a great amount of history and culture that we should respect, a lot of wisdom that we shouldn't just throw away. Yet tolerance must take

into consideration truth. For just because we believe something, doesn't make it true.

Most people believed a few centuries ago that the world was flat. They believed it sincerely. They were willing to ostracise other people who dared think that it was round. But gradually scientists gathered more and more data, to prove it wasn't flat after all. And today it isn't even an issue.

During the 1930's and 40's the Nazi Government believed that Arians, the white Germanic people, were the master race. And the people that were stopping their destiny were the Jews. So they believed, really believed that the Jews deserved to be annihilated, wiped out. And so some 6 million Jews were exterminated, in one of the worst atrocities in human history. But many Germans sincerely believed what they were doing was right. Yet sincerity was not enough, and the world rightly came to see what was going on in Nazi Germany was wrong.

You see being sincere concerning something doesn't make it right. Just look at those suicide bombers, at those who kill or rape or steal things from one another, or the way we Australians treated the aboriginals in the past. We are not always right. Yet that is still what many people still think today. It doesn't matter what you believe, even what religion you believe in, as long as you are sincere.

The problem with this view is that it misunderstands the teachings of all the different religions, for it teaches that basically we believe in the one thing. Well do we? Lets look at the teachings of some of the major religions on two main points of contention.

**a) Lets firstly look at the nature of God.** Christians believe that there is only 1 God, yet this God is made up of 3 persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Each of these persons have a role - the Father created the world and rules it now; the Son reconciled us back to the Father by dying on the cross; and the Spirit leads and guides us, giving us wisdom and direction and strength and assurance of God's continued help. So Christians believe in one God, made up of 3 persons.

But Islam and Judaism disagree with the Christian position, in fact they disagree violently. They agree there is just one God, but they scoff at the idea of the Trinity. For the Muslim, Jesus is just a prophet and when his teachings disagree with the great prophet Mohammad then they are ignored. Judaism doesn't recognise Jesus at all. In fact if a member of a Jewish family becomes a follower of Jesus, then the orthodox Jew will hold a funeral for them, for they consider them as good as dead.

So how can Jesus be both God and not God? How can there be three members of the Trinity and only one member of the God head at the

very same time? But it gets even worse when you look at some of the other religions! You see Hinduism doesn't believe in just one God, but 1,000's and 1,000s of gods. So how can one God actually be 1,000's? Mormonism believes that the reward for a good life is that we become our own gods in the next life? So how can we become a God if there is only one God? And Buddhists don't believe in a god at all?

You see these religions may have some moral teachings that are similar but in the most foundation issue of all, in their view of God, it is so different, so contradictory that they all can't be right. We can't all be touching a different part of the elephant so to speak. So which is right and which is wrong? But before we think about that lets look at another key area....

**b) How we are saved.** Even if we were to agree over what God is like, and we could agree that God had prepared a heaven, a nirvana, a better world for the future, the most vital question is how do we get there? What can we do to make ourselves acceptable to God? What sorts of things does he want us to do, right here and now?

Now the Muslim belief is based on the five pillars of Islam, where one must continually repeat the Creed, make a pilgrimage to Mecca, give money to the poor, pray 5 times daily and keep the fast of Ramadan. Anyone who doesn't do this, will miss out on heaven, which is a paradise of wine, women and song. Sorry girls, heaven is not going to be much fun for you, but men, you basically get whatever you want!

Yet the Buddhist has a less active path to their nirvana, in fact it is totally relaxing! Through Meditation and following the eightfold path to enlightenment ( so there are not 5 steps but 8) you can remove all desire and enter into total nothingness. Their idea of heaven happens here on earth, not in the next world and it is likened to snuffing out a candle. Have you had that sort of experience? Well if not, you've missed out on heaven.

Whereas the Hindu achieves nirvana by losing your individuality! They commit themselves to the Good Life & in return reap their karma in the next life. Where you are reincarnated to a higher form if you are good, a prince or a queen for example, but if you are bad you might find yourself coming back as a slug or a cane toad. So there is no such thing as heaven, instead you are trapped in the continual cycle of reincarnation.

You see all these religions say you have to do *different* things in order to be saved. But they do have one thing in common, it is by your works, your lifestyle, your actions that you achieve God's favour. They are all do it yourself propositions. Follow this way of life, say these words, go to this holy place and you will get on God's right side. But once again who is right, when they are all pointing in such different directions?

I heard recently about a Chinese Confucian scholar who had since become a Christian. He told a story that illustrated some of the difference between the religions. Apparently a man fell into a dark, dirty, slimy pit and he tried to climb out of it, but he couldn't. Confucius came along and he saw the man in the pit & said "*Poor fellow, if he'd listened to me, he would never have got in there.*" Then he went on his way.

Buddha came along and he saw the man in the pit and said "*Poor fellow if he'll just come up here, I'll help him!*" He too went on his way! Then Jesus Christ came along, he saw the man and said "*Poor fellow*" and jumped into the pit and lifted him out. Jesus perished down there but the man in the pit lived!

You see the difference between Christianity and all other religions is that it is not about what you can do for God but what Christ has done for you. Our going to heaven is not a reward for our labours but a gift that none of us deserve. For all other religions, good works earn us our salvation, but in Christianity they are our response to being saved by God.

Thus Christianity is the only one that can give us assurance, assurance that we are really going to heaven. Because it doesn't rest on our own efforts, but on God's effort. It is the only one where God jumps into our predicament and does something for us. And this something reverses our past, wipes away our sin and gives us a future.

You see when you look closely at them, all other religions contradict each other, So they can't all be true at once. So if Christianity is true, all the other religions are untrue. But the reverse is also right. If the Muslim religion is right, then Christianity is wrong and should be ignored, forgotten and rejected.

And the Bible understands this and that is why it proclaims that the only way to God is through the Lord Jesus Christ. The apostle Peter says this clearly to the men of the Sanhedrin who believed that Judaism was the only way to God. He said "*Salvation is found in no-one else but Jesus Christ, there is no other name under heaven by which men can be saved.*"

Is this arrogant? Is this saying we have it all right and everyone else has it all wrong? Is this declaring that we are somehow better than everyone else? No as one writer says when we are telling people about Jesus it is like one beggar, telling another beggar where to find bread. We are just telling others what God has told us. And we don't do this in an arrogant or self righteous way, we do it in a humble way, because we know there is nothing that we have done to cause our salvation, it is all of God. As Jesus declares "*I am the way, the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father except through me.*"

So all we are doing is communicating to others what the Bible says. So is that right, is it true? Well we are back to some of the other questions we have looked at over the last couple of weeks. How do we know God exists? How do we know that Jesus rose from the dead? Can we trust the Bible? And it seems to me the key to all these questions, is Jesus. Was he really God? Did he really tell the truth? Did he really rise again? For if he did, then we know that Christianity is true, but if he didn't do these things, then we shouldn't touch it with a 10 metre barge pole.

For Jesus is the key to knowing God and to being saved. Now can I remind you that this is not a popular suggestion, is it? If we just talk about God we can get some agreement. If you encourage good and moral and upright behaviour, people will nod their heads. If you mention spirituality is OK. But if you talk about Jesus, you are a religious fanatic, a nut, you've gone over the top.

But what this means is if you or your spouse, or your grandkids, or your brother or your best friends, aren't following the way that is Jesus, doesn't believe the truth about Jesus, then they won't experience the life that Jesus offers. Instead they will go to hell.

That's scary isn't it? Jesus has the key to unlock heaven for them and without that key they will miss out. So that puts the responsibility back on us, to not just talk about God. To not just concentrate on our actions, on being good people around them, but to humbly point people to Jesus. It is not about being religious that is important, it is about following Jesus.

So it's not really about going about going to midweek church or not. It's not about the denomination that you are a part of. It is not about how you worship or whether you live a good life. These are all what you do. It is about what has been done for you..

So how do we know that Christianity is right? It is the only one that says, nothing *you can do* can get you to heaven. But something that has been done for you can secure your relationship with God. So trust in Jesus. Is that right? I think so.

But if it is right, then why does the average Australian ignore Jesus? Because they think they can do enough to get into heaven. And unfortunately on the last day they will find out they are horribly wrong. So we had better let them know the truth well before then, hadn't we?