

John 14:1-14

14.05.17

*The only way?*

It must surely be one of the most controversial texts in the entire New Testament – one that has been endlessly debated and argued over: John chapter 14 and verse 6, ‘Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father but by me.’ For some, this is the bedrock of the Christian faith, the non-negotiable foundation upon which everything else rests – while for others it is a stumbling block that gets in the way of Christianity. Here there would appear to be an exclusive claim for Jesus Christ as the one and only, unique, way to God and not surprisingly that causes problems in our multi-faith, diverse world.

Once upon a time, after all, and not so very long ago, we in this part of the world only really knew about the Christian faith. We were raised in it and our culture was shaped by it and it was like the water that fish swim in. It was our surroundings, the very air that we breathed and we knew nothing else. And the vast majority of people were baptised into this faith and were taught it and nurtured in it. And people of other faiths were another world away, in parts of the globe that were often considered less civilised and developed – and their religions were therefore considered primitive and superstitious. It was easy to maintain the superiority and uniqueness of the Christian faith. Now, of course, the world has changed. People of other faiths are not somewhere ‘over there’ but are here with us, among us. And any kind of exclusivism is considered ignorant and unenlightened: how dare we say that one religion is ‘right’ and everyone else’s is ‘wrong’, or that one faith has exclusive access to God? And especially to those who practice no faith at all – increasing numbers of people – it all seems so absurd, people claiming one brand of superstitious nonsense trumps every other brand of superstitious nonsense. And just look at the harm that an exclusive view of religion has done in the world, as one faith fights for recognition and supremacy over other faiths and the result is the Crusades and the Inquisition and all the horrors unleashed in God’s name. Can’t we just be a little more ‘inclusive’ and affirm all faiths equally?

So there is a squabble about the Christian faith even among those who might call themselves Christians. On one side there is the exclusive view that Jesus is entirely unique and that Christianity is the only Way, the only Truth, the only path to eternal Life. And on the other side there is the inclusive view

that different faiths are all equally valid but all different paths to the one God: many roads to one destination. And the inclusives accuse the exclusives of being narrow and fanatical, while the exclusives accuse the inclusives of being wishy-washy and selling out Christianity. And the unbelieving world looks on, baffled and confused.

So where do we begin? Well, it's a brave person that steps onto this minefield but you cannot avoid difficult texts – so let's go, and with some trepidation let's see if perhaps the truth might be slightly more nuanced, not quite fitting comfortably in either of those positions. And, given the impossibility of beginning to do this subject justice, I want to make three points this morning.

The first thing to say – surely uncontroversially – is that John's Gospel says that Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life and not the Christian religion. And we have to say, over and over again, sadly and regretfully, that there is a big difference between Jesus and the Christian religion as practised all too often, and that for too much of the time the Christian religion has presented to the world a caricature of Christ, misrepresenting him disastrously. Last Sunday, with the other churches on The Spui, we commemorated 500 years since the Reformation, that great 16<sup>th</sup> century rupture in the Christian faith and church that set Roman Catholic over and against Protestant. And that event, and Martin Luther's protest against the church of his day, shows how easily Christianity becomes distorted and corrupt and defaces the image of God in Christ. And the fact that what is known as 'the Protestant principle' insists that the church must always be reforming, always rethinking its faith and its practice, only goes to show how the church must struggle to be faithful to Jesus. The Christian faith is an attempt to understand God as revealed to us in Jesus Christ, to grasp him and to pin him down, but Jesus is far so elusive. The great Reformer who followed Martin Luther, John Calvin, emphasised that one feature of sinful human beings is that we are idolaters. The human heart is an idol factory, as he put it. We continually make God in our own image – Christians and people of other faiths alike. And that means that all faiths, including Christianity, are to some degree distortions of the truth. And yes, Christianity is the place where Jesus is proclaimed as Lord, however poorly, and that is why I will always associate myself with this faith and call myself a Christian. But I realise that our confession that Jesus is Lord is deeply flawed,

and that Jesus is often absent from the faith and practice of the religion that bears his name.

And that brings me to the second point. Just as Jesus is often absent from the faith and practice of Christians, so he may be present and active in the faith and practice of those of other religions which do not acknowledge him as Lord. Jesus cannot be confined to the Christian faith and the those who call themselves Christians. Who knows where Christ is to be found incognito, unrecognised, unconfessed in people of other faiths? Who knows in whose lives he lives – unnamed? In this same John’s Gospel, a few chapters back, Jesus likens the Spirit of God to the wind and says, ‘The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes’. There is that elusive Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ blowing where he wills and who knows where we might hear the sound – in whose life, and in whose faith? Where might that Spirit of Jesus Christ be found in the Buddhist faith or in Islam, albeit unconfessed as the true and only Lord? In other words it is entirely possible to acknowledge the uniqueness of Christ, the fact that he is the one and only way to God and indeed is God with us, while not confining him to the Christian faith or to Christian believers. Jesus says in John chapter 10, ‘I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold, I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice’. Might that not refer at least at one level to those of other faiths? Jesus is shepherd of a large and very diverse flock and we run the risk of restricting the boundaries of that flock. And in fact Jesus explicitly warned elsewhere that many who think themselves ‘in’ may find themselves ‘out’ and many who we might consider ‘out’ may in fact be ‘in’. The Christian writer and apologist C S Lewis made this point with characteristic clarity. He wrote, ‘We do know that no(one) can be saved except through Christ; we do not know that only those who know Him can be saved through Him’. Think about that because it seems to me to be crucial: ‘We do know that no(one) can be saved except through Christ; we do not know that only those who know Him can be saved through Him’. Christians may be those who know Jesus in a unique and conscious way, confessing him as Lord, and that opens us up to a whole new relationship with God, as we’ll see in a moment. But Jesus cannot be confined to where he is acknowledged and confessed - and something of his salvation can be present even where he is not known that way.

So to one last point, and it concerns salvation and what it means. Think about this. This verse in John's Gospel does not say, 'I am the way, the truth and the life, no-one comes to God except by me...' It says 'no-one comes to the Father but by me'. What this is saying is that through Jesus we are given a very special relationship with God, a relationship that is expressed in that word 'father', and just think of all the love and intimacy and care that goes with that word. 'So elsewhere in the New Testament salvation through Jesus is presented as a new relationship with God whereby we become daughters and sons of God in a new way and we are given the privilege of knowing God in this new, parental way. And there is maybe more to this than meets the eye. You see, in the New Testament, there is really only one son or daughter of God, only one person who can call God 'Father' and that is Jesus and Jesus speaks of that special, close relationship in these verses from John 14. As Christians we believe that from all eternity he and only he has been God's true Son, the one Son of the Father. But when we become Christians something extraordinary happens. When we become Christians we are given the gift of sharing in Jesus' relationship with this one who he calls 'Father'. Suddenly Jesus' Father becomes our Father. And so Paul writes in his letter to the Galatians, 'God has sent the spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying... Father!' And then God is no longer some vague force. Then God is not merely some distant Creator – he is one who we know with all the very special associations of that word 'Father'.

Just think of those moments in Jesus' life when he called God 'Father'. Those moments of deep prayer, like those moments in the Garden of Gethsemane when he faced the agony of his vocation. Then he drew near to this one who he called Father – this one with whom he was united in the closest of bonds. And as Christians we receive God's Holy Spirit and so share in that deep intimacy with God that is Christ's first of all.

So no, other faiths are not all dead ends. Christians do not have a monopoly on God. We cannot say that people of other faiths have no experience God. But do they experience God as Father with all that means and all that Jesus revealed?

Well, I said it was minefield. No doubt the things I've said will appear too narrow, too exclusive to some, and too affirming of other faiths to others. As a Christian I believe that Jesus is the definitive revelation of God to us. Truth, ultimately, is Jesus-shaped. And I will affirm that truth and celebrate it

wherever it is found – in whatever religion and in whoever’s life. And I will try to make the Christian faith worthy of one whose name it bears, proclaiming Jesus as Lord of all. And to him be the praise and the glory forever. Amen.

O holy and gracious God,  
eternal and sovereign one,  
maker of all things in heaven and on earth  
and who we are privileged to call ‘Father’:  
we praise and bless your holy name.  
we praise you who have come among us in Jesus Christ,  
the Way, the Truth and the Life:  
Christ the living Way to yourself;  
Christ the Truth who reveals you to us;  
Christ in and through whom we have life  
in all its fullness:  
we praise you, the one in whom we find our true home,  
that dwelling place with its many mansions.  
O God,  
forgive us we pray that we have strayed from your Way;  
forgive us that we have distorted and twisted your Truth;  
forgive us that we have forfeited the Life that you yearn  
for all our children.  
O God, forgive us and have mercy upon us we pray.  
And we praise and thank you that in Jesus you have come to us  
with outstretched arms, to raise us up where we have fallen  
and to lead us home.  
Come now and reassure us of a love that triumphs,  
unquenchable and unyielding,  
and help us to live in that love and to show it to the world.  
We pray in the name of Jesus Christ,  
crucified and risen, and in whose name we pray, saying...