

Preaching on Atheism

We want you to preach on atheism. We'd love to have lots of preachers in churches around Australia address the issues of atheism, and we hope this resource will help you do this.

We originally wrote these sermons to encourage churches to respond to the Atheist Convention, *Celebration of Reason*, in Melbourne in April 2012. Although the convention has come and gone the issue is still around, and garners a new wave of attention each time a celebrity atheist publishes a new book or visits Australia. So the sermons ideas still useful.

In these notes we are trying to promote preaching to Christian churches. We haven't tried to put together a resource for apologetic talks to unbelieving audiences. That would be worth doing, but it isn't what we're trying here.

These are some ideas of what you can proclaim to a Christian congregation from Scripture in the face of the new atheism. We have outlined a series of four sermons each based on the exposition of a Biblical text and the declaration of the gospel of Jesus Christ. They are primarily a word to believers who may be unsettled, confused, intrigued or angry about atheism or who can yet see that it is a great opportunity for the gospel but wonder what they can say.

We are not trying to trigger a war against atheists and run them out of town, or even berate them into silence. We want to live in society where belief and non-belief are allowed and where these issues can be discussed and debated openly.

While these sermons are not primarily apologetic they certainly have an apologetic dimension. Apologetics serves Christians by helping them see how their faith is defensible. At the same time it can at least prompt unbelievers to listen more carefully to the Christian message. We hope these sermons do both these things, giving Christians some greater clarity and confidence in the face of atheist criticism and engaging the unbeliever who is at church and opening the way for them to reconsider their scepticism or apathy.

We are providing you with some sermon starters. We don't at all expect you to feel constrained to repeat what we have here. In fact that would probably be a very bad idea. Please adapt and adopt anything we've put in here and make use of it in whatever ways suits you and your people.

Each sermon looks at a topic raised by the new atheists: faith and doubt, whether God is a projection, suffering and ethics. For each sermon we provide the following.

Texts: a suggested Old Testament and New Testament text which serve as the basis for a sermon.

Rationale: A summary of a few sentences of our sermon direction. You might call this our 'big idea' though it is a little more complex than one big idea.

Notes: These are written to you, the preacher. They are not meant to be a sermon or a detailed commentary on the suggested texts. They explain our thinking about the topic and suggest some ways of developing the ideas biblically, theologically, apologetically and pastorally. We certainly assume that you will do more work on the biblical texts as you prepare.

A sermon outline: some main headings and a couple of subpoints which could be the framework of a sermon.

Quotations: A few quotations, from all sorts of sources, which might spark some thoughts or be useful in the sermon.

Resources: Some books and other resources which might help you prepare or might be good to suggest to people.

We share these hoping that you they will encourage you to declare God's word to believers living a world in which unbelief is getting more aggressive and spiritual longing seems more obvious.

Michael Jensen, Moore College, Sydney

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April, 2012.

Doubting and Believing

Texts: John 20:24-31; Ecclesiastes 1:12-18

Rationale: The point of this sermon is to help the congregation think about what it is to believe by considering the narrative of a skeptic turned believer – Thomas. When we doubt, it is because we have started to believe something else. A secondary rationale for the sermon is to acknowledge the presence of doubt in the lives of believers and invite conversation about it.

Notes: In the contemporary world a stance of skeptical doubt appears brave and authentic. Doubt conveys a kind of knowing aloofness; an ability to stand courageously above the gullibility of the ordinary person. It is the position from which you can be more authentic than thou. Comedians like Stephen Fry, Tim Minchin and Ross Noble, for example, use their unbelief to connect with their audiences.

But if we dismiss doubt as so much posing, we underestimate its more serious and earnest side. In the nineteenth century the great poet Alfred Tennyson, a doubter of longstanding himself, wrote: “There is more faith in honest doubt, believe me, than in half the creeds.”

‘Honest doubt’ is certainly preferable to the kind of willful ignorance or deliberate naivety of most popular religion. (I suspect that this phrase will resonate with many congregation members). Who isn’t tired of intellectual shortcuts and slick arguments that don’t stack up on closer inspection? Who isn’t appalled by the kind of blasé faith which is more convenient than courageous and more concerned for reputation and sticking with the received opinion than for the truth?

But even doubt has its limits. It is simply not possible to doubt everything. As the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein once said: “If you tried to doubt everything you would not get as far as doubting anything. The game of doubt presupposes certainty.” That is to say: doubts will tend to arise in one place because of increasing certainties in other places. You lose belief because of the presences of counter-beliefs. This insight has, I think, great pastoral merit for us: it is always worth asking the doubting person, or indeed asking ourselves when we begin to have doubts: what am I starting to believe in more than the Christian faith?

We don’t have anything like a biography of Thomas the apostle. We don’t know if he was naturally skeptical or just crushed by the disaster of the crucifixion of his master.

Like many of the characters in the gospel of John he is a bit of a literalist. Like Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman, he can’t see what Jesus is saying - he still hasn’t got the spiritual insight that is necessary to understand who Jesus is. What Jesus is saying just doesn’t make sense of the world as he knows it.

And so as we meet him in his famous scene in chapter 20 it appears that little has changed for him.

24 Now Thomas (also known as Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. 25 So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!" But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe."

Nothing in Thomas's view of the world made him think that the report of the resurrection of Jesus was true. It was easier to believe that those who told him the news were sadly misguided or deluded.

Thomas was not ancient Richard Dawkins: Thomas had witnessed miracles and had heard the teaching of Jesus and had even been prepared to die with him. But still he cannot see. He makes his demand for tangible proof of the risen Jesus because he cannot think of a circumstance in which he might ever have to place his fingers in the wounds of Jesus.

We often think of Thomas as the ultimate empiricist (that is, a person who says: 'I won't believe unless I see') but really he is a thoroughgoing rationalist, because he knows already, or thinks he knows, what he can't possibly ever see. By a rationalist I mean that he has a *theory* of how the world operates that cannot be gainsaid and that determines how he believes things.

Our theories act like great filters for our experience of things – and they are a convenient way for us to deal with all manner of information in a way that we can quickly organise and understand it and deal with it in the world. An example of such a theory would be the Scottish philosopher David Hume's principle 'that the laws of nature are never broken'. It is a fine sounding principle. But if a law of nature – such as dead man rising – were ever to occur, you would be unable to see it, because your theory had already determined beforehand that such things do not occur. The theory might just screen out a reality.

This is very much how the beliefs of the New Atheists and the other cultured despisers of Christianity of our time work. They tend to fly under the cover of the authority of empirical science, which gains its power from dealing with what is there in front of its face. That's why it can describe the world so well – it must deal with what is in the test tube, and not with what is only there in theory. But when they dip their toes into philosophical and theological waters, they become for the most part dependent on their theories. God isn't part of the theory, so God must go.

Strangely, this is how Islamic apologists against Christianity work as well. They always start with a theory about God: 'God never dies', to which I nod. Then they say 'Did Jesus die?' to which I also assent. Then comes the killer blow: 'Was Jesus God?' And well indeed: Jesus makes a very poor God in theory.

But Christianity is not a philosophy or a theory. It is a historical faith – which doesn't mean that it belongs in a museum, but rather that it begins with what God actually does rather than what human beings feel he ought to do.

And so the gospel writers – and particularly John – draw us into the world of eyewitness testimony. They don't ask us to accept a philosophy. They invite us to the courtroom to hear the witnesses to what happened tell their stories – and to consider whether we believe the stories or not.

A week later, everything dramatically changes for Thomas (20:26-7) And at that moment his whole constructed theoretical world dramatically collapses before the sheer fact of the presence of the risen Jesus right there in the room in front of him. 'My Lord and my God!' What else could be said? What else could you say with Jesus in the room? And in that instant of discovery, in that one gut reaction, Thomas moves from spiritual blindness to twenty-twenty spiritual sight. But the time for theories is passed – because here in front of him is the reality.

What Jesus says next, and how John comments on it, tells us some very significant things about the structure of Christian believing (20:29-31)

29 Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." 30 Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. 31 But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

Thomas has become a necessary link in the chain of believing. He has become an eyewitness to the risen Christ whose testimony will serve as evidence to those who haven't seen Christ first-hand. It will be the seeing and believing of the Thomas and the other apostles that leads to the hearing and believing of 'those who have not seen'.

Christian believing is belief in the testimony of those who saw the events of the life of Jesus. Are the witnesses trustworthy or not? And how will their testimony be transmitted? In vs 31, John lets us know: it has been written down for us who now come to read. And the blessing of those who will believe without seeing that Jesus declared to Thomas, is a blessing to those who read and believe and have life in his name.

That's not to say all doubt is removed. But doubt can exist alongside faith and not destroy it.

Doubting might be hip, but believing is blessed.

Ultimately believing is what connects us to the one who gives life abundantly. It is because it is believing in the one who died, yet lives. It is believing that death has been conquered, and sin has been defeated. It is a believing hope, in other words. And that changes everything.

But believing in this sense is not accepting a superior theory: it is just a matter of seeing as Thomas saw – or at least, of believing his testimony: Christ is risen – my Lord and my God. Dead men do not rise from the dead, it is true. But that is only a theory.

It is important to acknowledge the presence of doubt, and to admit that a few short sermons on the subject of doubt won't simply blow it away. Speaking openly about doubt however means that we can be honest with one another about our struggles in believing.

But ultimately, at the end of all our questions and problems and conundrums and paradoxes, stands the figure of the risen Jesus. And we meet him, the tables are more than turned. He is risen: and the sheer fact of his life brings us trembling to his feet to exclaim with Thomas: My Lord and my God!

Outline:

1. Doubt appears real, but has its limits
2. Christianity is not a philosophy or a theory – it is a historical faith
3. Thomas's theories are exploded by meeting the risen Jesus
4. Christian believing is believing the testimony of those who saw the events of the life of Jesus
5. Doubting might be cool, but believing is blessed because it produces hope

Quotations:

There is more faith in honest doubt, believe me, than in half the creeds.

Alfred, Lord Tennyson

If you tried to doubt everything you would not get as far as doubting anything. The game of doubt presupposes certainty.

Ludwig Wittgenstein

Modest doubt is called the beacon of the wise.

William Shakespeare

The Resurrection hope makes people ready to live their lives in love wholly, and to say a full and entire Yes to a life that leads to death. It does not withdraw the human soul from bodily, sensory life; it ensouls this life with unending joy.

Jurgen Moltmann

Resources:

Os Guinness *God in the Dark. The Assurance of Faith Beyond A Shadow of Doubt* (Crossway Books, 1996)

Jennifer Michael Hecht *Doubt: A History* (HarperOne, 2004)

Timothy Keller *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York, 2008)

Atheism and the real (inconvenient) God

Texts: Jeremiah 10:1-16; 1 Corinthians 8:1-6

Rationale: Atheist criticism echoes the prophets and challenges us about which God we believe in. When we respond to the atheist criticism we have to reconsider our own view of God.

Notes: In his Sydney Morning Herald column Peter Fitzsimons' regularly mocks sports stars who attribute their success to God. He points out the problems with these claims. What's going on when they don't win? Is God off the job? And what would happen if two divinely blessed teams clashed? Who would get the win then? The god who blesses you with sport wins is a nice god to have. You can accuse Fitzsimons of taking cheap shots, but you have to admit that belief in God can be rather convenient and comfortable. This talk looks at how atheist criticism can focus us on an important question: which God to we believe in?

One of the themes of the new atheists is that God can be explained scientifically or naturally. "There is, I believe, compelling evidence that humans created God and not vice versa", writes Michael Shermer in *The Believing Brain* (Times, 2011). His explanation is that our minds are wired to find patterns of explanation and a personal intentionality in the universe in order to give life meaning and that this is reinforced by the role of religion in creating social cohesion. Other new atheists offer similar explanations. Daniel Dennett's *Breaking the spell: Religion as a natural phenomenon* (Viking, 2006) is a book length study offering several possible theories of where religion and belief come from.

These arguments follow in the tradition of Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-72). In *The Essence of Christianity* (1841), he argued that religion is an expression of human consciousness, and the idea of God is a projection of human nature. We need someone like us to be in control of affairs, so we embrace the idea of a divinity who reflects our nature and guarantees what we most desire. Before Feuerbach there were thinkers who were trying to show that the world could be understood without God, he took the further step to explain where belief in God came from and to argue that faith is a problem. He argued that belief in an infinite God suppresses our grasp of the true infinity of human essence: "to enrich God, man must become poor; that God may be all, man must be nothing" (*The Essence of Christianity* Harper, 1957).

This is an important question for Christians to face. Perhaps believing in God is just a way of helping us cope with a big universe. Perhaps it is “just a crutch”.

Robert Banks has pointed out in his recent book *And Man Created God: Is God a Human Invention?* that the prophets of the Old Testament made a similar point about idolatry. They mocked people whose gods were convenient and comfortable and controllable. In Jeremiah 10 the prophet scoffs at people who have to decorate their gods so they are beautiful and nail them down so they don't fall over. Even then they can't talk and have to get carried around. He is shocked that living breathing people could bow down to lifeless figures, they are worshipping a fraud. The result is that they are “senseless and without knowledge” and “shamed” by the idols (Jer 10:14).

The contrast with the true God is huge. He is the great king and ruler, no one is like him (vv6-7). He made the whole universe by his wisdom and understanding and rules it all. The terrifying forces of storms are under his control (vv12-13). Paul builds on the same ideas in 1 Cor 8, idols are nothing – only the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ is the true God.

Three points are worth making:

- We must not be afraid to say that other gods are nothing. If we let people define ‘god’ broadly and not biblically then we have to agree that god doesn't exist. Our discussion is not about a general theistic god, but only the true and living God who is the Father of Jesus.
- God must not be repackaged to make him more comfortable – we have to know him as transcendent, majestic, infinite, eternal and the God of wrath and judgment.
- Our thinking about God can be idolatrous, we can shrink the true God to a size that suits us.

How do we repackage God? Here are some of the ways we try to repackage God (these are based on suggestions of Banks who repeats some of the ideas of J.B Phillips): policeman, parent, Grand Old Man, heavenly Mate, Perfectionist, Busy God, Contractual God, Santa Claus, Divine Mr Fix-it, CEO, Magician, Military Chaplain, Backstage manager, murmuring Voice, Spoil Sport. You can add to the list.

So, how do we keep our idea of God true? The short answer is: keep going back to the Bible. Robert Banks reminds us that we have to particularly look at Jesus to keep challenging our view of God. The full scope of revelation in Jesus will blow apart our facile ideas of God. It turns out that God is more generous, more holy, more beautiful and more terrifying than we'd ever dream. The God who made all things will call everyone to account and owes us no favours. Compared to him we count for nothing. Remember Jeremiah 10:10: “the LORD is the true God ... the living God ... the eternal King, when he is angry, the earth trembles; the nations cannot endure his wrath.”

Yet this God takes on humanity and sinks to the depths of our pain. He becomes obedient even to death and bears for us the burden we can not bear. He does solve a few problems or give some temporary relief or deliver some football results. He restores us to know and love him so we be what we are truly meant to be.

Knowing the true God in Jesus frees us from the prison of our own projected desires and returns us to true worship. Feuerbach lays bare the false gospels of projected gods, but can only offer a universe where we worship ourselves.

J.B. Phillips wrote a book "Is your God too small?", we need to ask "Is your God too convenient?".

Outline:

The convenient God

- the atheist criticism is that believers have made a god to suit us
- maybe there is something we can learn from that

Prophetic mockery

- Jeremiah 10 is a savage criticism of a comfortable god – a god who can be controlled and kept in place

- not every idea of “god” is a true idea of god: when atheists reject God we should ask “Which God are they talking about”? Christians have to be very wary of making common cause with other religions to argue for the existence of God

- Jeremiah also warns that the comfortable god is a trap – worshipping a god who is less than God traps us in our ignorance and folly (v14)

- the comfortable god comes from our own desires and will always rationalize and reinforce those desires

Our convenient God?

- we have to turn the critique of Jeremiah (and the atheists) back on ourselves and ask how do we tend to make God suit us?

- how would Jeremiah direct his mockery at us?

The true (inconvenient) God

- Admit our capacity to distort God
- commit ourselves to allowing God to be fully God

Quotations:

If one didn't know better, one would think that man, in his fear of losing all that he loves, had created heaven, along with its gatekeeper God, in his own image. Sam Harris, *The End of Faith*, 36

One had better look out if one picks up the only weapon that will take care of Feuerbach. No one may strike him with it unless he has himself been hit by it. This weapon is no mere argument which one exploits in apologetics, it should rather be a ground on which one can stand, and with fear and trembling allow to speak for itself. Whether or not we stand on this ground will be tested by our answer to this question: are we capable of admitting to Feuerbach that he is entirely right in his interpretation of religion insofar as it relates not only to religion as an experience of evil and mortal man, but also to the "high," the "ponderable," and even the "Christian" religion of this man? Are we willing to admit that even in our relation to God, we are and remain liars, and that we can lay claim to His truth, His certainty, His salvation as grace and only as grace? Then we know what we are doing when, in contrast to Feuerbach, we remember evil and death."

Karl Barth, "An Introductory Essay", in *The Essence of Christianity* by Ludwig Feuerbach, (Harper/Torchbooks, 1957), xxix-xxx.

Resources:

P. Avis *Faith in the Fires of Criticism* Darton, Longman and Todd, 1995

R. Banks *And Man Created God: Is God a Human Invention?* Lion Hudson, 2011

J.I. Packer *Knowing God*, IVP, 1973

P.F. Jensen *At the Heart of the Universe*, Lancer, 1991, 41-46

Suffering and God

Texts: Ecclesiastes 2:1-26, John 1:1-18

Rationale: Suffering is **the** great argument against the existence of the Christian God. There is no neat answer to the 'problem' of suffering, but the Bible does tell us that the world we live in now is a ruined and disorder world which God is fixing up. We have to face up to the red raw horror of suffering, not dodge behind easy platitudes. Christian faith can face this reality and not fail, because God does not fail.

Notes: In the Sydney Morning Herald for March 10, 2012 Ruth Pollard told the story of appalling torture of Ibrahim Ahmad Aloglah by the forces of the Syrian president Bashar al-Assad. The details of his detention and abuse are stomach wrenching. In the interview Mr Aloglah comments that "After everything I have seen, I can tell you, God cannot exist. How can God allow a man like Assad to walk on this Earth?" See: <http://www.smh.com.au/world/a-journey-into-syrias-dark-world-of-torture-20120309-1upxp.html#ixzz1ormxvQcQ>

That is a very real question. Nothing challenges belief in a good God more than horrendous evil. The question is hard enough to answer in the abstract, when it is presented as a straight-forward logical conundrum. "You believe in a totally good and a totally powerful God?" you are asked. When you agree the obvious riposte is: "How can that possibly be the true given the evil which exists". The logical options seem to be: deny God's goodness, deny God's power or redefine evil so that it doesn't really exist. None of those responses work for the biblical Christian.

Hard as the logical problem is, the question has its punch when it comes from a friend in real pain. They stand in despair at the end of the bed looking at the crumpled body of a son dragged from a wrecked car, "What's happened to God?"

Glib answers won't cut it. You can't say, "It will be OK in the end", "If it feels like God is a long way away, guess who moved?". Even the words of Romans 8:28 "in all things God works for the good of those who love him", can seem sickening in the face of awful evil and suffering. It is important to see that the Bible gives us a perspective on suffering and evil which is deeper and more mysterious and more satisfying than a straight-forward explanation.

In the face of suffering there are two things we need to know: how far the world is from what God intends and the wonder of God's work of redemption. It is not just a matter of having nice words and thoughts about those two truths, they have to be hammered into us so we see and live life from them.

We live in a frustrating mess

It is easy for people in the West to exist in fairy-tale world (or rather an advertising world) in which life is sweet and smooth – or at least to think that world exists somewhere for someone. When the realities of life crack that fantasy open we swing to the other extreme: life is an awful, meaningless, nightmare existence. The Bible doesn't let us take either view. The book of Ecclesiastes struggles with the frustration and confusion of living in a world which offers also offers delight and pleasure but also brings pain and death. The Preacher leads us through a series of these surveys of things which really are worth having but end in disappointment.

The Preacher knows that wisdom is a blessing from God. This is, after all, wisdom literature and his whole study is a search for wisdom and understanding. It is self-evident that “wisdom is better than folly, just as light is better than darkness” (2:13) - wisdom is the better course and is worth pursuing. Yet things don't add up. Wisdom is so easily spoilt: “as dead flies give perfume a bad smell, so a little folly outweighs wisdom and honor” (10:1). Ultimately wisdom and folly both end in death (2:16). So the preacher concludes that wisdom is “chasing after the wind” (1:17). Like the wind, wisdom surrounds us and brushes past us, but when we try to grab it, it loses substance and slips through our fingers. Even when we gain some wisdom, but it is spoilt by pain: “with much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief” (1:18).

The Preacher traces the same problem with pleasure. He is not an ascetic who can't or won't enjoy life. At the beginning of chapter 2 he recounts his recreations and projects and reports: “I refused my heart no pleasure, my heart took delight in all my labor, and this was the reward for all my toil” (2:10). In the Preacher's view there is no higher aspiration for human life than to enjoy it (3:12-12). Yet, like wisdom, pleasure is ephemeral and frustrating. It offers delight but fades away. Knowing that it will fade often tarnishes the enjoyment of the moment. So the Preacher concludes that pleasure seeking is “chasing after the wind” (2:11).

For the Preacher, the things that seem most worth having turn out to be unreliable and fleeting, which makes them all the more painfully beautiful. In his darkest moments the preacher finds living unbearable. He declares that the dead are better off than the living (4:2-3). At other times he thinks that life is worth living, if it is full and busy enough so we don't think too much (5:19-20).

For the Preacher life is a puzzle with key pieces missing. His experience of life is not unremitting horror. That would at least make a bleak kind of sense. If we lived in hell, life would be hellish and there would be nothing more to say. The puzzle is that the world seems to be both wonderfully good and unjustly brutal. It is the juxtaposition which makes life impossible to understand. The mixed reality is the heart of our problem with evil. The death of a child tears us apart, because children bring joy. A failing body is hard to bear because a strong, active healthy body is so much fun.

Barry Webb suggests that the book of Ecclesiastes has very purposeful allusions to Genesis 1-3. It understands the world as made by God (11:5; 12:1) and humanity as in God's image and fallen (3:20; 7:29; 12:7).¹ The book is not a theological treatise on creation and fall, rather it records the frustrating experience of living in that world. The Preacher constantly points out that death hangs as the final mockery after all the frustration and pain of life (2:16; 3:19; 8:8; 9:3-5, 10) and Genesis 3 tells us that death is the result of sin.

When people look at suffering and evil and conclude that there can't be a good, powerful God; they are on to something. Look at the evidence of life and you can't make sense of it; you certainly can't find a clear picture of a good God. Yet you can't dismiss goodness as a figment of imagination. Almost every life (I think every life), no matter how matter how disfigured and distorted, will also have echoes of goodness. So we live in this frustrating mix of terror and beauty, along with trivial frustrations – it doesn't add up.

All human pain and suffering is experienced in the conditions that Ecclesiastes describes. If Ibrahim Ahmad Aloglah had been tortured by wild animals we would be shocked but not scandalized in the same way. The horrific reality is that the men who beat and electrocuted him went home and held their wives and laughed with their children. They still showed some of the beauty of God's creation, even while they live the depths of human ugliness.

This is not the way the world is meant to be, and we can't look at how things are and come to conclusions about what God is like and what he wants. Our thinking about the world has to take into account the devastating affects of sin.

God's great redemption

Ecclesiastes doesn't give us the whole Christian story. It focuses on the confusion of living in the ruined world. We can only start to make sense of that world when we know more about it. And what we need to know can't be guessed from how things are now. It is only the message of God's great redemption in Jesus that gives us a way of making sense of things, including God.

Although the world has gone wrong, God has not given up on it. John's gospel starts by saying that there is a "darkness" (1:5) and that the world does not accept the Creator's Word (1:10). Yet the Word became flesh. The famous text of John 3:16 says that God's love for the world means that he sent Jesus to save, rather than condemn. So the Christian message is that how things are now is not what God intended, nor how they will remain. If only know that God is powerful and good because of Jesus.

God's is committed to redeeming the world through Jesus. Paul writes about "our present sufferings" and says that the whole of creation in "bondage to decay" and

¹ B. Webb, *Five Festal Garments*, (Leicester: Apollos, IVP; 2000), 103-04.

“groaning”. But the day will come when “the creation itself will be liberated from its and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God” (Rom 8:18-21). That only happens through Jesus. What has gone wrong with our world because of human disobedience, is undone by God when he takes on humanity for himself and lives the life we should have lived and dies the death which is the curse for our rebellion. When Jesus rose from the dead God was redeeming his people from sin and corruption, but also repairing and glorifying the whole ruined cosmos.

God redeems our ruined world and us as ruined creatures from the inside, it takes the incarnation and the fully human life and death of Jesus. God puts himself into his creation, he bears our pain and suffering, he carries the curse we deserved in order to put things right. God does not stand apart from our suffering and pain and struggle, he saves us by taking part in that struggle. God’s great work of redemption in Christ is the reason that Christians have hope. The promise that death and corruption and pain will be done away with is based on God’s victory over them in Jesus (1 Cor 15:51-57; Rev 21:4-6).

This means that we don’t have a neat logical answer to the problem of evil and suffering. However the logical problem is not the real problem of evil. The real problem is that we are trapped in it and suffer from and are guilty of it. The gospel is an answer to that.

What does this say about evil and suffering?

- Don’t talk as if suffering and evil make sense.

Christians sometimes talk and write as if we can explain why there is evil. I’ve heard people claim that there had to be evil so that God’s glory would be shown fully, or so that humans could exercise free choice, or so that God could save sinners. None of those are explanations that the Bible gives for evil, and they are too neat.

- Christians do not have a nice neat answer to the problem of evil, there is a profound mystery which we cannot and should not explain

Henri Blocher calls the problem of evil “the thorn in reason’s flesh”. The Christian answer is not to explain evil. There is a mystery about God and his will which we can’t explain, but the gospel declares that God is good and loving and has overcome evil and will end it.

- What the world is like is no guide to what God is like.

When people decide there is not a good God because of that how things are now they are making up their mind without getting the whole story. This is the great problem

with “natural theology”, by leaving Jesus out of the picture it rules out the most important way in which God shows his power and goodness.

- Recognise the reality and depth of the problem of suffering and evil.

Of all the questions people ask about God this is the most penetrating. We must not treat it as if it is dealt with easily. Logically it is difficult, experientially suffering and evil can be crippling and soul-destroying. God will save his people from the suffering of the world, but now he saves them through the suffering of the world. Christians of all people, as we follow a crucified messiah, now the reality of suffering.

- People need the hope of the gospel not clever answers about evil.

Trying too hard to answer the problem of evil is a trap in apologetics, and specially in apologetic preaching. It is better to acknowledge the death of the question and then declare the hope of the gospel.

- When we ask questions about God and suffering, we are asking about a God who has entered into our suffering in order to undo the mess.

Apologetics is tempted to defend a general idea of God that many theists can accept. That approach never really works for Christian apologetics and that is very obvious with the problem of evil. The only useful response we have to “the problem” is to speak about the God who suffered for us and with us to redeem us.

- Can atheists really ask about evil?

We can ask atheists what basis they have for knowing what is good and evil. How do they know that the world is wrong and not the way it should be? Why are human atrocities really atrocious? An atheist can't develop an answer which is fully convincing. However, Christians recognise that no one can escape the ideas of good and right. We live in a world that still echoes with God's goodness and even when people don't accept that God exists in God and so don't have a basis for explaining why good is good; and even when they are doing their best to get away from God and his ways; they still feel the powerful pull of goodness, beauty and truth. (The next sermon focuses on this point).

Outline:

What a wonderful world!

- the Louis Armstrong song echoes hollow when you see horrendous evil
- no wonder atheists ask – “How can you believe in a good, all-powerful God?”
- yet there are hints of goodness in the world
- so the atheist and the unsure keep being drawn back to the puzzle: how can there be real good and no God – how can there be real evil and a good God
- the question is hard for Christian as well

What a wonderful, awful, painful, confusing world!

- present the Ecclesiastes picture of a life after the fall, full of the remains of God’s very good blessings mixed with the awful pain of his curse
- making an assessment of God from how things are now will always be confusing and unsatisfying

God so loved the world

- God shows what he is like in Jesus
- God puts himself into creation, bears our pain and suffering and carries the curse we deserved in order to put things right.
- God does not stand apart from our suffering and pain and struggle, he saves us by taking part in that struggle.
- If you want to know if God is powerful and good – you have to look at Jesus

Hope not explanation

- The gospel is not a logical, philosophical answer to evil but offers hope to live for.
- illustration of Christian who bore great evil on basis of great hope

Quotations:

My experience in the First World War and now the Second World War changed my outlook on things. It is hard to believe that there is a God. I feel that the Bible is a book that was written by man, not for the good of man but for the purpose of preying on a person's conscience, and to confuse him. Anyone who has taken part in a fierce bayonet charge (and I have), and who has managed to retain his proper senses, must doubt the truth of the Bible and the powers of God, if one exists. And considering the many hundreds of different religions that there are in this world of ours, and the fact that many religions have caused terrible wars and hatreds throughout the world, and the many religions that have hoarded terrific wealth and property while people inside and outside of the religion are starving, it is difficult to remain a believer. No sir, there is not God, it is only a myth.

A.B. Facey *A fortunate Life*

In Joseph Heller's nihilistic classic *Catch 22* the central figure Yossarian has a long discussion with wife of his commanding officer Lieutenant Scheisskopf. He is having an affair with her and they spend Thanksgiving Day in bed arguing about whether there is, in fact, anything to be thankful for.

"I'll bet I can name two things to be miserable about for every one you can name to be thankful for."

"Be thankful you've got me," she insisted.

"I am, honey. But I'm also goddam good and miserable that I can't have Dori Duz again, too. Or the hundreds of other girls and women I'll see and want in my short lifetime and won't be able to go to bed with even once."

"Be thankful you're healthy."

"Be bitter you're not going to stay that way."

"Be glad you're even alive."

"Be *furious* you're going to die."

"Things could be much worse," she cried.

"They could be one hell of a lot better," he answered heatedly.

"You're naming only one thing," she protested. "You said you could name two."

"And don't tell me God works in mysterious ways," Yossarian continued, hurtling on over her objection. "There's nothing so mysterious about it. He's not working at all. He's playing. Or else He's forgotten all about us. That's the kind of God you people talk about—a country bumpkin, a clumsy, bungling, brainless, conceited, uncouth hayseed.

Good God, how much reverence can you have for a Supreme Being who finds it necessary to include such phenomena, as phlegm and tooth decay in His divine system of creation ? What in the world was running through that warped, evil, scatological mind of His when He robbed old people of the power to control their bowel movements? Why in the world did He ever create pain ?”

Joseph Heller, *Catch-22*

“Pilgrims as we are, there is no rational solution to the problem of evil: the theoretical problem of the origin of evil ... in the light of the cross, how could there be any doubt about the three propositions at the heart of the Christian position? ... At the cross, God turned evil against evil and brought about the practical solution to the problem. He has made atonement for sins, he has conquered death, he has triumphed over the devil. He has laid the foundation of hope” .

H. Blocher, *Evil and the Cross* 104

“The mystery of providence defies our attempt to tame it by reason. I do not mean it is illogical; I mean that we do not know enough to be able to unpack it and domesticate it. Perhaps we may gauge how content we are to live with our limitations by assessing whether we are comfortable in joining the biblical writers in utterances that mock our frankly idolatrous devotion to our own capacity to understand. Are we embarrassed ... by the prophetic rebuke to the clay that wants to tell the potter how to set about his work (Isa 29:16, 45:9)? Is our conception of God big enough to allow us to read “the Lord works out everything for his own ends - even the day of disaster’ (Prov 16:4) without secretly wishing the text be excised from the Bible?” .

Carson, *How Long O Lord*, 226

Resources:

H. Blocher *Evil and the Cross* Apollos, 1994

D.A. Carson *How Long , O Lord* Baker, 1990

J. Frame *No Other God* P&R, 2001

J. Dickson *If I Were God, I'd End All the Pain: Struggling with Evil, Suffering and Faith* Matthias Media, 2003

Can you be good without God?

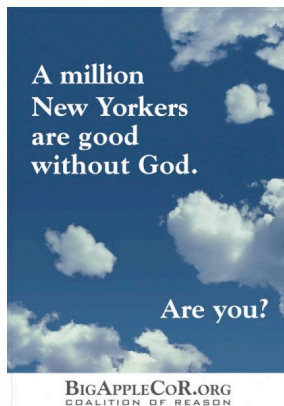
Texts: Psalm 34; 1 John 1:1-10

Rationale: Christians have accused atheists of being immoral and recently atheists have responded that it is quite possible to be good without believing God. Christians should recognise that this is true: we are made in God's image and God preserves good in the world. However, we can ask if there is a firm basis for goodness apart from God and point to the goodness of God as the true basis for our sense of right.

Notes:

Christians have accused atheists of being immoral, and that is a big mistake.

It is a mistake because for every evil atheist we point out there is a believer who is also guilty of awful evil.



It is wrong because there are atheists who have done great things for people around them. Many of the great artists and thinkers of the last century have been non-believers. In Australia people such as Mark Oliphant, Fred Hollows and Peter Cundall have been recognised for their integrity and compassion. Several of the most generous philanthropists (Andrew Carnegie, Ted Turner, Warren Buffett and Bill and Melinda Gates) have been atheists or avowedly secular. Most studies, including a recent one which received a reasonable amount of publicity, have found that how religious people are and whether they believe in God makes no difference to how well they behave (though there is a suggestion that belief in a God who punishes may make a difference).²

The most serious reason that it is wrong to accuse all atheists of being immoral is that it dishonours God! Even when people deny God's existence, their God-given morality still asserts itself. That is point Paul makes in Romans 2 when he talks about Gentiles who "who do not have the law" but "do by nature things required by the law" (Rom 2:14). Paul writes this to shock his Jewish readers who were used to the idea that the Gentiles who did not have God and the law were evil idolaters. His point is not that any Gentiles are morally perfect but that Jews cannot pride themselves that they are better

² Shariff, Azim F. and Norenzayan, Ara, "Mean Gods Make Good People: Different Views of God Predict Cheating Behavior", *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 21/2 (2011): 85-96.

than Gentiles. Gentiles, without the law of Moses, do the right thing, while the Jews, who do have the law, are often shown up as sinners by that very law (2:17-29).

Behind Paul's view of the Gentiles is an idea of 'common grace'. That is, God cares for his world and he maintains human society far more than any of us deserve. One way he does that is to preserve something of his image in all people. One reflection of that image is that people still have a sense of right and wrong and sometimes live from that.

The Bible doesn't teach that only people who have proper beliefs can be good. So when the atheists say "You can be good without God", we should agree. There is no neat alignment between believing in God and being good. (The kind of goodness we are thinking of here is not an absolute goodness of lives lived in full devotion to God but the relative goodness of people who show care for their neighbours and act with a recognisable integrity).

However that is not the end of the discussion. Rather, the discussion needs to go to another level. The question is not whether atheists can be good, but whether atheism as a worldview offers a real vision of goodness. Can atheism really make sense of our moral experience or provide satisfying account of ethics?

How do you think about ethics apart from God? There has been a huge amount of discussion and debate about this question over the last 100 years. G.E. Moore an English philosopher in his book *Principia Ethica* (1903) argued that it is not possible to derive ethical insights from the way things are since how things are can never create a definition of "the good". He called the attempt to derive ethics from observable facts the "naturalistic fallacy". (Moore did not, however, think that ethics were built on divine revelation but on an intuition of truths which we cannot support by reason). While there have been many attempts to overcome Moore's objection (a few examples will be given below) none have been generally recognised as successful. William Lane Craig quotes philosopher Kai Nielsen who concedes that, "We have not been able to show that reason requires the moral point of view... Pure practical reason, even with a good knowledge of the facts, will not take you to morality".³

In these notes we can't look at every naturalistic ethic in detail but it is worth having a quick look at some attempts at naturalistic ethics to get a feel for them.

Consequentialism is one attempt to get ethics going without God. It holds acts are good or bad as they have good or bad consequences. Good consequences are those which are preferred by people (or other beings) who are affected by an act. For instance, very rich people should be generous to very poor people. This is so even if the rich do not want to

³ Kai Nielsen, "Why Should I Be Moral?" *American Philosophical Quarterly* 21 (1984): 90, quoted in William Lane Craig "The Indispensability of Theological Meta-ethical Foundations for Morality".

be generous because their generosity hurts them very little (if at all) while it may benefit the poor a great deal. The obvious problem with this thinking is how to answer the “Why?” question: “Why should I be concerned about good (that is preferred) outcomes for other people, or even for myself?”.

Evolutionary ethics is another attempt to develop a non-theist ethic. One way this is developed to is to suggest that organisms developed biological altruism in which some individuals lose their life and/or their opportunity to reproduce in a way which allows others in their group to live and reproduce. It is then suggested that human psychological altruism (a conscious concern for others) developed from biological altruism, so that we have a tendency to be concerned about the good of others and from this developed a capacity for making judgements about right and wrong. The suggestion is that each of these developments proved to be advantageous for beings (specially human beings) and therefore should be promoted. There are three problems with this conclusion. First, how can we be sure that altruism is still advantageous to us? Much of our metabolism, which deals well with a low carbohydrate, high protein diet, struggles with a modern diet. Altruism could also be a problem for us. Second, why should we express the altruistic elements of human inclinations over the aggressive and violent ones? Both seem to be part of how we have developed (on the evolutionary accounts). Finally, we have not managed to justify that troubling should. Why “should” we express altruism rather than selfishness? Even if altruism is a strong trait in most people that doesn't show why there is an obligation on me to express it. Where does this obligation come from?

Naturalistic ethics is just not satisfying. We might be able to come up with good arguments about why we should live a certain way if we want certain results (such as preserving the environment for future generation), but we can't show why everyone should adopt that goal. Moreover, when we use ethical language we usually want to make strong claims. Ruining the environment for our own short-term gain is “evil”, not merely “ill-advised”. When we want justice in a criminal case we don't simply mean that we want an outcome that will help society function well. Just outcomes may help society, but that is an argument for justice, not a definition of it. Imagine that someone were to prove to you that in a particular case it would be better for society if the a guilt person is declared not guilty. You might accept that, but you would not think that justice was satisfied. Yet a naturalistic ethic can't get a hold on the kind of principle of 'justice' that our sense of justice wants.

A satisfying ethic needs a compelling vision of the good and that is why God is basic to ethics. It is not that we need God to punish us if we do the wrong thing. God is the judge, but that is not why he is foundational to making sense of good and evil. A personal God who has made the world and made us to be in fellowship with him and is good, loving, generous and just makes sense of why we want altruism and justice.

Atheists will sometimes argue that morality was around a long time before religion (particularly Christianity). They will point to Greek philosophers and claim they had a rational ethic without the Christian idea of God. Plato, however, thought that goodness, justice and truth existed in a transcendent realm which found a reflection in world we experience directly. Philosophy sought a vision of the Good which could give some direction to life. Without knowing the true and living God he had an inkling of a greater goodness which gives direction to life. That seems to be an example of what Paul was talking about in Romans 1. It is certainly different to the atheistic position which rejects any transcendent reality.

We don't have to settle for an inkling of what goodness is like, because God has revealed himself. The opening verses of 1 John say that in Jesus God has made himself available to be heard, seen and touched so we can have fellowship with him. This God is "light" and in him in darkness. He is perfectly, thoroughly, ravishingly good. So when we know him we have to live in light and he has made that possible through Jesus. We have a wonderful compelling vision of goodness in Jesus. We meet a God who is a servant and lover, who gives up his own rights and power to suffer for his creation; who loves the truth and is utterly faithful, but faces lies and betrayal for our sake. When the atheist asks where we get the idea of God's goodness from we point to Jesus' life, death and resurrection. Jesus doesn't just show us what goodness is like, he invites us into fellowship with him so we share in his goodness.

It is not easy to describe God's goodness because it is so wonderfully immense. Stephen Charnock describes God's goodness: "A boundless goodness that knows no limits, a goodness as infinite as His essence, not only good, but best; not only good, but goodness itself, the supreme inconceivable goodness."⁴ The Bible speaks often, and with great delight, of God's mercy, compassion, grace and patience. Ps 34 is a wonderful reflection on God's goodness. It leads us through a contemplation of the signs of God's goodness: he answers, saves his people and protects his people (vv3-7, 17-20); he provides for his creation (v10); he judges the wicked (vv15-16). It also shows us how we respond to the good God: praising him (vv1-3); pointing others to him (v11); and taking our moral direction from him (vv13-14). At the heart of the psalm is an expression of the deep joy and satisfaction that comes from fellowship with the good God: "Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good!" (v8), good in life comes from God (v12). Psalm 34 reflects on Israel's experience of God. We can take its words as ours with even greater confidence because of Jesus. God cares for his people and his world and gives us satisfaction in fellowship with him through Christ

Some objections to the idea that God is good

God is infinitely wonderful, full of love and is the source and ground of goodness. However there are several atheist criticisms which attack exactly this point. The problem of evil, which has been presented as an objection to Christian faith at least

⁴ Charnock, *Discourses upon the Existence and Attributes of God*, 2:10

since the French philosopher Voltaire (1694 – 30 May 1778), is still raised. (The notes on Sermon 3 offer some ideas on this).

In recent years two more pointed questions have appeared. One is to point out that the Bible seems to be a morally deficient book. For instance Simon Blackburn concludes that “the Bible can be read as giving us a carte blanche for harsh attitudes to children, the mentally handicapped, animals, the environment, the divorced, unbelievers, people with various sexual habits, and elderly women. It encourages harsh attitudes to ourselves, as fallen creatures endlessly polluted by sin, and hatred of ourselves inevitably brings hatred of others.”⁵ A response to this requires a careful discussion of the nature of the Bible and how the admittedly difficult texts fit in. For a detailed discussion of the Old Testament presentation of God see *Paul Copan, Is God a Moral Monster?: Making Sense of the Old Testament God* (Baker, 2011). His approach is summarised in his paper “Is Yahweh a Moral Monster? The New Atheists and Old Testament Ethics” available at the website of the Evangelical Philosophy Society (<http://www.epsociety.org>). You probably will not have time to deal with this objection in this sermon but it is important to have given the issue some thought.

Even more pointed is the argument that morality based in God, whatever its content, is morally deficient and at least highly prone to evil. That is the argument of Christopher Hitchens in his book *God Is Not Great*. Robin Craig puts it this way: “Theistic ethics, far from being the only possible source of morality, contradicts objective morality in practice and is reduced to abject power worship in principle”.⁶ That is, far from being a source of moral direction, theistic belief and religious practice are a major source of evil. This sermon can develop as a response to such accusation. We have two entirely different views of ethics one is rationalist and humanist, the other is theistic. Each finds the other entirely inadequate. What you can aim to do in this sermon is not to rebut the naturalist approach but rather to show how a Christian theistic approach looks and feels with its rich vision of God’s goodness and to leave the enquirer with the question: “Which of these two is most satisfying?”

An atheistic worldview leaves life barren and purposeless. At the very best it offers us the chance to impose our own desires onto the world to make our own moral vision. The reality of God is an invitation to live in fellowship with the Light and enjoy his light, to taste and see that he is good. Our challenge is not just to show that this makes better sense than atheism but to live it well.

⁵ Simon Blackburn, *Ethics: A Very Short Introduction* (OUP, 2001), 12.

⁶ Robin Craig “Good Without God” in W. Bonett, ed. *The Australian Book of Atheism* (Scribe, 2011), 360.

Outline:

Good without God?

- Who is good is a big debating point in with the new atheists

Thank God for good atheists!

- By God's common grace many people are (relatively) good whatever their beliefs
- conscience is partially hard-wired for us
- we don't have to say to all atheists are bad

Making sense of goodness

- without God we can't make sense of goodness (or justice or truth)

Meeting goodness

- in Jesus we see what goodness is really like
- Ps 34 invites us into an experience of the good God
- we are invited to live in fellowship with his true goodness

Quotes:

The position of the modern evolutionist ... is that humans have an awareness of morality ... because such an awareness is of biological worth. Morality is a biological adaptation no less than are hands and feet and teeth. .. Considered as a rationally justifiable set of claims about an objective something, ethics is illusory. ... Morality is just an aid to survival and reproduction, ...and any deeper meaning is illusory...

Michael Ruse, "Evolutionary Theory and Christian Ethics," in *The Darwinian Paradigm* (London: Routledge, 1989), 262, 268-9

Rakitin doesn't like God, oof, how he doesn't! That's the sore spot in all of them! But they conceal it. They lie. They pretend.'

'What, are you going to push for that in the department of criticism?' I asked.

'Well, they won't let me do it openly,' he said, and laughed.

'But,' I asked, 'how will man be after that? Without God and the future life? It means everything is permitted now, one can do anything?'

'Didn't you know?' he said. And he laughed. 'Everything is permitted to the intelligent man,' he said.

Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. R. Pevear and L. Volokhonsky. (North Point , 1990), 589

"The existentialist, on the contrary, thinks it is very distressing that God does not exist, because all possibility of finding values in a heaven of ideas disappears along with Him; there can no longer be an objective Good, since there is no infinite and perfect consciousness to think it. Nowhere is it written that the Good exists, that we must be honest, that we must not lie; because the fact is we are on a plane where there are only men."

Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism Is Humanism" in *Existentialism and human emotions* (B. Frechtman trans. (Philosophical Library, 1957), 22

Eternal depth of love divine,

In Jesus, God with us, displayed;

How bright Thy beaming glories shine!

How wide Thy healing streams are spread!

Hymn by Nikolaus Zinzendorf translated by John Wesley in *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1739).

Resources:

- John Hare *Why bother being good? : the place of God in the moral life* (IVP, 2002)
- W. L. Craig “The Indispensability of Theological Meta-ethical Foundations for Morality” presented to the Christian Theological Research Fellowship at AAR November, 1996, available from <http://afterall.net/papers/16?theme=print>
- Robin Craig “Good Without God” in W. Bonett, ed. *The Australian Book of Atheism* (Scribe, 2011), 349-62
- D. B. Hart *The Beauty Of The Infinite: The Aesthetics Of Christian Truth* (Eerdmans , 2004)