

Reading - 1John 1:1-10

Sermon

Welcome to our theology lecture today.

Now, please don't all rush screaming to the door, or at least before you do, let me recap a little of where we are and why we're talking about theology today.

Theology, let me remind you, is quite simply 'how we speak about God'.

And we are doing theology every day, even though we might not realise it. When a person of faith prays, when they make an ethical decision, when they choose right from wrong, when they choose wrong from right, when they speak out in love, when they care, they do theology – or at least they ought to be doing theology. The transformed life of a Christian is one that is shaped by our understanding of God.

Our faith life, or you might want to call it our Christian walk with God, or our path, is the place where theology and life meet with a bang.

And why do they meet with a bang?

Because sometimes God has to shout to get our attention.

This meeting place, the intersection of God and our life, is a messy, chaotic place, full of questions with few answers, full of doubt and confusion, full of contradictions and challenges.

Then, when we unfangle the messiness and we explore our understanding of God, then we can move on a little bit further and start saying, "I believe..."

But even that's not an end point. We haven't 'arrived' when we can say, "I believe." Rather, we're just at another stage in the journey of discovery.

But that place of "I believe" is a very important one.

Throughout the history of the Christian church there has been controversy. This is far from being a new phenomenon. Read the book of Acts and you'll find plenty controversy among Christians. Chapter 11 finds Peter having to explain himself for meeting with uncircumcised men and for eating 'unclean' food.

Peter explained the vision he had received and how he had come to dine with this particular group of people who had experienced the Holy Spirit.

"So if God gave them the same gift as he gave us, who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could oppose God?" Acts 11:17

Here was Peter wrestling with an issue that went against his Jewish sensibilities and upbringing, and real life is forcing him to rethink his theology.

The obvious manifestation of the Spirit in this group of people could not be denied and so Peter's understanding of God, what he believed of God, how he spoke of God, had to be revised and transformed as the power and will of God became known to him.

Paul's letters are full of controversy and I don't simply mean that they stir it up today but they were dealing with controversies at the time.

And Paul's letters are often treated as great theological tomes that need to be scrutinised and debated endlessly in academic circles. But the simple truth of it is that Paul was doing theology 'on the hoof'.

Every time someone said "it should be done like this" or "God wants you to do that", it was brand new.

And Paul needed to think through the issues and work out a theology to go with them. This was theology and life coming together with a bang. It was messy and it was controversial and it slowly formed the basis of "I believe..." statements.

In fact, Paul's writings are riddled with little snippets of creedal statements.

Romans 1:3-4 "Regarding his Son, who as to his human nature was a descendant of David, and who through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God, by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord"

Colossians 1:15-16 "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created..."

These are statements of faith and understanding. They are 'I believe...' statements and there are many, many more examples but our focus for today is the passage we read earlier from 1 John.

This letter of John actually may not be a letter as such. It doesn't contain the usual greetings at the beginning and end, so some commentators suggest that it should be read more like an essay or sermon in written form.

Regardless of its original function, it's extremely useful for us today as we consider how we can speak about God, how we might describe him, how we might understand him.

Often when we read scripture we are reading relatively large chunks of it. We're being presented with a story or a poem or a piece of history.

Just think of the parables Jesus told, or the Psalms, or the Exodus.

And when we read scripture in this way we're being asked to imagine a big picture, with lots of details, lots of images, a moral perhaps; certainly something out of the ordinary and challenging.

What we have here is a little bit different. With this piece of scripture it's the detail that's important.

I could use that lawyer's phrase "the devil's in the detail" but in this case it's God that's in the detail.

This short passage provides us with a lot of detail. Almost every word is significant but I'm going to highlight a few of them today that will hopefully bring us a little closer to being able to express our beliefs and to describe 'the God I believe in'.

The first one I want to highlight is a fairly obvious one. It'll get us started and give us a pattern for the others.

The first one, of course, is light. And the reason it's treated in a fair amount of detail is that this whole letter or sermon is about light.

More particularly it is about light and darkness and about our behaviour against Godly behaviour. It's a letter or sermon of 'contrasts' and if you want to read it later, and I would encourage you to do so, then bear this purpose in mind as you read.

Interestingly though, as I read this passage, the first thing that popped into my head was a link right back to the beginning of the Bible, to Genesis 1:3

"And God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light.

And so we are reminded that God is our creator; he brings light; he creates order out of chaos. But I don't want to say too much about that because as we get a little further into the creed, this is one particular area we will be exploring.

But it's also worth thinking about light in this context as well. It was light that began the process of bringing order to the chaos and so too it is the light of God that we need to bring order to our chaotic and messy lives.

So living in fellowship with God means living in the light, because 'in him there is no darkness at all'. We each have our own darknesses: our tragic secrets; our heavy guilt; our deepest sorrows.

Into all of which God wants to bring his light, to bring healing and to be a balm of love, gradually stilling the waters of chaos and turmoil, bringing peace.

Do you see what we're doing here?

We're talking about God, what we believe him to be like. We're 'doing' theology. We're always doing theology when we try and get to grips with God.

And that's just one word, one short phrase, "God is light."

I said that was just our starter though, so let's move on to another word. In fact I want to look at one verse in particular, because it's absolutely jam-packed with wonderful words to help us speak about God.

Verse 9 says:

"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."

Here we have four words worth exploring.

God is faithful; God is just; God is forgiving; God purifies.

I'm sorry, but this is most definitely not a three-point sermon, but that's what happens when you get into theology (and it's one of my passions). As you unpack something you reveal more and more layers, each presenting a new challenge and even more thoughts that need unpacked.

It's a bit like playing an endless game of pass-the-parcel and there's a prize in each layer, but there's yet another layer to unwrap.

So let's unwrap another layer.

God is faithful.

Here's a pretty common description of God – faithful. We find it in hymns; we speak it in prayers; we read it in scripture. But, what does it mean? When we speak of God as being faithful, what are we actually saying?

Well, the word often crops up in different guises in different translations. Isaiah 49:9 says the holy God of Israel **keeps his promises**.

1Corinthians 1:9 says God is to **be trusted**.

Faithfulness is tied up with the idea of promise or covenant and trust and it's something that spans the whole of Biblical history. In fact it's at the very core of Biblical history.

From the very moment of creation God has been faithful to us. When Adam and Eve turned from him in the Garden of Eden to seek their own knowledge, they were not abandoned.

When the Israelites were in captivity in Egypt, they were not forgotten. Nor were they left to their own devices in the Exodus. Later, settled in the 'promised land' they turned from God and demanded an earthly king over them, and yet God remained faithful to them. The prophets warned against the ungodly behaviour of rulers and landowners and the common people and God was still with them, ready to pick up the pieces.

And faithful to his promises to redeem creation, to bring us back into fellowship with him, to provide a Messiah, God sent his son Jesus into a world that mocked him and beat him and nailed him to a cross.

But God, in his faithfulness, did not give up on us even then.

He renewed his promise and made it greater and more wonderful. Through the body and blood of Christ, nailed to a cross and laid in a grave, he brought new life, new hope, new promise.

And he did this because he is faithful.

Just before we leave this thought and unwrap another layer, let me also point out that the word we translate as 'faithful' here in 1John is the Greek word 'pistos'.

It means more than just faithfulness – there's an implied continuance about it, an ongoing event.

God's faithfulness isn't about always 'being there' in the same sense of, say, a granite statue always being there. It's about being active and involved. God's faithfulness is about his ongoing care and concern, it's about him pouring out his blessings each and every day, it's about the Spirit continually transforming our life regardless of whether we are up or down, God-centred or selfish.

God's faithfulness is always present, always working, always loving.

But let's move on a bit. Each and any of these topics is worthy of a sermon (or several) on their own, but what I want to do is give you a more general flavour of how we, and I mean each of us, can speak with more confidence about God, how we can 'do' theology and how we can get to grips with some of the phrases we often recite but which we don't always give a lot of thought to.

You'll be pleased to hear that I don't intend to spend quite as much time on these, but that doesn't mean they are any less important and it also doesn't mean that they are the tail end of a list. They are just examples and are just a few descriptions of God we pluck from scripture.

So let's move on to our next description of God - God is just.

Where does this come from? What do we mean by 'just'?

Well, one image we might use is that of the courtroom, where God sits as judge over us.

It's not a comfortable image though, is it? And it's one that is often sidelined because we don't like it.

We like the 'God is love' stuff, or the 'God is light' phrases, but when we are suddenly in the spotlight, and not in a good way, we're less certain about that and we avoid speaking about it.

Actually, maybe we do need to spend a little bit of time with this one because to avoid it or skim over it would be to fall into this same trap.

And we can't ignore it because the picture the Bible paints for us and the witness it presents to us of God is of a God who judges – and what, or rather who, he is judging is us.

It would be easy to say just open the Bible to anywhere in the Old Testament and you'll find this wrathful, vengeful God, but that would be a shocking caricature. Not least because we also find plenty of light and faithfulness in the Old Testament as we've already pointed out.

But it's also because we can't dismiss God the judge as the God of the Old Testament. There are no shortage of passages in the New Testament that remind us we are under judgement:

Romans 2:5 "But you have a hard and stubborn heart, and so you are making your own punishment even greater on the Day when God's anger and righteous judgments will be revealed."

Acts 10:42 "And he commanded us to preach the gospel to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God has appointed judge of the living and the dead."

Romans 14:10 "All of us will stand before God to be judged by him."

Matthew 25:31-32 "'When the Son of Man comes as King and all the angels with him, he will sit on his royal throne, and the people of all the nations will be gathered before him. Then he will divide them into two groups, just as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.'

You get the idea I'm sure.

And why are we under judgement?

The simple answer is that we have parted ways with God and do not honour him or honour ourselves by living in harmony with him as we were created to do.

But we also need to be clear what the purpose of his judgement is, and we'll come on to that in a moment.

And we need to be careful that we don't fall into the trap of presenting a one-sided God to others by speaking about him as a vengeful God or as a God whose only desire is to punish us for our shortcomings. And this is just as important as only presenting God as the one-dimensional God of love.

And so to this end, we need to hold in tension this just God with the God who forgives.

John 3:16 "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son so that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life"

"For God so loved the world".

God does not want to destroy and seek vengeance on his creation. God loves what has been created and all that is in it. His desire is to save it, not punish it.

God's forgiveness is so awesome, that he gave up his son so that all might have it.

Remember that question we left hanging – the one about why we are judged? Let me suggest that we are judged so that all we are, all we have done, all we have not done may be brought to light before God.

And the purpose of that is so that we might be healed and renewed as we are also forgiven.

The word is variously translated as purifies or cleanses.

In John 15 Jesus says, "I am the real vine, and my Father is the gardener. He breaks off every branch in me that does not bear fruit, and he prunes every branch that does bear fruit, so that it will be clean and bear more fruit."

Mark 9:49 "Everyone will be purified by fire as a sacrifice is purified by salt."

1Peter 1:2 "You were chosen according to the purpose of God the Father and were made a holy people by his Spirit, to obey Jesus Christ and be purified by his blood. May grace and peace be yours in full measure."

Judgement, forgiveness, purification.

We could spend hours on any one of these subjects and I'm conscious that I've barely touched on them. There's a depth to them that is definitely worth exploring.

Maybe we should start giving out homework.

But I've also deliberately strung them together to show that when we speak of God we really can't stick to just one thing.

There is 'connectedness' about all the things we have considered today and that's always going to be true as we move through this exploration of the Apostle's Creed.

The connectedness is there whether we are speaking of God, of Jesus, of the Spirit or indeed our part in that relationship.

And so when we say ‘I believe...’, we need to remember that.

We can’t, with any sense of integrity, present a lop-sided picture of God.

The God I believe in is complex, wide, deep, high, confusing, challenging and so much more.

But don’t let that put you off speaking about God.

And don’t let your ‘I believe...’ be shallow or tentative.

There is so much to speak of about God and remember, we don’t always have to speak our theology in our words.

Faith is where theology and life meet and they become intertwined.

Does your life reflect your understanding of God?

Does your life shout out, “I believe in God!”