



*Chaplaincy of All Saints' Marseille
with Aix-en-Provence
and the Luberon*

*10th May 2020
5th Sunday of Easter*

**Reflection
by The Revd John Smith**

There is so much in our readings that would provide a solid topic for several sermons. Given what I have been banging on about since we have been struck by this pandemic, I could start with the first words of our gospel "*Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me*" Then I would sit down and we could spend the next ten minutes reflecting on why we let our hearts be troubled despite what Jesus tells us. Perhaps Jamie could go round our houses and picture us in deep reflection but probably you and Jamie would not be happy with that.

Instead I want us to consider one statement from our gospel reading, verse six "*I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me*". The question I would like us to consider is this: Is Jesus the only pathway to the true God? Not coincidentally, this question picks up from where Christine took us last week. Jesus said "*I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved*" (John 10:9) and by extension, those who do not enter through Jesus (the gate) will not be saved. I also noted in Christine's script that ONE God was capitalised. I assume you intended this Christine as it raises the question who is the one God and how do we get access to Him?

So, this morning I want to attempt something that I am not good at – exegesis, the interpretation of scripture – on a difficult topic that involves eschatology – that part of theology concerned with death, judgement, and the destiny of the soul and of humankind, that I am not learned about.

Before I delve too deeply into answering this question "Is Jesus the only way to God?", you need to know where I am coming from, my history and the experiences that have shaped my understanding; some may say my biases and prejudices.

Probably the most important thing to know is that I was born into an evangelical family. My mother and father first met at a Pentecostal church and for the first twelve years of my life we worshiped, as a family, at a Pentecostal church. I continued to attend this church into my early teens as a crusader and answered the call to give my life to Christ at the age of fifteen in this church. Fast forward to 1986 when I went to an international hospital conference in Japan. We had a tour in Tokyo when I came face to face with a statue of Buddha. I say face to face but this was a very big buddha sitting on a plinth maybe 15 meters high at the top of his head. The tour party moved on but I just stood there, frozen. I could feel the spirit drain out of me. I don't know how long I stood there. It was if I became lifeless. Later on, when the party moved to Osaka, I got up very early one morning, went for a walk and came upon a Shinto shrine. It was very peaceful. It was cherry blossom time and I just stood and watched the Shinto priests in their robes and ballooning trousers going about their early morning tasks opening up the shrine. Their dedication was undeniable but I had the same distant feeling. There was such a huge gulf between my faith and theirs.

Fast forward again to theological college which changed my opinions on several things including the sacraments, abortion, homosexuality, and immigration. We had a course on appreciation of other religions. This involved visiting several places of worship including a Jewish temple, a Muslim mosque and the great Hindu temple in Neasden in north west London which is Britain's first authentic Hindu temple. The multiple towers reminded me of Disney World which is not being disrespectful as I went with a lot of respect. We watched one of the ceremonies where I could not help noticing a flannel and tooth brush in the corner which were used every day to clean that god's face and brush that god's teeth.

That is enough of the full disclosure. It carries more warnings than on a packet of cigarettes which is appropriate because what follows is a matter of life and death.

Throughout Easter our gospel readings are from John and before we examine the text it is as well to know why John was writing his gospel. He helpfully tells us: "*These things are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God and that by believing you may have life in his name*" (John 20:31). The prologue to the gospel of St. John is probably the most profound passage in the whole Bible. In the prologue John presents the two paradoxes that underpin everything in his gospel: the paradox of Jesus' unity with and distinction from God and the paradox of his simultaneous deity and humanity. John addresses the unity of Jesus with God at the very beginning of the Gospel. Jesus is the incarnation of the Word who both was God and was responsible for creation. John defines their relationship and their unity as Father and Son. As Son, Jesus does what the Father does and only what the Father does. The purpose of Christ's mission is to do the will of the one who sent him. So how we answer the question we are addressing will all depend on our Christology i.e. who we believe Jesus to be.

Since Nietzsche reiterated Kant's view that "ultimate truth is unknowable" there seems to be no justification for holding to an ultimate truth. Since ultimate truth/reality is unknowable and hence pragmatically useless we should not bother ourselves to worry about it, so says Nietzsche. Everyone is entitled to an opinion, one that is born out of a person's own experience. I believe that that statement is a self-contradictory belief and a violation of its own ideological premise. The result is that since no one can really know the truth we must be content with a multiplicity of opinions. In the world of religion this is called pluralism; the acceptance that no one religion is the sole and

exclusive source of the truth; an acceptance that religions with mutually exclusive beliefs are equally valid.

Religious pluralism is not a new experience for either Old Testament Israel or the New Testament church. Both were born into the context of religious pluralism (a world of "many gods and many lords"). Christianity has never existed outside of pluralism. What is new in the context of "post-modern" pluralism is the impossibility of making any universally justifiable truth-claims on any matter, whether religious or otherwise. Today, the claim to know a universal truth is perceived as arrogant, conceited, egotistical, intolerant.

So, the debate begins and we hear the statement that all religions are the same underneath; at least they have more in common than what differentiates them. It is true that the world's religions do have some things in common - they all recognise a spiritual dimension and have broadly similar moral codes. When it comes to the other two monotheistic religions, Judaism and Islam, there are even more similarities. We share common history, prophets, concepts and the Jewish Bible is 75% of the Christian Bible. But we cannot possibly ignore the differences. For despite the similarities, the differences are huge. It is not just a case of 'believe in God and be nice to other people - all the rest is mere detail'. It is those very details that make the difference.

Christianity makes three distinct claims with which no other religion agrees:

- i) Jesus is God – Judaism sees Jesus as an impostor, Islam sees Jesus as merely a human prophet; other religions often see him as a good moral teacher or as one of many incarnations of God.
- ii) The authority of the Bible – Christians believe that the Hebrew and Greek scriptures (or Old and New Testaments) together constitute the authoritative word of God. Jews accept only the Hebrew scriptures (OT). Muslims only accept those parts of the bible that agree with the Qur'an.
- (iii) Salvation by grace through faith in Christ's death and resurrection – Islam tells us that mankind is essentially good and that we just need to live a certain way to earn God's forgiveness. Judaism still relies on the observance of the Law as given to the children of Israel. The biblical view is that humans are essentially evil and unable to live up to God's righteous standards. Only the perfect sacrifice of Jesus on our behalf could satisfy his justice and restore the broken relationship between God and man.

These three examples show us that all religions are certainly not the same and in fact they are totally incompatible.

Some will say that the differences are not really that important as 'we are all on paths going up the same mountain', climbing different sides and unable to see the others, but once we reach the top all will become clear and we will see the same God. But be assured the triune God (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) that I see at the top of the mountain is not the God any other of the world's religions and even some sub-Christian denominations would recognise.

I come now to another challenge that is usually raised. So, what about those people who never heard about Jesus and could not accept Him as God's son perhaps because they lived before Jesus and those who have lived since who have never heard about Jesus? And here, we need to look at what happens after we die.

Unfortunately and surprisingly, there is no agreement in the church about what happens to us when we die. While the Bible speaks often of death, we know little of one death in particular, the “second death.” The term “second death” is found only in the book of Revelation (Rev 20:4-6). Here we learn that on Christ’s return the martyrs will be raised first after which there will be a period before everybody else who has lived throughout human history is raised; believers and non-believers alike including those who have never had an opportunity for salvation. Christ will raise all the Gentiles and extend to them the same offer He does to Israel. If they satisfy Christ’s judgement, He will grant them eternal life with Him. Those who will not repent of their rebellion against God will be excluded from God’s presence and receive a merciful, permanent, second death. At most we can speculate that if the martyrs are in some sense priests of God and of Christ (v. 6), they might mediate salvation to others, but we have no explicit evidence that this is the case.

But this is why I believe that David could write, *“As for me, I shall behold your face in righteousness; when I awake, I shall be satisfied, beholding your likeness”*. (Psalm 17: 5) and Job to say, *“For I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God”* (Job 19 :25-26).

But one last clinching point that became so real to me as I was preparing this talk. Paul quotes a verse from Isaiah (45:23) in his letter to the Romans (14:11) and his letter to the Philippians (2:10-11): *“at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord”*. This tells me that at Christ’s second coming everybody who has ever lived will bow before Jesus; Moses, Abraham, the apostles, Mary, Christ’s mother, all of us will bow before Jesus and acknowledge that Christ is Lord of all. These verses do not indicate universal, unconditional salvation but universal recognition that Christ is Lord of all. Being God He is the only way to God.

Amen.