

Title: I am the Way, Truth and the Life
Text: John 14:1-6
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Terry Jones is the Pastor of Dove World Outreach centre in Gainesville, Florida; a church of 50 members. On March 20, Jones followed through with his threat, wheeled a portable BBQ into the church sanctuary and burned a copy of Islam's holy book, the Koran. The incident was broadcast on Arab TV networks.

Reaction to the Koran-burning in some parts of the Muslim world was swift and brutal. While many Muslim leaders called for calm, in Afghanistan mobs gathered and a UN compound was stormed and at least two dozen people died. One survived only as he was able to recite verses from the Koran as he lay on the ground being beaten by the mob.

So tragic, so unnecessary and so sad. Blaise Pascal, himself a man of deep Christian faith, famously said this:

Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction.
(Blaise Pascal)

History, and indeed our present day, is replete with unimaginable horrors committed in the name of religion. No major faith it seems is immune from the disease of religious violence, including Christianity if we are honest.

Often at the heart of religious violence is an underlying conviction and claim to exclusive truth and the tragic and mistaken belief that this truth needs to be forced down the throat of others. Given so much violence perpetrated in the name of religion, living in a world under the shadow of Islamic and other extremism, it would be easy to join the list of atheists past and present in writing of all religious faith as a dangerous delusion.

We can write of religion as dangerous delusion or alternatively we can try to rationalize the different strands and streams of religion as different paths to the same God. After all, don't we all worship the same god? Like a jigsaw, you have part of the truth, I have part of the truth and we put your piece and my piece and other pieces together and we have the whole picture.

It is a tempting possibility. The problem is it makes no sense logically, as we shall soon see.

In this season leading up to Easter we have been working through the seven 'I Am' statements Jesus makes about himself in the Gospel of John. Make no mistake; in each of these statements Jesus is making a radical claim for himself – that he is in effect God in human form, the Divine clothed in humanity. Today we come to perhaps his most radical claim. Certainly it was controversial when Jesus first said it and, I would contend, remains the most contentious and offensive statement of Jesus in our day as well.

Let me set the scene. Jesus has just washed his disciple's feet - a radical step for a Jewish Rabbi. He has predicted that one of the 12 will betray him and that in a little while he will be leaving them all. As you might imagine, this causes the disciples enormous confusion and distress. Out of his distress, Peter declares his undying loyalty to Jesus, to which Jesus responds with a prophecy of Peter's denials. Into this highly charged and emotional situation Jesus offers the 12 and us these encouraging and challenging words:

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a

place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going.”

Thomas said to him, “Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?”

Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”
(John 14:1-6)

‘I am the way and the truth and life. No one comes to the Father except through me.’

Various Bible scholars persuasively state that these words are the high point of the gospel, the hinge on which all that has happened up to this point and all that is to happen turns. In this radical claim Jesus leaves little room for ambiguity.

He is not a way, a truth or a life. He is the way, the truth and the life.

In our multi-religious, pluralistic, and secular culture this sounds offensively exclusivist. Exactly.

In Jesus Christ we see the radically exclusive truth about a graciously inclusive God. Let me explain.

Thomas and the disciples were confused. Jesus told them about a place he was about to go to and which he was preparing for them. But the disciples did not know the way to this place. They were lost. And so Jesus responds, ‘I am the way, the truth and the life.’

The emphasis of the Thomas’s question and Jesus’ response is on ‘The Way.’

Jesus is the Way to God because he embodies the truth about God and the very life of God. Let’s look at each of these words in turn.

In Jesus is Truth to Believe

We live in a world deeply suspicious of any exclusive truth claims – a time and place marked by endemic scepticism. We live in a world where truth is relative – where truth lies in the eye of the beholder, where truth is subjective. We live in an age where increasingly there is the belief there is no such thing as objective and timeless truth.

You have your truth and I have my truth and what is important is that we respect each other’s right to hold to our version of the truth.

A popular view of religion is that every major faith has part of the truth, but not the whole truth. But Jesus does not say ‘I am partly true.’ He says, ‘I am the truth.’

A popular ancient Buddhist parable that has been used to illustrate the equality of religions is the story of six blind men and an elephant.

In the story, a King calls together six blind men and asks them to describe an elephant through touching it. One gets a hold of the tail and says, "The elephant is long and wiggly, kind of like a snake."

Another blind man gets a hold of the side and says, "No, no, no! The elephant is big, and flat and smooth."

Another blind man gets a hold of the leg and says, "No, you're wrong. You're both wrong. The elephant is short and round."

They had this argument as to what the elephant is. In fact, in one version of the story, they get into a wild fist fight. All the blind men, grasped part of the elephant, but none of them grasped the whole elephant, so everybody is right, and everybody is wrong.

The illustration goes on to say that religion operates the same way. All religions have part of the truth. But no religion has all of the truth, so there can't be one true religion. Every religion is partly right and partly wrong.

It's a great story and a powerful illustration. The only problem is that it is illogical.

Lesslie Newbigin was a missionary for many years in India. In a country made up of Hindus, Muslims and Christians he heard the story of the blind men and the elephant countless times. But one day something occurred to him.

It occurred to him that the King can only tell the story of the blind men and the elephant, can only know the blind men can only grasp part of the elephant if he himself sees the whole elephant.

If the king himself is blind, there is no story to tell.

There is no way to know the men are blind and they can only see part of the elephant unless you see the whole elephant.

In other words, there is no way you can say all religions have part of the truth and no religion has all of the truth unless you see all of the truth! There is no way to say that religions have part of the truth and no religion has all the truth unless you claim the superior knowledge that you say these religions don't have, unless you claim the superior knowledge that you say that no one has the right to claim. The illustration and its logic fails on its own terms.

John is clear and unambiguous about Jesus and the truth. In John chapter one he says:

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.
(John 1:14)

Jesus was and is full of grace and truth. In Jesus we discover truth that sets us free from the lies we have been told, and even the lies we tell ourselves.

A second myth about religion is that it doesn't really matter what you believe, what truth you embrace as all religions lead to the same God, don't they?

But think about it. Can all approaches to God be correct? How can all religions lead to God when they are so different? It's illogical. We don't pretend that all roads lead to London or all ships sail to Australia or all flights wing their way to Hawaii.

Author and Pastor Max Lucado demonstrates the futility of this thinking in this way.

Imagine you go a travel agent and ask her to book a flight to Hawaii on the 10th of October. She looks at her screen and tells you that there is a flight to London on that day, leaving at 6am.

You're a bit perplexed and so you check. "Does it go to Hawaii?" you ask.

"No, but it offers great food and movies."

"But I need to go to Hawaii," you say.

She says, "Well, let me suggest Virgin Atlantic."

You respond, "Really? Virgin Atlantic flies to Hawaii"

"No, but they win awards for on-time arrivals."

You're getting frustrated, so you reiterate: "I need one airline, to carry me to one place—Hawaii."

The agent appears offended: "Sir, all flights go to Hawaii."

Well, you know better. Different flights have different destinations. That's not a stupid conclusion, but an honest one.

Every flight does not depart for Hawaii. And every path – every religion - does not lead to God.

The early church fearlessly preached the exclusive nature of the gospel in a culture that was in many ways violently opposed to its message. When Peter and John are challenged by the religious leaders about the message they are preaching, they say this:

Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.
(Acts 4:12)

You may fall for the trap of believing that the most important thing is not so much what we believe, but the strength with which we hold that belief. As long as we hold to our belief sincerely, that is the most important thing.

Rick Warren illustrates the problem with this argument in this way:

Last week, Kay and I had an appointment in Pasadena and had to take separate cars. She was in the white van, and I was in our second car. We got caught in a little traffic jam, and I lost her. Then I saw what I thought was her white van, and went all the way across town before I realized I was following the wrong van. I got to our appointment half an hour late.

(He goes on to say)

You can be sincere, but you can be sincerely wrong. The fact is it takes more than sincerity to find our way to God. It takes truth.

It's like the story I read this week of a man who was driving a freeway when his mobile phone rang.

He answered it and heard his wife's voice urgently warning him, "Herman, I just heard on the news that there's a car going the wrong way on the freeway. Please be careful!"

"Honey," said Herman, "It's not just one car...It's hundreds of them!"

He sincerely thought he was going the right way. Problem, was he was sincerely and dangerously wrong.

Jesus said: 'I am the way, the truth and the life. No-one comes to the Father except through me.'

We discover the way to God as we embrace the truth about Jesus.

Winston Churchill once famously said:

Men occasionally stumble over the truth, but most of them pick themselves up and hurry off as if nothing happened.
(Winston Churchill)

The truth about us is that most of us have become adept at avoiding the truth, or even denying it. We all know the truth hurts. And the truth of our humanity is that we are not autonomous beings. We need God. The Christian story confronts us front and centre with this difficult truth. Flannery O'Connor said:

The truth does not change according to our ability to stomach it.
(Flannery O'Connor)

The fact that in and through Jesus, the Creator God launched a rescue mission to restore men and women into relationship with him tells us how desperate our situation is. The hard, honest truth is that we are far more sinful than we thought, and the consequences of our sin far more desperate than we perhaps ever contemplated. But as a Jewish proverb states:

Better the ugly truth than a beautiful lie.
(Jewish Proverb)

Equally true is this; in launching a rescue mission that came at the immeasurable price of his son, our Heavenly Father shows the extent of his love for us. The wonderful, liberating truth is that we are far more loved than we imagined possible.

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.
(John 3:16)

At some point after being confronted and challenged with the truth claims of Christianity we must respond. We should and must examine the claims of Christianity. We should and must assess the reasonableness of these claims. But there comes a point when we must choose to embrace or reject those truth claims.

Jesus is Life to Receive

One of the key themes of John's gospel is the life that Jesus both embodies and offers us. Again, right at the beginning John says:

In him was life and that life was the light of men.
(John 1:4)

After John 3:16, perhaps the best known verse in John is when Jesus says this:

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they might have life, and have it to the full.
(John 10:10)

Jesus not only embodied the very life of God; astonishingly he offers us that very life. This is abundant life; abundant life in this world, and in the world to come, that is full of meaning and purpose and joy.

When he was a young man, Tony Campolo attended the funeral of a black friend called Clarence. Let me read what happened:

The pastor was incredible. From the pulpit he talked about the Resurrection in beautiful terms. He had us thrilled. He came down from the pulpit, went to the family, and comforted them from the fourteenth chapter of John. "Let not your heart be troubled," he said, "'You believe in God, believe also in me,' said Jesus. Clarence has gone to heavenly mansions."

Then, for the last 20 minutes of the sermon, he actually preached to the open casket. Now, that's drama! He yelled: "Clarence! Clarence!" He said it with such authority. I would not have been surprised had there been an answer. He said, "Clarence, there were a lot of things we should have said to you that we never said to you. You got away too fast, Clarence. You got away too fast." He went down this litany of beautiful things that Clarence had done for people.

When he finished—here's the dramatic part—he said, "That's it, Clarence. There's nothing more to say. When there's nothing more to say, there's only one thing to say. Good night. Good night, Clarence!" He grabbed the lid of the casket and slammed it shut. "Good night, Clarence!" *Boom!*

Shock waves went over the congregation. As the preacher then lifted his head, you could see there was this smile on his face. He said, "Good night, Clarence. Good night, Clarence, because I know, I know that God is going to give you a good morning!" The choir stood and starting singing, "On that great morning, we shall rise, we shall rise." We were dancing in the aisles and hugging each other. I knew the joy of the Lord, a joy that in the face of death laughs and sings and dances, for there is no sting to death.

The life that Jesus offers us enables us to stare death down. While the grief of death is still a terrible and painful reality we all experience, it is not the final word. The final word belongs to Jesus who says:

I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies.
(John 11:25)

Death no longer has any power over those who believe and embrace the truth about Jesus.

We discover the way to God as we embrace the truth about Jesus.

And we discover the way to God as we receive the life of Jesus.

Jesus is the Way to God because he embodies and offers us the full and complete truth and life of God.

Spiritually Lost

I have shared before about a trip our family took to Vietnam six years ago. We landed in Hanoi, checked into our hotel and then in the late afternoon we began to walk the bustling streets. I had my trusty copy of Lonely Planet and was confident I could find our way around and eventually our way back to the hotel. We had a great time, the people were friendly, the sights and smells exhilarating. Then it got dark. And there were no street lights. And then I noticed there were very few street signs, at least ones that I could read. Sue asked me if we were lost. Like the good man I am, I replied indignantly, 'Of course not!'

Thomas asked the question as to where Jesus was going because he knew without Jesus' directions he was lost – spiritually lost. And we are the same. How do we know if we are spiritually lost? Let me suggest there are three symptoms, any one of which can suggest you are spiritually lost.

First, we may be spiritually lost if we are unsettled by the past. We may have made mistakes in our life that cast a shadow over our present and future. We are haunted with shame or regret or fear. Or we may have been hurt by someone else and we are burdened with an inability to forgive that person.

Second, we may be spiritually lost if we are unsatisfied in the present. We may even feel frustrated that even though life is full with family and friends and material blessings, there is an emptiness; a lack of meaning and purpose. We wonder of this is all there is. We feel adrift, aimless - pointless. There is restlessness in us we can't explain.

Third, we may be spiritually lost if we are uncertain about the future. You want to believe that some essence of us lives on beyond our last breath on this earth, but you're not sure. And if there really is a heaven, you're not sure if you meet the entry requirements! This uncertainty about our eternal future may be experienced even as fear.

If you feel unsettled by the past, unsatisfied in the present or uncertain about the future you may well be spiritually lost. The good news is that knowing admitting we are lost is the first and most important step to finding our way home.

Back in Hanoi I eventually set aside my pride and admitted what Sue, Joel and Emily knew already – we were hopelessly lost. And so I asked for directions, we got our bearings and to everyone's great relief, we found our way back to our hotel.

Jesus said, 'I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. No-one comes to the Father except through me.'

We find our way home to God only through Jesus.

We do not find our way to God through good intentions or wishful thinking.

We do not find our way to God through religious devotion or endless prayer.

We do not find our way to God through any religion.

We do not find our way to God through trying to appease God with our good works, or our generosity.

We find our way to God only through Jesus Christ. These are the steps along that path.

Step One is we Repent, which simply is to admit that apart from God we are spiritually lost and need to find new directions.

Step Two is we Believe. We believe through reasoned faith that Jesus is who the Bible says he is, the Son of God in whom all the fullness of God dwells, and that through his life, death and resurrection we can have a relationship with the Creator.

Step Three is we Receive. We receive the Life, the abundant life that Jesus offers us now and for the future than unfolds before us.

Repent. Believe. Receive.

This is the radically exclusive truth about a radically inclusive God.

Jesus said, 'In my Father's house there are many rooms...'

Many means exactly that, many. God's desire is that all might experience the life he offers. His love is for all, without exception.

Back in Hanoi, after admitting I was hopelessly lost, after getting directions I discovered we were only a couple of blocks from home.

Folks, we are never far from God. More accurately, despite how we might feel or what we might think, God is never far from us. Our home is only a prayer away.