



## **Q&A – Do all religions lead to the same God?**

**Sunday 18 January 2010**

I love Christmas because, at my age, I get really useful Christmas gifts. When you get to a certain age your friends, relatives and others don't really know what to get you. So what's the failsafe? Gift vouchers!

I love gift vouchers. It's like a licence to go spend money on what you want. And of course my family knows that one of my weaknesses is books. I love buying books. In fact I've got bookshelves full of books that I've read and a few shelves full of ones I haven't read yet ... but one day I'll get to. Whenever I go into a bookstore - and the Gold Coast has reached a cultural pinnacle because it now has a Borders bookstore - my family know that if I go in there I'll never come back out again ... well not for a number of hours. I had a date night with my daughter Emily just recently. We went to Max Brenner's and had some hot chocolate there and we were walking past Borders and I said, "Can I go in and spend my g...?". Even before I got the sentence out she said, 'No dad, we're moving on'.

But I went in there the other day and the first place I always go to is the 'Religion and Spirituality' section. Have you ever been there before? They have books on Christianity and Islam and Buddhism and they also have, under the 'Religion and Spirituality' section, they also have atheism. Certainly in our 21<sup>st</sup> century there's been a resurgence in writing and reflection on atheism, in the belief that there is no god, that all religions are leading nowhere. There are quite militant forms of this atheism. The 'High Priests' of modern atheism, or 21<sup>st</sup> century atheism, are people like Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens and Sam Harris. But this is an ideology that stretches back centuries – the denial that there is a god. And under this atheistic banner are various descriptions of religion and none of them are particularly attractive.

For example, one atheist from a century or two ago, Sir William Robinson, said this:

*Religion is to reason what rigor mortis is to dancing*  
(Sir William Robinson)

In other words, anyone who has a religious belief or conviction has switched off their brain, they're not thinking straight any more.

Karl Marx famously said:

*Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature. It is the opium of the people.* (Karl Marx)

In other words, religion stupefies people; it reduces things to the lowest common denominator.

Blaise Pascal, a Christian believer himself – and we'll reflect more on his life when we look at joy later on this year – said this:

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

And we've seen that - especially in the last 10, 20 years with the advent of militant Muslim terrorism. But that's just the latest manifestation of what has happened down through the centuries, when God's name, under various religious banners, has been used to justify genocide and war and conquest. In fact atheism would describe religion as a virus to which atheism is the antidote.

### **Where does humankind's religious impulse come from?**

Well the first question I want to answer as we address the larger question as to whether all religions lead to the same god is to address the issue of origins. Where is it that this religious impulse comes from in humankind – right across history and right across culture? One person put it this way:

*Religion is what man does with his solitude.*  
(Alfred North Whitehead)

There's a deep yearning inside of us that longs for something beyond ourselves, that recognises that there is something beyond ourselves: A larger meaning, a larger purpose and we give that larger meaning, that larger purpose, that presence beyond ourselves, we give that the name 'God'. That there must be something beyond this universe as we know it, there must be some meaning behind it. I remember as a teenager, lying in my bed at night, contemplating the largeness of the universe and whether it was all meaningful or meaningless. In our solitude we wrestle with those big questions.

Last week I shared some words from one of the greatest Christian thinkers of any age, Saint Augustine, who in the beginning of his magisterial work, *The Confessions*, said this – right in the beginning in the opening sentences:

*God, you have made us for your self and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in you.* (Saint Augustine)

And so in the Christian tradition – but also in the other traditions – there is this understanding that we're made in the image of God. And as we are made in the image of God, we reach out to be in a relationship with God. There's a yearning for us to be in community with God, to be communicating with God ... and Saint Augustine articulates this rather passionately and incredibly well.

We see this yearning in the pages of Scripture from the dawn of human history, in Adam and Eve who, even after they rebelled against God, longed to be in community, in relationship with God. And that stretches through the pages of Genesis. We come up to the story - the wonderful, marvellous story - of the people gathering in a place called Babel, in Genesis 11. And there they decide amongst themselves, in expressing this yearning for God, to build a tower. But this yearning for God is distorted because, as often happens, it is expressed in a rebellious and prideful way. They build this tower and, as they build this tower, they say to themselves, 'Let us make a name for our self'. 'If we can't be in relationship with God, let's be like God, let's be little gods ourselves'. And the Scripture goes on to say that the tower falls and God distributes and disperses the people throughout the Earth and ever since, in the Christian tradition, we understand that people have been yearning in their own religious faiths and traditions, yearning to be in that relationship with God.

So, this religious impulse comes as an inherent part of our nature as being created in the image of God.

### **Do all religions lead to the same god?**

Well, let's go to this question, let's address it straight up front: Do all religions lead to the same god?

Now this is a very serious topic. Whenever you talk about religious faith - which we do here every week - whenever you start talking about other faiths, it's a very serious topic. So, I had permission from a number of other people, I can tell this joke this morning ... OK?

There was a priest ... it always starts with a priest, doesn't it?! ... there was a Priest, a Rabbi and a Baptist pastor and they were all part of a university where there were chaplains and they became good friends and they would argue and debate about the relative merits of their faith traditions. One afternoon, as they were going through their endless debates, one of them said, "Well, you know, the proof is in the pudding. If we were able to go out to preach and see people converted then the effectiveness of our faith would be expressed". And another person said, "It's relatively easy to get people converted. What if we could convert a bear?" They were living in the US Mid-West.

So they went out into the woods, each of them in turn. And after they attempted to convert the bear, they all found themselves in the same hospital ward, back in that university town, where they shared their experiences.

Father Pat went first and he said, "I went out into the woods and I started preaching to that bear and the bear wouldn't listen. In fact the bear became quite irate and we started to wrestle and I got a bit hurt" (He had his arm in a sling and a few scratches). He said, "But then I sprinkled some Holy Water on him and he became calm, and I began to teach him the catechism".

And then Pastor Billy Bob, the Baptist, said, "Well I went into the woods and I started preaching to that bear and he became really irate as well and we got into a wrestle and we rolled down this hill. I broke my arm, I broke my leg" (He had his arm in a cast, his leg in a cast). "But once we got down to the bottom of the hill, I found myself in a creek and I baptised that bear, by full immersion, and he settled down there and then, and became a believer".

And they looked over to the Rabbi who was lying in bed - full body cast, intravenous drips and, after they asked him what happened, he said, through a shattered jaw, "Well, perhaps I shouldn't have started with circumcision".

I like that one. I've probably upset you with some other things but some of you are going to be upset just right there and then ... but that may be a good thing.

But we do live in a religious marketplace where religious ideas are competing against each other, don't we? We're in a religious marketplace - a supermarket of religious ideas. But in this religious supermarket, we see in the Christian faith that Jesus himself made some rather exclusive claims for the religion that bears his name, which is founded on him.

He says this, in John's Gospel:

*Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No-one comes to the Father except through me. If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him."*  
(John 14:6-7)

Jesus is saying, 'When you look upon me, you see God' ... and so we see within the Christian faith this understanding that, through Christ, we see the fullness and totality of who God is. And this stands in contrast, sometimes stark contrast, to other understandings and other faiths.

Let me very simply articulate what I understand about what other faiths say about the character and nature of God:

In Judaism, God is known as YHWH - a name that is not even mentioned by Orthodox Jews, who see that God's name is so holy, that God is holy and other ... and yet can be known personally.

In Islam, God is known as Allah. 'Allah Akbar' is that phrase we all know well from our television screens: 'God is great'. God is one but is a judge.

In Hinduism, God is not so much a person as an experience; Brahman. Everything else is illusion. The only reality in our life is Brahman. Everything we do and experience is illusory.

In Buddhism, there is no God. Nothing is. The ultimate reality is 'Sunyata' or the 'void' and that is our ultimate goal, to be caught up in the void.

All this stands in contrast with Christianity which understands God to be a trinity of love - this dance of love between Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Yes, that God is one, as is articulated in the other monotheistic faiths like Islam and Judaism, but God is known in three persons, the three persons of the Trinity.

And so the answer to the question, 'Do all religions lead to the same God?' ... the answer straight up front is no because they don't talk about the same god. They have very different understandings of who or what God is. As I said, in Buddhism, there is no god! So the very simple answer to that question is no. All religions don't lead to the same god.

I mean, it's not just in a random concept of god that faith traditions differ. For example, in Hinduism there's a very particular understanding of history, that history's

like a wheel where you have this endless cycle of birth, growth, death, rebirth ... birth, growth, death, rebirth. And the ultimate aim is not to stay on the wheel but to travel down one of its spokes of a particular religion and to go to the hub and there from the hub, where you don't move, to see the endless cycle and the meaninglessness of life. That's the Hindu understanding of history. Now this stands in contrast, of course, to Christian faith that believes that history has a beginning, middle and an end - that history is going somewhere, that it's a journey. That Jesus is the alpha and the omega, that we have come from somewhere and that we're going somewhere, that time stretches from one point out into eternity.

And so, again, when we ask this question, 'Do all religions lead to the same god?', very simply, I think we have to say, 'No'.

But there are some other things I want to say.

The second question I want to ask as it flows out of this assertion is this:

### **Does God reveal himself and his will through non-Christian religions?**

There are different ways that people view other religious faiths and traditions from the aspect of their own religious faith. Very simply, here are three categories (these are simplified versions of very complex things):

#### **1. Pluralist**

The pluralist understanding has its emphasis on **pilgrimage** and understands that all religions are striving for ultimate truth but none have yet attained it. There is a very famous Hindu parable which illustrates the pluralist position:

There was a wise King who gathered together five or six blind men and he took them up to an elephant and he asked them to touch it and he asked them to describe what they felt and one, who was touching the trunk, said, "I feel the trunk of a palm tree". Another who was touching the tail said, "I feel a cord of rope". Of course all of them were touching one aspect of the elephant but none of them could see the elephant as a whole. There was only the wise King, with his eyes that could see, that could see the totality of what was in front of them.

And so the pluralist would see that each religion is like one of those blind men; they have one aspect of the truth but they don't have the whole truth. There's a certain arrogance in the pluralist position. That's because the pluralist is the only one that could see the whole elephant. They're the only ones that have the whole truth.

In the handouts you received, there's this quote from Martin Goldsmith. He says this:

*The pluralist is tolerant of tolerance but gravely intolerant of anything considered intolerant.* (Martin Goldsmith)

Just think about that for a moment. So the emphasis here is on pilgrimage.

## 2. Inclusivist

With the inclusivist the emphasis is on **dialogue**. Here the understanding is that there is a hierarchy of revealed truths which inform each other, that religious faiths are all climbing the same mountain to perhaps the same god but each is going on a different route. Some routes get there faster and easier. Some religious faiths get there slower, in a more roundabout way. But the emphasis is on dialogue, on listening to one another, on learning from one another.

## 3. Exclusivist

And then there's the exclusivist's position, where the emphasis is on **evangelism**, on convincing and converting other people to your particular understanding of who God is, that truth is revealed exclusively and fully in a particular faith.

Now to understand these three positions, we also need to go to the nature of revelation, of how God reveals himself to us. Just bear with me for a moment. There are two particular categories of revelation that theologians would understand. First of all, there's general revelation and then there's self-revelation - God's self revelation.

### General revelation

Under the heading of 'general revelation' we go to the passage in Romans chapter one, where Paul says this:

*Since the creation of the world, God's invisible qualities - his eternal power and divine nature - have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made. (Romans 1:20)*

What Paul is essentially saying is God has been revealing himself from the beginning of time to all of humankind. That He's been seen through his creative power around us and the created order, that He's seen in the way in which we express ourselves - the goodness that's part of us as the image God. His eternal power and divine nature have been seen by that which is created around us, including each other. That's what general revelation is. And this very neatly flows into an understanding of what John Wesley articulated - the prevenient grace of God that God is active in this world, even in places we don't expect God to be active, that God, by his Spirit, is drawing and wooing people towards himself.

There's an ancient rabbinic question that goes like this, 'Why did God speak to Moses from a thorn bush, a lowly thorn bush?'. And the answer is this: "To teach you that there is no place that the glory of God is not."

God is active in our world, even outside the confines of our own religious faith and tradition. And so, with this understanding of general revelation, we can look at other faith traditions and there are some things we can affirm in them. For example, many faith traditions have their own version of the 'golden rule': Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. In the monotheistic religions of Judaism and Islam, they confirm that God is one. Again, in Islam, they affirm that God is holy, that to rebel against God is a sin, that there will be a final judgement ... and so it goes on.

Even within eastern religions there are some faith practices that we share, in terms of prayer and meditation and reflection ... and so it goes on. And so Martin Goldsmith, who is a Jewish convert to Christianity, has this to say:

*All human beings and religions combine good and evil, truth and error. Sinful and demonic influences are mitigated by the influence of general revelation and by the image of God which remains in us.*  
(Martin Goldsmith)

And so for me, when I look at other religious faiths and traditions, the first thing I would say is this: They are distorted. They are in error. They have God fundamentally wrong ... and I'll get to this more a bit later on. But there are elements of truth nonetheless within those faith traditions that I can affirm as a Christian. Let me say a bit more ...

### **God's self-revelation**

We go on to self-revelation. We read this (again Paul's words to the church in Colossi):

*For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.*  
(Colossians 1:19-20)

When we read the New Testament, when you read the writings of the Gospels, when you read Paul's words, when you read Peter's words, when you read the letters and the epistles - when you read these things, you cannot escape the understanding that Jesus is both unique and universal. That in Christ we see all the fullness of God, that God has revealed himself absolutely, totally and completely in the person and work of Jesus. That God has revealed himself.

And so again, Martin Goldsmith would go on to say this:

*We cannot expect that Mohammed, Krishna or the Buddha have anything significant to add to Jesus Christ and they cannot in any way correct him.*  
(Martin Goldsmith)

So when I read my Bible - and taking the claims of those New Testament writers seriously - I cannot escape the fact that Christian faith that is articulated by those writers, as it's regulated by Scripture, is both exclusivist in outlook and intent. That it sees that in Christ God has revealed himself totally and fully and my desire is that every man, woman and child would understand that and come to saving faith in Christ. That's what I read in my pages of Scripture.

Well let's go on to another big question ... there's a lot of big questions here, aren't there!

### **Can followers of other religions be saved apart from faith in Jesus Christ?**

What about those people who have never heard the Gospel in times past, even in times present, or have heard a distorted image of the Bible?

For example, the Spanish conquerors that swept through Latin America were told by the Pope that when they got there they had to articulate the Gospel. So, they would read the Gospel out in Latin - in Latin! - to tribal people who had no understanding. And if they didn't repent there and then after hearing the Gospel in a language they

didn't understand, they were given permission to kill them. This is the history of our church.

But what about those people who've never heard the Gospel? Well let me start by just bringing a bit of levity ... let's go to the great words of Homer Simpson who, when commenting on his own nominal Christianity, had this to say, "What if we've chosen the wrong religion? Each week we just make God madder and madder".

A pluralist understanding of this question is articulated by the Hindu mystic, Ramakrishna. He said this:

*God can be realised through all paths. All religions are true. The important thing is to reach the roof. You can reach it by stone stairs or by wooden stairs or by bamboo steps or by a rope.*  
(Ramakrishna)

We hear that understanding articulated in different ways in our world today. It's the dominant understanding of religion and faith - that all religions lead to the same god ... and, as I said before, just a cursory look at how each religion articulates who God is says that that's nonsensical. We contrast that pluralist understanding with what is written in Scripture and, as I said before, when I read the New Testament - even allowing for its historical context - I see that the pages of Scripture articulate an exclusivist claim for Christ.

For example, in the early days of the church, after the day of Pentecost, the religious authorities of the day, as they were represented by the Sanhedrin, were worried about what they were hearing about this new faith, what had happened on the day of Pentecost - this new schism within the Jewish faith. And so they called the apostles to account and Peter and others were brought before the Sanhedrin. It was like a trial. They were asked to defend themselves, to apologise, to do something to nip this in the bud. But Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, in this first account of the defence of the Christian faith (which I think is significant in itself) says 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)*

That salvation is found in Christ alone. I don't think there's any way of wriggling out of this, any way of dismissing this, any way of explaining this away because this is repeated again and again and again in the pages of the New Testament. And if we take the Bible seriously, we need to take that word seriously.

But what does this mean to this question – can people of other religions or people who have not heard the Gospel, can they be saved apart from faith in Christ?

Well I'd like to say here - I don't think this is a cop-out - is that God, ultimately, is the judge. That you and I, that we, are not called to judge. We are called to evangelise, we are called to give an account for the hope that is ours in Christ but ours is not to judge. Many evangelical theologians and scholars have wrestled with this very issue and they have speculated - I underline speculated - about what it is that God might do in these instances where people have not heard the Gospel before themselves.

For example, some would say if people come to a humble repentance, recognise their sin and cry out to God, even if they don't name God as Christ, that this form of repentance might well save them - not their religious piety, not their good works but their humble repentance.

Many have pointed out that within particular religions, particular tribal religions, there are Christ-like figures that emerge as you understand them ... as within Aboriginal spirituality here in Australia. That God is making himself known through the expression of his cosmic Christ, if you like.

Others would say that Jesus himself says, 'Seek and you will find me'. That if people earnestly seek after God that ultimately they will find God expressed through Christ.

This is a big issue. It's a big question.

At the second Vatican Council, which was a major gathering of the Roman Catholic church in the 1960s this issue was addressed and they articulated this response to it ... and this response in many ways is widespread across the Protestant church; it's one way of articulating an answer to this question:

*Those can also attain to salvation who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his church yet sincerely seek God and, moved by grace, strive by their deeds to do his will as is known by them through the dictates of conscience.*  
(Second Vatican Council)

You don't have to agree with this. This is one of those unknowable mysteries for us. What I do know is this: I am called to give an account for the hope that is mine. I am called to tell people the Good News. I am called - **we** are called - to be Christ's presence in this world in order that all people might be drawn to salvation in Christ. But in the end, God is the judge.

So, let me move on ...

### **Should Christians enter into dialogue with people of other faiths?**

Again my answer to this question right up front is 'Yes'. We should enter into conversation with people from other faith traditions, I believe, with confident humility. We've already sung this morning about what we can boast in. I can't boast in any wisdom I have, I can't boast in any knowledge, I can't boast in any insight but what I can be confident in is Christ. I can be confident in Christ and what God has done for me in Christ, that God has saved me from the presence of sin, that God has saved me from the power of sin and God has saved me from the penalty of sin and in Christ I have been set free. In that I have confidence. And in that also, when having conversations with people of other faiths, I should come with humility.

I should come with humility, ready to give an account for the hope that I have but also ready perhaps even to learn. When you think about it, in the Christian church we have a lot to be humble for and over. There are 36,000 different Christian denominations in the world today - 36,000 different versions of the same truth, when you think about it. And so Paul, Saint Paul, said this when he talked about the limit of our capacity to understand the greatness and goodness of God's love, he said this (In the words of Eugene Peterson in *The Message* translation):

*We don't see things clearly. We're squinting in a fog, peering through the mist. But it won't be long before the weather clears and the sun shines bright! We'll see it all then, see it all as clearly as God sees us, knowing him directly, just as he knows us!*  
(1 Corinthians 13:12)

One day we will see it all. Every question will be answered. We will see the greatness and the expanse of God's love.

And here's what I think. I think we'll be surprised at just how great the grace of God is. We put limits around the love and the grace and the mercy of God but I have a feeling that we will be surprised on the upside of just how great God's love is for this world.

Martin Goldsmith, again, said this:

*Faith in Jesus Christ again will go hand in hand with humble tolerance.*  
(Martin Goldsmith)

Bill Hybels tells a wonderful story that articulates what can happen when we come with confident humility into conversation with people from other faith traditions. He met, at a conference, a man who'd converted from Islam to Christianity. He was an African American man. He was a businessman in the south of the United States. He'd converted to Islam as a young man and taken on an Islamic name and so in his business he said, "Often I would go to places. I'd be at conferences and people would give me a wide berth. They were scared of me. They were worried about me. They didn't know who I was. I was different from them, in their whiteness and in their faith". He said, "Often I'd go to these conferences and I'd be there and I'd have a polite glass of water or orange juice but as soon as I could, I'd make my excuses to leave".

"I was at one of these conferences," he said to Hybels, "... one day and the same thing was unfolding - I was in my corner, everyone else was their little groups, having conversations amongst themselves - when one of the people peeled off from his group and came over and talked with me, which was unusual. And we introduced ourselves to each other, we traded names, we told each other about our families, about our work. And eventually I took the risk. I said to him, 'You know, I'm a Muslim'. I was expecting him to run away at that point to make his excuses to leave". And this person said to me, "You know that's interesting. I'm a Christ follower, I'm a Christian. I don't really know much about the Muslim faith. Can you tell me about it?"

Hybels goes on:

And he then went on to begin to explain to him and eventually, an hour or so later, it was time for them to leave but the Christian guy said to the Muslim, he said, "You know I'd love to hear more. I really am very ignorant. Can we meet together for coffee?" And so they arranged to meet together for coffee over the ensuing weeks and they would get together over breakfast or over coffee and he would have this opportunity to talk about his conversion to Islam, his understanding of the Muslim faith. And then after a while, something happened. You see, after he'd given an account for the faith that was his, he then asked the Christian guy to give an account of the faith that was his. Let me read the words of this Muslim man as he articulates them. He says this:

"One week I even took the opportunity to ask him about his beliefs. I'd been a Christian as a kid but had left God, left the faith, left it all because the church my family attended was so racially prejudiced. I wanted no part of that Christianity. When the tables turned and I was on the receiving end of his faith story, he patiently described why he'd given his whole life to this person known as Jesus Christ. I couldn't understand how easily the conversations evolved and how respectfully and

sensitively he conveyed his love of God. Despite our deep-seated religious differences, we were becoming fast friends. It went on this way for some time as we'd meet to hash out nuances about our faith experiences. Sometimes he would ask for a couple of days to find answers to my questions. Other times he knew exactly where I was struggling. He seemed to have the perfect words to untangle my confusion. There finally came a day - I remember being home alone when this happened - where I felt totally compelled to pray to God. I kneeled beside my bed, told God everything I was feeling and in the end gave my life to Jesus Christ. In the space of about a week that single decision changed everything in my world, every single thing."

And that conversion, that experience of salvation in Christ, happened because someone was there to walk across a room, to take a risk, to give an account of the hope that was theirs but to humbly listen and even to learn from the other person... and, in the process, become a better Christ follower.

### **What is so unique about the Christian faith?**

As we finish, I think it's important for me and for us to articulate what it is, in just a brief snapshot, that is so unique and particular about the Christian faith:

#### **Jesus personified God**

Again, in that verse we read before, in Christ all the fullness of God was revealed. Jesus affirmed this and he lived a sinless life. Those around him saw him deal with temptation, they saw him struggle to overcome and yet not once did he rebel against the will of the Father as every human being had done before and every human being has done since. He talked with authority again and again; in the pages of the Gospel we read and hear those who listened to him saying they were astonished. No one had ever talked like this, no one had ever taught with such authority - surely he was speaking the very words of God!

Through his life and through his ministry, through the miraculous events, he demonstrated signs and wonders that pointed towards his very divinity. He was able to take charge over illness and disease, even the very elements, as he calmed the waters, as he walked on the waters, as he calmed the storm and that he fulfilled Old Testament prophecy from centuries before. In him all those prophets' words were fulfilled, that Jesus personified God, that in him all the fullness of God was demonstrated.

#### **Jesus dealt radically with sin**

Jesus didn't fall into the temptation that other faith traditions fall into, of either minimising sin or saying that we are so hopeless before God, there is no hope because of our sin. He acknowledged the reality of sin, he pointed to the reality of it. But in his life and his death and his resurrection he offers a way through and past sin; he dealt radically with sin by his grace and his mercy.

Eugene O'Neill says this:

*Man is born broken. He lives by mending. The grace of God is glue.*

We are mended day by day because Jesus dealt radically with sin.

## Jesus defeated death

As he was raised from the dead on the third day, he destroyed the last barrier, the last enemy of humankind, the enemy of death. He destroyed it once and for all and he promises all those that live in him that one day they too will destroy its power.

## Jesus defines God as Love

Other faith traditions point towards God as being loving but only in the Christian faith tradition do we see God defined as love.

The apostle John, when he was reflecting on the life and times and ministry of Jesus Christ in his letter, simply said this, "When I look at Jesus, I can only say, 'God is love'".

God is Love. Jesus defines God as love, not just as loving but as love – his very character, his very nature, his very being. At the very heart of God is love, expressed to all humankind and to all creation. We see that love demonstrated in God's grace, God's mercy and God's forgiveness.

Anne Lamott, one of my favourite writers who herself was a reluctant convert to Christianity from eastern religions, from 'New Age' religions, said this about her conversion:

*It's like the tap is flowing even before you hold out your cup to be filled.*  
(Anne Lamott)

I love that phrase. When we come to God, God's tap of love, grace and mercy is already flowing, already there for us.

Now Christianity was birthed in a multi-cultural, multi-faith environment. The Roman world was known for the mixing and matching of faiths and traditions from right across the world, from Egypt to Persia, to Rome, to Greece, to Palestine ... and so it goes on. It was a potpourri of religions and the apostle Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, which itself was really at the heart of this multicultural, multi-faith world; it was right on the crossroads of a trading route. And in that city there was a great plethora of different religions. There was the temple to Aphrodite on the hill overlooking Corinth where there were temple prostitutes. And the church in that place struggled to maintain its identity just as in our day we struggle to maintain our identity in a multi-faith, multi-religious world. But Paul wrote to them to encourage them and to draw them back to the particularity of the Christian faith ... and when he draws them back, he draws them back to the cross. Because in the cross we see all of God's fullness demonstrated. This is what he says:

*Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.*  
(1 Corinthians 1:22-24)

I have nothing - as I said before - nothing to boast about except Christ crucified. That's all I have. Any wisdom I have, any insight I have, all this comes from God and through the filter of Christ crucified. We can be confident about our faith. We can be confident about the hope that is ours, that God asks that we express that confidence

in humility, recognising that now we see in a mirror dimly and one day we will see him face to face.

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