

Title: Three Pillars
Text: Various
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Date: 1 April, 2012

Last week film director and explorer James Cameron descended as far as anyone has into the ocean's depths. 320 kilometers off the coast of Guam is the Mariana Trench – a vast sea canyon that is larger than the Grand Canyon and as deep as Mount Everest is tall. In the end Cameron plunged 35,576 feet – almost 11 kilometers - below the ocean surface. He didn't find sea monsters or Atlantis or anything spectacular at all. He surveyed a dark and desolate place where the only sign of life were prawn like creatures a few centimeters long.

Cameron's journey of discovery reminded me of the journey of discovery that is possible for us. The same week that Cameron descended into the Mariana trench I read this quote:

The Bible is like the ocean. It takes a minute to dive in and a lifetime to explore.
(Guy Mason)

Over the last five weeks we have been on a journey of discovery. Our launching point has been the Apostles' Creed – one of the oldest statements of faith in the Christian church that dates back to at least the 2nd century. The Creed is our launching point – but it is not our ultimate destination. The Creed summarizes and points to the deep truth that can only be found through the pages of Scripture. Over the last five weeks we have dived into the ocean depths of God's truth discovered in the testimony of the bible. Unlike the life-less bottom of the Mariana Trench – in the depths of the bible we encounter the life-giving truth of God – truth that astonishes, amazes, challenges, provokes, comforts - truth that sets us free.

When we splash around in the shallows of faith – when we fail to dive deep into God's truth – we run the risk of creating God in our own image. But God cannot be contained, or domesticated, or controlled.

Several years ago in Britain, researchers went door-to-door asking people about their belief in God. One of their questions was:

Do you believe in a God who intervenes in human history, who changes the course of affairs, who performs miracles, etc.?

When published, their study took its title from the response of one man who was seen as rather typical of those who responded. His answer was this:

No, I don't believe in that God; I believe in the ordinary God.

How many people, if they believe in God at all, believe in an ordinary God? The Creed testifies to what the Bible reveals. God is not ordinary – God is stupendously, prodigiously, amazingly extra-ordinary. If I have one remaining hope from our six week journey into the Creed it is this; that you have encountered in a new or fresh way our extra-ordinary God.

No more is the extraordinary nature of God revealed than in the truth behind the last three lines of the Creed. Let me remind you what they are:

I believe in...
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting.

In these three lines are three essential pillars of the Christian faith; the scandal of amazing grace, the hope of bodily resurrection and the promise of eternal life.

The Scandal of Amazing Grace

As Christians we believe in the forgiveness of sins. Don't we? Actually, some of us perhaps find it easier to believe in the miracles of Jesus or his resurrection than we do the fact that God in his grace readily and repeatedly forgives us of our sin and makes it possible for us to forgive others.

There is strong evidence to suggest that at the beginning of the fourth century the line 'forgiveness of sins' was added to earlier forms of the Creed. There is a reason. From the years 303-305AD a terrible persecution occurred against Christian believers across the Roman Empire. Property was taken from Christians, legal rights were stripped and thousands of believers were killed. In many places Christians could avoid persecution if they sacrificed to the Roman gods and of they handed over their copies of scriptures to be publicly burned. Many did.

In 306AD the persecution came to an effective end – but then a fight broke out in the church. One North African bishop – Donatus – argued that those who had renounced their faith (they were called traditores) could never be welcomed back into Christian fellowship – that they should be shunned. The Donatists argued that the church should be made up of saints and not sinners.

To the Donatists the rest of the church responded by defiantly welcoming back repentant believers who had renounced their faith under the threat of persecution – and by adding to the Creed the biblical affirmation of the forgiveness of sins. More than two centuries before the Donatist controversy the Apostle John wrote this:

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.
(1 John 1:9)

In the third century there was controversy as to the extent or the boundaries of God's grace. Could people who renounced their faith be welcomed back into the church? Could they be forgiven by God? As it was then, so it still is now. Forgiving grace will always be controversial – amazing – scandalous even. Even the church, sometimes especially the church, has struggled to accept the depth of God's forgiving grace towards us.

The fact is that we are all 'traditores' to some extent. All of us have renounced God in how we have lived. Most of us don't even have the excuse of persecution. But grace always welcomes home the repentant sinner. In fact, grace pursues them. The Apostle Peter was a traditore who denied Jesus not once, but three times. But it was Peter who the resurrected Jesus pursued with his forgiving love, graciously restoring him.

Grace joyfully welcomes prodigal sons and daughters home with a feast.

Grace forgives and restores and renews.

Grace casts our sins as far away as the east is from the west.

Grace is the bottomless ocean of God's love, mercy and forgiveness.

Grace is the language of God's redemptive love.

Grace was revealed fully and completely in the Jesus Christ – the one full of grace and truth.

On the Cross, Grace seeped from Jesus' pores as blood flowed from his wounds.

Grace bleeds from every page of the bible.

Grace tells us that we are more sinful and flawed than we ever dare believed and more loved and accepted than we dared hope. (Tim Keller)

When our son Joel was little he had three favourite videos. First there were the Wiggles. He played it over and over and over to the point we became so sick of it skivvies are still banned in our household. Then there was the magnificent video of the mighty Adelaide Crows demolishing the St. Kilda Saints in the 1997 AFL grand final. After watching it umpteen times our four year old son could recite swathes of the broadcast. Finally, there was the Lion King. We watched that film over and over again. Joel watched that film at least twenty times before a profound reality hit him.

The main character in the Lion King is Simba, a lion cub, who idolizes his father Mufasa. Early in the film there is a wildebeest stampede and Mufasa is killed. Joel had watched the film at least 20 times. On the 21st the penny dropped; the daddy lion dies. I remember the moment well. Our cheerful little boy descended into a flood of tears and uncontrollable sobs. A familiar story suddenly became very unfamiliar, unsettling even.

This next week we will hear again the familiar story of the death and resurrection of Jesus. We know how the story goes. We know how it ends. But even though the story is familiar, my hope and prayer is that when we hear it again this week we will have a moment of divine revelation – that behind the empty cross and empty grave is the greatest story ever told – the story God’s amazing grace. Grace should always surprise and stun us. May God always unsettle us with his grace!

Our God is not ordinary. He is extraordinary!

The Hope of Bodily Resurrection

In December last year the well known author and atheist Christopher Hitchens died after a battle with cancer. Hitchens has a way with words. He wrote an article for Vanity Fair about his illness and treatment:

I am badly oppressed by a gnawing sense of waste. I had real plans for my next decade and felt I'd worked hard enough to earn it. Will I really not live to see my children married? To watch the World Trade Center rise again? To the dumb question "Why me?" the cosmos barely bothers to return the reply: Why not?

I sometimes wish I were suffering in a good cause, or risking my life for the good of others, instead of just being a gravely endangered patient. Allow me to inform you, though, that when you sit in a room with a set of other finalists, and kindly people bring a huge transparent bag of poison to plant into your arm [his chemotherapy treatment] and you either read or don't read a book while the venom sack gradually empties into your system. You feel swamped with passivity and impotence: dissolving in powerlessness like a sugar lump in water.

Is what Hitchens says, true? Does this physical life eventually just dissolve and disappear like a sugar lump in water? The Creed boldly says, 'No!' It says that a foundational Christian hope is a belief in the resurrection of the body.

We often spiritualize resurrection. We talk about our soul or our spirit being resurrected, when the bible is very clear in proclaiming the hope that our body that dies and is buried or cremated will one day come back to physical life. Paul made this clear when he wrote to the church in Corinth:

The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body.
(1 Corinthians 15:42-44)

It wasn't Jesus' spirit that was raised from the dead; it was his body. It won't be our spirit that is raised from the dead; it will be our body. On the other side of death we will experience not some disembodied spiritual experience where our souls float off into the heavenly clouds. Rather, the bible says that on the other side of death we will eventually experience a new physical and embodied existence with a new body which will enjoy a new heaven and new earth that is free from sin and pain and limitation.

Now this raises all sorts of questions? What will our new bodies look like? What attributes will they have?

To this I would say they will be familiar, and yet different. What is laid in the ground perishable will be raised imperishable. What is sown in weakness will be raised in power. What is sown a natural body will be raised as a spiritual body – that is with a physicality animated by the fullness of God.

After he was raised from the dead, Jesus was recognized by his disciples as the one who had been crucified and laid in the tomb. They could even see his wounds. There will be some continuity between our mortal bodies and our resurrected bodies. We will be recognizably us. There will be continuity and discontinuity. Jesus' resurrected body was recognizable and yet different. For example, he could walk through walls!

When it comes to our resurrection hope, Thomas Aquinas says this:

God destines us for an end beyond the grasp of reason.
(Thomas Aquinas)

Here's the thing. While we have the future hope of resurrection of our bodies, we don't have to wait until we die to experience the power of resurrection in our life.

Tim Keller tells the story of a minister who came across the grave of a man who had died centuries before. The dead man was an unbeliever and completely against Christianity, but a little afraid of it too. So the man had a huge stone slab put over his grave so he would not have to be raised from the dead in case there is a resurrection from the dead. He had inscriptions put all over the slab saying, "I do not want to be raised from the dead. I don't believe in it."

Evidently, when he was buried, an acorn must have fallen into the grave. So a hundred years later the acorn had grown up through the grave and split that slab. It was now a tall towering oak tree. The minister looked at it and asked, "If an acorn, which has power of biological life in it, can split a slab of that magnitude, what can the acorn of God's resurrection power do in a person's life?"

When you trust your life to Jesus as Savior and Lord, the Apostle Paul says the power of the Holy Spirit animates our life. This is the same power that raised Jesus from the dead. If the same power that raised Jesus from the dead lives in us then those things we think are immovable obstacles – fear for the future, unforgiveness, bitterness, anger, a suffocating habits – can be split side open and rolled away.

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The Promise of Eternal Life

When I was a kid there were times my parents would go out at night and take us with us. All three of us would be bundled up in the back of our Kingswood dressed in our pajamas and dressing gowns. Later that night we would come home and that is when the games would begin. My goal as a kid when I went out at night with my parents was to stay awake as long as possible, but then on the way home in the car to fake sleep. I knew that if mum and dad thought I was asleep then they would not risk waking me up when I got home and carry me in from the car to my bed. I was lazy even then and I was very good at faking sleep. Dad would pick me up, I would snuggle and he would carry me in and lay me gently in between the flannel sheets of my bed. Heaven! Sometimes as he carried me I would hear him say to mum, 'I think he's foxing Jill.' I think Dad knew when I was faking it.

There were other times though when I didn't fake it. We would come home after a night out and in the warmth and movement of the car I would fall asleep. My last memory would be drifting off to sleep. My next memory would be waking up hours later with morning sun streaming through the window of my bedroom. Between falling asleep and waking up I had no memory – but I knew this. I knew that between falling asleep and waking up either mum or dad had gently picked me up and carried from the car into our home.

One day I will fall asleep never to wake up again in this world. My next memory will be waking up in a new world - a glorious new world. It won't be the morning sun that wakes me up; it will be the light of the glory of God! I will wake up and I will discover I have a new body – recognizably me, and yet free of the effects of sin and the limitations that come with it. In that new morning, in that new world, with my new body and in the company of others – I will revel in the full, free and glorious presence of God my savior.

Between falling asleep and waking up in that new world I do not know exactly what will happen. But I do know this. From the moment I fall asleep, God will pick me up, he will pull me close to his chest and he will carry me.

People of God, we do not escape death – we conquer it!

When death comes, we do not stare into a life-less abyss; we gaze into the loving face of our Creator God.

The last affirmation of the Apostles' Creed is that we through Jesus Christ we will enjoy life everlasting. Jesus says this in John's gospel:

Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.
(John 17:2)

In knowing God, not knowing about God, we have the promise of everlasting life with him. In trusting our life to God in this world, in believing what Jesus did for us in his life, death and resurrection has the power to save us – we have the promise of eternal life.

Our God is not ordinary. He is extraordinary!

Three pillars of the Christian faith; the scandal of amazing grace, the hope of bodily resurrection and the promise of eternal life. There is not much left to say. But there is one word we have missed. It is an old word, and ancient word and a familiar word. So familiar we often rush past it. The Apostles' Creed finishes with the word, 'Amen'.

Amen

The word 'Amen' is amazing. Thousands of years ago it emerged in ancient Middle Eastern culture, including ancient Israel. In Hebrew it looks like this. In the Greek language, even though it looks different, it is pronounced pretty much the same. From ancient Hebrew and Greek, amen was transliterated into Latin and then English. From Hebrew, to Greek, to Latin to English – Amen sounds the same. It is a universal word – it has been called the best known word in human speech.

What does 'Amen' mean? It means 'so be it'. It is an expression of strong affirmation or belief. So when we recite the Apostles' Creed and say 'Amen' at the end, we are saying that all that the Creed says is trustworthy and true.

So can you say 'Amen'? Will you say 'Amen'?

Do you believe in God the Father, maker of heaven and earth? That we are made and loved by an extraordinary God?

Do you believe in God the Son, Jesus Christ our Lord? That he lived, died and was raised so that we might be reconciled to God?

Do you believe in God the Holy Spirit – the giver of life?

Some of you might be thinking, yes...but. Yes, but I have some doubts. Yes, but I have lots of unanswered questions. And so you hold off on trusting your life completely to God, thinking you can't until all your doubts are resolved and questions answered.

Here is the thing. God doesn't care so much in the strength of our 'amen', but that we offer it.

Tim Keller uses this analogy.

Imagine you are falling off a cliff, and sticking out of the cliff is a branch that is strong enough to hold you, but you don't know how strong it is. As you fall, you have just enough time to grab that branch. How much faith do

you have to have in that branch for it to save you? Must you be totally sure it can save you? No, of course not. You only have to have enough faith to grab the branch. That's because it's not the quality of your faith that saves you; it's the object of your faith. It doesn't matter how you feel about the branch; all that matter is the branch. And Jesus is the branch.

God knows we have doubts. God know we have questions. God knows that often our faith is as small as a mustard seed. It doesn't matter.

It is not the depth of our faith and belief that saves us; it is the strength of the object of our faith.

God is strong. God is mighty to save.

We do not have an ordinary God. We have an extraordinary God. You can trust him with not only your life, but also your death.

All God wants, all God needs is our 'Amen'.