

Religious extremism - Good or Bad?

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 01 October 2017

Preacher: Simon Dowdy

[0 : 00] On one of those days, as Jesus was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting there, who had come from every village of Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem.

And the power of the Lord was with him to heal. And behold, some men were bringing on a bed a man who was paralyzed, and they were seeking to bring him in and lay him before Jesus.

But finding no way to bring him in because of the crowd, they went up onto the roof and let him down with his bed, through the tiles into the midst before Jesus. And when he saw their faith, he said, Man, your sins are forgiven you.

And the scribes and the Pharisees began to question, saying, Who is this who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone? When Jesus perceived their thoughts, he answered them, Why do you question in your hearts?

Which is easier, to say, Your sins are forgiven you, or to say, Rise and walk. But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.

[1 : 02] He said to the man who was paralyzed, I say to you, Rise, pick up your bed, and go home. And immediately he rose up before them, and picked up what he had been lying on, and went home, glorifying God.

And amazement seized them all, and they glorified God, and were filled with awe, saying, We have seen extraordinary things today. After this he went out and saw a tax collector named Levi, sitting at the tax booth.

And he said to him, Follow me. And leaving everything, he rose and followed him. And Levi made him a great feast in his house, and there was a large company of tax collectors and others reclining at table with them.

And the Pharisees and their scribes grumbled at his disciples, saying, Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners? And Jesus answered them, Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.

I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance. Let me add my welcome. For those who don't know me, my name is Simon Dowdy, and I'm the senior minister here at Grace Church.

[2 : 09] It's lovely to have you with us this morning as we consider this question, Religious Extremism, Good or Bad? And I'd be grateful if you could pick up one of the church Bibles and turn to that reading which we just had from Luke chapter 5 on page 1038.

Luke chapter 5, page 1038. It's the true story of Levi the tax collector and how he came to follow Jesus Christ. Levi is, I suggest, the sort of person who might be considered an extremist.

Notice with you, he follows Jesus in a very, very costly way. Verse 28, he turns his back on his job. Verse 29, he follows Jesus publicly as he invites friends to his house. He follows Jesus extravagantly as he puts on what is described as a great feast.

Verse 30, his actions provoke opposition from the religious and political establishment. In other words, as we look at Levi, this is no empty profession of faith.

[3 : 30] This is not simply a nod to religious observance going to church at Christmas and Easter. Does it impact his career, his lifestyle, his finances, his social life?

Extreme? Possibly. I guess part of the problem as we consider the question, religious extremism, good or bad, is what do we mean by extremism?

You'll see on the order of service there a short outline of the talk just under that song which we've last sung and the definition from the Oxford Dictionary of Extremism.

It defines the extremist as a person who holds extreme or fanatical political or religious views, especially one who resorts to or advocates extreme action.

Now, using the word extreme twice to define whether extremist describes someone is not very helpful, is it? It is highly subjective.

[4 : 32] After all, sometimes what seems radical and unthinkable can in due time become the overwhelming consensus. In the US in the 1830s, the moderate way to abolish slavery was to compensate slave owners and to send slaves back to Africa.

By contrast, it was those who were regarded as extremists who argued that nothing short of immediate abolition and immediate freedom would do.

William Lloyd Garrison said, on this subject, I do not wish to think or speak or write with moderation. And a little over three decades later, what he had fought for, his principles were written into the American Constitution.

Likewise, the early pioneering women suffragettes were regarded as extremists, dangerous to society. It begs the question, doesn't it? When is extremism good and when is extremism bad? Former American Senator Barry Goldwater famously said, extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice and moderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtue.

[5 : 54] There is bad extremism. There is good extremism. There is bad moderation. There is good moderation. And I guess that just sounds a note of caution, doesn't it?

Because as a culture, generally speaking, those of us who are British, that's not all of us in this room, but those of us who are British, we are suspicious, I think, of anyone who takes anything too seriously, with the exception, that is, of sport.

In other words, if we're not careful, the language of religious extremism, I think, can so easily become for us simply an excuse for lazy thinking, not really engaging with the issues, a kind of catch-all for the kind of religious experience or religious ideas which are outside of our comfort zone and we don't really like.

So what I want to do this morning is simply to ask two questions about the Christian faith as we address this broader issue of religious extremism, good or bad.

They're there on the talk outline. First of all, is Christianity true? Secondly, is Christianity good? Firstly, is Christianity true?

[7 : 09] As Bruce reminded us earlier, the person of Jesus Christ lies at the very heart of the Christian faith. That he lived is not in any doubt. Just turn back, will you, a few pages to the very beginning of Luke's Gospel on page 1030.

This is where Luke tells us at the very beginning of his Gospel why he's writing and how he wrote his Gospel account.

Notice verse 1, he's writing about things which have been accomplished. In other words, these are events that really happened. Verse 2, the sources he used are the eyewitnesses themselves. Verse 3, he's writing an orderly account. This is no fake news story cobbled together. Verse 4, he writes to give certainty about Jesus. Now the fact is that for better or for worse in our culture, religious certainty is often associated with extremism.

The key question, of course, is who was Jesus? Because Luke is writing, he says, to give us certainty about who Jesus was. In other words, there is an entirely right, proper, and appropriate certainty that we can have about Jesus.

[8 : 35] So, back to Luke chapter 5, page 1038. Who was Jesus? Well, we see so clearly here, don't we, that he claimed to be God. As he says to this paralyzed man who is lowered down before him, as he says, verse 20, man, man, your sins are forgiven.

And verse 21, the scribes and the Pharisees began to question, saying, who is this who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone? Now, when the Bible talks about sin, it's not referring to the kinds of things we might see on the front page of a tabloid newspaper, but rather about what we might call our moral compass, whereby I am at the center of my life, I am the one who decides what is right, what is wrong, living my life, my way, not God's way.

And it is what each one of us is naturally like. And therefore, you see, it's God alone who can forgive sins, just as if I offend you or if I'm rude to you or worse, then you alone are the one who can forgive me.

And therefore, you see, the claim that Jesus makes here in verse 20 is truly staggering. It is breathtaking. Sometimes you hear people saying or writing that Jesus himself never claimed to be God.

actually, you know, and that it was a sort of claim later on made up by the early church. But the religious establishment here, they are in no doubt, are they, what Jesus is claiming, verse 21. [10:10] No, they say, this is blasphemy. Who can forgive sins but God alone? But there's more.

Because supremely, after his death on the cross, Jesus rose from the dead never to die again. A couple of years ago at the Festival of Dangerous Ideas in Sydney, in the Opera House overlooking the harbour, the following question was put to a group of panellists.

Which dangerous idea has the potential to change the world for the better? I wonder how you'd answer that question. Well, the atheist on the panel said that their dangerous idea was that abortion should be mandatory for 30 years to deal with overpopulation.

the feminist said that her dangerous idea was simply that of freedom. But Peter Hitchens, the Christian, came out with an answer which clearly startles everyone.

This is what he said. The most dangerous idea in human history remains the belief that Jesus Christ was the son of God and rose from the dead.

[11:20] at which point the compare didn't really know what to say. Because of course, if true, it means that Jesus Christ really was God as he said he was.

If true, it means that Jesus Christ is Lord today and is ruling the world today. If true, it means that Jesus Christ will return at the end of history as he said he would.

If Jesus is God then actually Levi's response surely is entirely right and proper.

He follows Jesus in a costly way. No empty profession of faith. It impacts his career, his lifestyle, his finances, his social life. Extreme? Perhaps. But actually it is entirely appropriate if Jesus Christ is indeed God in the flesh.

In that sense you cannot be a Christian without being extreme. Imagine for a moment two passengers arriving at Heathrow airport on a flight from far away.

[12:33] One is wearing a coat, a hat and carrying an umbrella. The other wearing a t-shirt and a pair of shorts and flip-flops. They look at each other and both think the same thing.

You are dressed in a very odd way indeed. Now of course one of them they've arrived in London and they're staying in London. That's their destination.

It's home. They are dressed entirely appropriately. For the other one while they are simply passing through on their way to sunnier climes to their final destination.

In the same way you see it is inevitable that the life of the person who knows that Jesus Christ is God that he rose from the dead that there will be a judgment day that death is not the end that there is another destination to come.

it is inevitable that their life will look very different from someone whose world view says to them that this life here and now is all that there is.

[13:45] Now there are of course those who label Christians as extremists in the dangerous sense. A catch-all for the kind of religion that they don't like or that's taken too seriously in their view or that they're offended by or disagree with and it's dismissed as extremism.

But just think for a moment what kind of God would it be who fitted in precisely with the assumptions and values of 21st century Britain and a particular segment of 21st century Britain as well the opinion makers.

Well surely that kind of God wouldn't really be God at all. It would simply be a God who is made on our own image. A God reflecting secular western values.

A God who was therefore completely irrelevant to the rest of the world who were neither secular nor western. A God who is in fact no God at all.

surely integrity demands you see we ask the question is Christianity true? Not do I like it? Not does it fit in with my world view?

[15:07] Not does it affirm my assumptions or my prejudices? But is it true? Who was Jesus? Was he really God in the flesh as he claimed?

if he was that is completely life changing. That's our first question is Christianity true? Second question is Christianity good?

Because this section of Luke's gospel also reveals I think the root of religious extremism or we might say the difference between a bad extremism and a good extremism.

The bad extremism is there in verses 29 to 30. Have a look at it with me. And Levi made a great feast in his house and there was a large company of tax collectors and others reclining at table with them and the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled at his disciples saying why do you eat and drink

with tax collectors and sinners?

In first century Palestine tax collectors regarded as traitors as well as crooks. They collected taxes on behalf of the occupying Roman forces which meant they were traitors and they added their own cut which meant they were crooks.

[16:24] It's why the religious establishment here of Jesus' day are so shocked and why they ask Jesus why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners? In other words you see what is their assumption?

Well their assumption is that when God sends his king when he sends his king Jesus into the world he will come as a kind of ofsted external inspector.

In other words he's going to come to reward good people with a pass and bad people with a fail. Good people get a heaven bad people get a hell.

That is their kind of framework their assumptions. And therefore you see they divide the whole human race into two groups. The good like them and the bad like the tax collectors and sinners. Their mindset in other words is one of separation. And I want to suggest this morning that is the root of the kind of religious extremism that even many Muslims would disagree with.

[17:30] It is the separation which says we are okay with God but you are not. we are the faithful ones you are not. We are holy you are not.

We are chosen you are not. Separation the roots of bad extremism. Witness the way in which Buddhists in Myanmar treat Rohingya Muslims.

Witness the way in which Christians are treated in India and much of the Arab world. Witness the way in which full-blown Islam treats others. Separation.

It starts with where we are here we don't eat with them. You shouldn't eat with them. The mindset which regards others as second-class citizens.

But it's a road if you carry on down that road it's a road which leads you to holy war and killing so-called infidels.

[18:32] repentance. So will you then notice the shock of verses 31 to 32? And Jesus answered them those who are well have no need of a physician but those who are sick.

I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance. Here is the root of what we might call good extremism. As Jesus says look I'm not the examiner.

I'm not the Ofsted examiner. No I've come as a doctor. And I would not have bothered coming into the world if there wasn't something badly wrong with the whole human race.

Because it's not the healthy who need a doctor. It's the sick. And therefore you see when Jesus divides people into two groups it's not between those who are good and those who are bad.

Because as he looks into our hearts he knows that actually all of us are bad as we stand before God. All of us are sinful. All of us deserve the judgment to come. Now what is the distinction he sees instead?

[19:41] Have a look at verse 32. It's the difference between those who aren't right with God and know they're not right with God and those who aren't right with God but assume that they are.

God. There was once a smart society lady who went to a photographer to have her photograph taken. He was a young man.

He looked cheeky so he eyeballed her with a steely glare and said young man I want you to do me justice. Well he paused grabbed her gaze and said madam it's not justice you need but mercy.

And you see that is why Jesus Christ came to bring mercy for those who know they need mercy. And if we've never realized that actually it shows that we've never come face to face with God himself.

And we've never grasped why Jesus came. He came for sinners. By the end of Luke's gospel we see that that takes him. He is arrested crucified.

[20:55] He dies on the cross taking the punishment for sin that we deserve. So that anyone even a Levi even a you even a me can stand before God as a forgiven person.

And I want to suggest that is the root of good extremism simply because it is deeply humbling. God's sin.

You see the Bible teaches that each one of us is created equally in God's image. Each one of us has equally rebelled against God.

Each one of us is equally sinful in God's sight. Far from being the language of separation you see this is the language of radical and genuine inclusion.

because Jesus Christ came for sinners for anyone equally who will receive the gift of forgiveness and follow him.

[21 : 56] Yes it leads to separation but it's not the kind of separation which is based on the fact that I think I am better than you but on whether or not we accept the forgiveness that Jesus Christ came to bring.

And as we see Levi here having hosting this party as we see Jesus coming to this party why it's a wonderful picture of what happens when we begin to follow Jesus Christ.

No longer an outcast miles away from God but made fit for his presence and enjoying his company. It's wonderful wasn't it to hear of Laura's story earlier how she came to follow Jesus so full of joy and delight in God's goodness and kindness.

And I guess there are many others who we could have interviewed like that this morning who stood up the front here and spoke of that same goodness of God delighting in his great kindness.

Because the fact is you see that once we've grasped why Jesus came then actually the decision whether or not to follow him really is a complete no-brainer.

[23 : 08] So is Christianity true? is Christianity good? I think one of the assumptions in our culture is that the more dedicated you are to your religious system if you like the more likely you are to commit violence in the name of that religious system.

Is that a fair assumption? Is it true? No. After all Jesus Christ calls those who do follow him to love God with all our heart, all our soul, all our mind and all our strength.

To love our neighbours as ourselves. Now that's pretty extreme isn't it? But surely it would be in the national interest to promote that kind of extremism.

Surely to restrict that kind of extremism would be detrimental to our common good as a society. Indeed it was deep radical Christian faith as I guess many of us know that was thought of many by extreme at the time that inspired men like William Wilberforce to fight for the abolition of slavery, Lord Shaftesbury to fight for better conditions for those working in mines and factories and Martin Luther King to challenge segregation.

the real issue you see as I put on the outline is not how devoted you are to your beliefs but the nature of the beliefs to which you are devoted.

[24 : 45] Not how devoted you are to your beliefs but the nature of the beliefs to which you are devoted. So let me finish just by asking a question.

Whether like Levi you see your need to be forgiven by God and whether like Levi you have experienced for yourself this marvellous truth that Jesus Christ came to bring forgiveness to those who need it.

If you haven't you can do so today. Now I realise saying that some of us won't be ready to do that. This may be very new. You may have questions in which case we'd love you to sign up for this Christianity Explore course.

You'll see there are details of it on the tear-off slip on the side of the service sheet there. Christianity Explore is a course that's run in churches up and down the country. It's a three-week course. For some people it's a refresher just going over the basics of the Christian faith.

For others it's just beginning to look at the Christian faith. a guided one-to-one read-through of one of the gospels would be of interest.

[26 : 04] Similarly we offer that as well. If you are a reader then we'd love you to take away one of these books. It's on the bookstall called Capturing God by Rico Tice.

But I guess others will be ready to begin to follow Jesus. Perhaps you're asking the question how do I receive the forgiveness that Jesus offers? In other words how can I do what some of my friends and family members what some in our culture may regard actually as a very extreme thing and follow Jesus Christ.

Well the key to doing that is one word and it's in verse 32 of Luke chapter 5. It's the last word. It is the word repentance.

Because repentance in the Bible doesn't mean to sort of turn over a new leaf. It's not the spiritual equivalent of a new year's resolution whereby I make myself more acceptable to God because that doesn't.

It's simply a U-turn whereby I say sorry to God for living my life my way without him. I ask for his forgiveness made possible by the death of Jesus Christ on the cross for our sins.

[27 : 23] I get out of the driving seat of my life. I hand over the keys to Jesus and I begin to follow him.