

Belief - Sunday 19th November 2023

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Preacher: Matt Wallace

[0 : 0 0] So, with it being Remembrance Sunday last week, and next week we'll be kicking off our Advent season. Today, I guess, is one of those sort of gap Sundays that we have sometimes in the sort of calendar, which maybe gives us a chance to take a one-off look at a topic this morning.

And so, thinking through and praying through what we might look at this morning, I'd like us, if we can, please, to consider this belief. Belief. So, what we believe and how that shapes our lives with each other and with God.

And I think it's fair to say that church life in general is big on belief. You know, working out what we think about God, Jesus, existence as a whole.

And the belief is all about settling on what we hold to be true, whether as individuals or as a community. And so, over the centuries, Christians have come up with various written and spoken creeds, texts which define the general beliefs we share.

The word creed comes from the Latin word credo, which basically means I believe. So, there's sort of statements about what we believe. For example, one of the most famous creeds is known as the Apostles' Creed.

[1 : 2 6] It's an ancient statement of faith from maybe about the 4th century AD. And that's still said to this day as a decent summary of what followers of Jesus generally hold to be true.

Now, as you usually said, perhaps in slightly more formal services than we tend to hold here at St. John's. But for this morning, I just wondered for a change, and if you're happy to.

I wondered if we might say together these ancient words of the Apostles' Creed. Don't have to, but if you wish, shall we say together?

I believe in God, the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth. I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried.

He descended to the dead. On the third day, he rose again. He ascended into heaven. He is seated at the right hand of the Father, and he will come to judge the living and the dead.

[2 : 4 5] I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Holy Catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.

Amen. Amen. So, some ancient words there. I don't know how you felt saying that. For some, I guess it would be very familiar. Words that we might have said perhaps every week growing up if we were a churchgoer from those times.

Maybe for others of us, maybe that was the first time we've heard that, or first time we've said them. Either way, there's a lot in it. It's pretty dense theology there.

And I don't know as we go through whether you're familiar with it or not, if you feel you're able to agree with every line it contains, or if certain lines raise questions or raise an eyebrow for you as we go through it.

For example, perhaps for some of us, we're not sure perhaps about saying that Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary. You know, that's often, and perhaps understandably, a cause for debate among people, whether they believe that or not, particularly with what we know these days about XY chromosomes and so on.

[4 : 00] It's one of those mysteries that we perhaps wrestle with. Equally, saying we believe in the Holy Catholic Church. You know, if we're not Roman Catholic, that can seem a little bit confusing, maybe.

But the word Catholic here, with a small c, simply means universal. You know, for the record, for this, although we don't say it in this way very often, I'm personally happy to say all the words of this creed.

But if you're not, then I understand that. And I appreciate any sort of hesitation you might have. Certainly, the honesty that comes with that. Indeed, wrestling with the bigger questions of belief, I'd say is part of what makes church life interesting together, that we can have these kind of discussions.

And wherever you're at on your journey of faith, you're very welcome here to continue working things out with us together. And yet the thing in this creed that I want to point out this morning is something in this bit.

Not so much any particular word or phrase, but rather this comma here, falling as it does between born of the Virgin Mary and suffered under Pontius Pilate.

[5 : 22] You see, in this section of the creed, speaks about Jesus. And whilst it covers, in what we've said, his birth and then his death, it actually says nothing about the life he lived in the middle.

Nothing about his teaching, his miracles, his parables. Nothing about the way Jesus related to people. Nothing about his travels, his encounters, how he conducted himself.

Says nothing about how Jesus lived. Which if you think about it, well, that's a pretty core set of truths to reduce to a comma.

And I guess herein lies a problem, maybe, with the way we're often tempted to think about belief. In that, if we're not careful, the principles of what we believe can sometimes overshadow what it means to put those principles into practice.

You know, how we live them out day by day. Indeed, if we say we believe these things, then surely it has to affect the way we live. By way of illustration, I just want to show us a clip from this.

[6 : 39] This is Ted Lasso, one of my favourite TV shows. If you haven't seen it, Ted, the moustached man in the middle there. He's an American coach who comes over to manage a fictional English football team called AFC Richmond.

And in a clip we're going to see, we're going to see Ted here talking to his players after they've not only just lost a match to Man City, but also just after they've lost their star player, a player called Zava, who has walked out on them.

So let's have a look at this clip here. Gentlemen, hey, that was a tough one tonight, okay?

Man City has still got our number. That's all right. We're going to get another crack at them later in the season. All right. Coach, go practice tomorrow, yeah? That's right. Okay.

Well, I'll see you all on Monday. Hey, hey, hey, hey, coach. What about Zava? You, um... He quit the team. I mean, technically, he retired from the whole sport, which makes it feel a little less personal, yeah?

[7 : 53] You know, like if your girlfriend runs off with some dude and it turns out they were soulmates. Hey, but look, look, look, look. I hear you, okay? Zava is gone.

And you know what? I think it's a good thing. What? How? Oh, I do. Okay, look. Do I want to win? Heck yeah. But I also want to do it with folks that want to be here.

It's not like we could handcuff him to his locker and make him love us. We could have tried. Hey, guys. Guys, look. We got a good thing going here. All right?

Mm-hmm. We didn't need Zava. Yeah? All we need to win are the fellas in this room right now.

And all you fellas need to do is believe it. Oh! That's a sign! That's it, we're doomed. No, no, no.

[8 : 53] Come on, guys. No, no, hold on. Hey, knock it off, okay? We're not doomed. No one is doomed. But bumper catch, yes, you're right. It is a sign. I agree.

Yeah. Yeah. Fact is, it's just a sign. Whoa! All right, guys, listen to me.

Belief doesn't just happen because you hang something up on a wall. All right? It comes from in here, you know? And up here. Down here. Only problem is, we all got so much junk floating through us, a lot of times we end up getting in our own way.

You know, crap like envy or fear. Shame. I don't want to mess around with that shit anymore.

You know what I mean? Do you? No, no. No, coach. No. Do you? No. No. No, me neither. Hell no.

[9 : 58] You know what I want to mess around with? The belief that I matter. You know? Regardless of what I do or don't achieve. or the belief that we all deserve to be loved.

Whether we've been hurt or maybe we've hurt somebody else. Or what about the belief of hope? Yeah? That's what I want to mess with.

Believing that things can get better. That I can get better. That we will get better. Oh, man. To believe in yourself.

To believe in one another. Man, that's... That's fundamental to being alive. And look, yo, hey, if you can do that, if each of you can truly do that, can't nobody rip that apart.

See you all Monday? Yes, of course. Yes, of course. Good.

[11 : 10] That's a speech. And it's a great series if you want to catch it. I think it's on Apple TV. And it's got some fruity language at times, but it's got a lot of heart, hopefully, as we've seen there as well.

So, as we saw that in that clip, I guess Ted, the manager, he was unpacking the idea that true belief is much more than simply saying what we believe or putting a sign up on the wall telling us to believe.

Instead, according to Ted, the kind of belief that counts is about how we live in practice. Treating people well because we believe they matter. We believe they deserve to be loved.

We believe, as he says, in the hope that life can be better and we do our best to make that hope become a reality. Now, what's interesting with this is that when we look at the words of Jesus and elsewhere in the Bible, belief and the principles which we hold to be true are intrinsically connected to our behavior and the way we put those principles into practice.

in fact, there are various passages in the Bible which suggest that how we behave is actually of more importance than the details of what we believe.

[12 : 36] For example, there's a parable Jesus tells in which he likens himself to a king who divides people into two categories. Those who help the poor and the oppressed and those who don't.

Indeed, we're going to take a look at this story. It's from Matthew chapter 25, so have a listen to what Jesus says here. When the Son of Man comes in his glory and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne.

All the nations will be gathered before him and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

Then the king will say to those on his right, Come, you who are blessed by my father, take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.

For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you invited me in. I needed clothes and you clothed me.

[13 : 53] I was sick and you looked after me. I was in prison and you came to visit me. Then the righteous will answer him, Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you or thirsty and give you something to drink?

When did we see you a stranger and invite you in or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you? The king will reply, Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.

Then he will say to those on his left, Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.

For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink. I was a stranger and you did not invite me in. I needed clothes and you did not clothe me.

I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me. They also will answer, Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison and did not help you?

[15 : 13] He will reply, Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.

Then they will go away to eternal punishment but the righteous to eternal life. Now, we can explore perhaps another time in more detail whether the eternal punishment that Jesus talks about at the end there is motivated by angry retribution and revenge and so on or, as I would suggest, by the possibility of hopeful rehabilitation because that makes a huge difference as to the kind of king we think Jesus is and makes a huge difference as to whether we think there's hope for people to be redeemed and turn to God beyond the grave.

But leaving that debate aside for a moment, it seems the main point of Jesus' parable here is to underline the importance of actions.

The people who feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick, the prisoner, they're the ones who he says are invited into God's kingdom whereas those who ignore the needs of others they're sent away.

Now Jesus says nothing here about their beliefs or doctrines as being crucial. Rather, in this parable, it's people's actions, you know, their attitude to and care for the poor and the vulnerable.

[17 : 03] It's their kindness and their mercy which sets them apart. all of which begs the question who will Jesus invite into his kingdom?

The one who says they're a Christian but ignores those in need or the atheist who shows consistent compassion?

It's one to debate over coffee, I'm sure. elsewhere in the Bible though, James, one of Jesus' brothers, he picks up on this theme in a letter he wrote.

Yes, says James, we might believe certain things but belief on its own doesn't seem to count for much. He says this, he says at one point, you believe that there is one God, good, even the demons believe that and tremble.

instead, James emphasizes the importance of putting faith into action. He says this elsewhere, he says, what good is it my brothers and sisters if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds can such faith save them?

[18 : 21] Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food if one of you says to them go in peace keep warm and well fed but there's nothing about their physical needs what good is it?

In the same way faith by itself if it is not accompanied by actions is dead. As he summarizes elsewhere, faith without deeds is dead which is pretty strong stuff really for us to work through and what are those deeds that James is talking about?

Well there are many but again as with Jesus James prioritizes the importance of meeting people's basic needs for food and clothes and shelter and so whether that means supporting homeless people on our streets when their plight is labeled by some as a lifestyle choice or whether it's protesting the horrendous disregard by the Israeli government for civilian life in Gaza as they respond to the equally horrific attacks carried out by Hamas if our faith if our belief is to mean anything well according to James according to Jesus it has to be reflected in the way we respond to those in need now having said that does all this mean that beliefs that doctrine that the truth of who God is doesn't really matter and it's all just about what we do not what we believe well not at all no after all

Jesus devoted much of his time and energy not just to helping people but to helping people understand in their hearts and their minds you know the truth about God in fact I'd say knowing the truth about God you know God's character God's priorities God's love and knowing God full stop in that kind of relational way that's crucial for us if our good deeds you know the fruit we produce in our lives is gonna last so where might we look to know the truth about God well it sounds obvious but it's gotta be first and foremost the person of Jesus the way the truth and the life you know the image of the invisible God the one who shows us who God is and what God's ways truly look like when put into practice primarily we see the truth about Jesus revealed in the gospel accounts of his life accounts which when read in tandem with the Holy

Spirit living in us helps us to again open our hearts and minds to the wonder of God the wonder of the God in whom we can put our faith and our trust and our belief but alongside these gospel accounts you know Matthew Mark Luke and John we also have the benefit of being able to read elsewhere in the New Testament some of the ways in which Jesus' earliest followers were working out what they believed and crucially how they lived in light of those beliefs now one such passage one such way in which someone in the early church worked things out is found in one of Paul's letters an early church leader the apostle Paul we call him this is a look at his letter to the Philippians it's a letter he wrote to the church in the Greek city of Philippi the same church that Lydia led who Ian was talking about the other week so just want to have a brief look at how Paul at one point outlines his beliefs about Jesus this is from

[22 : 15] Philippians chapter two he says this he says Christ Jesus being in very nature God did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage rather he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant being made in human likeness and being found in appearance as a man he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death even death on a cross therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father now this this letter here Paul we reckon was writing it about 60 AD that's maybe some 30 years or so after Jesus had ascended into heaven and yet because it reads pretty poetically him even you know biblical scholars reckon that

Paul was perhaps quoting something here that was already in use by his time making this creed we could call it one of the very earliest statements of faith there is now whole books have been written about these verses so we can only scratch the surface a little bit today but there's a couple of things I just want to point out if I can for example we looked earlier at Jesus' parable on the sheep and the goats and I mentioned there are different ways of understanding God's punishment God's discipline one which sees it as God's angry retribution from which there's no escape for eternity and another which sees it as God's loving correction you know with the hope and the aim of redemption now you can make up your own mind which of those two ideas of that discipline that punishment which view perhaps you want to take but I think what's interesting with this

Philippians passage is the way Paul describes what happens when Jesus sits on his eternal throne as king if you recall we're told this that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father every knee shall bow every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord where according to Paul in heaven yes on earth yes but also under the earth in other words those in the underworld in Hades or in hell they will declare that Jesus is Lord now as I say you're welcome to your own views on this but whatever we believe I'd suggest we need to work out our response to verses like this which suggest that even those in hell will eventually bow before Jesus as Lord and as Paul says elsewhere in Romans if you declare with your mouth

Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead you will be saved again one to ponder perhaps over coffee where we perhaps sit and understand this but wherever our perspective takes us I hope we can see how important it is for us to work out what we believe if we're able to share who God is with others in ways that represent him fairly and do God and God's ways justice but then secondly from this passage and in light of what we've been focusing on today what's fascinating I think are the qualities of Jesus that Paul chooses to highlight here now it's all again it's incredibly dense theology but some words which perhaps spring out for me here are that despite being God in all his glory Jesus came as a servant who humbled himself and we can flesh out what kind of humble servant

Jesus was again by looking at his life you know that comma if you like in the Apostles Creed because Jesus' life was lived in the service of others whether that's washing their feet holding their hands meeting their needs defending their worth you know Jesus modeled the very life he spoke of in that sheep and goats parable from earlier feeding the hungry welcoming the stranger clothing the naked caring for the sick freeing prisoners from the shackles that bound them ultimately as Paul says here Jesus humbled himself to such a degree he was obedient to death even death on a cross enduring the most painful and humbling humiliating of executions purely so that he could then defeat the power of death by rising again in order to offer us that same eternal life with him and that above all is why I would say belief matters because if we know the truth about Jesus we know the truth about God

[28 : 08] God who in Jesus puts the needs of the whole world before his own he becomes last gives up his glory to become the least for us and if we can get our heads around that truth that's incredible that's glorious that is love and that's the kind of God in whom I'm willing to place my trust and my faith my belief that's the kind of God in whom I'm willing to place my life and I encourage you with all my heart to do the same with yours indeed to finish and hopefully pull these strands of faith and deeds together going to close with some more words of Paul's from the letter to the Philippians which come just before that creed that we've just looked at indeed Paul says this words which

I'd suggest we do well to take on board and allow to shape our lives therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ if any comfort from his love if any common sharing in the spirit if any tenderness and compassion then make my joy complete by being like minded having the same love being one in spirit and of one mind do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit rather in humility value others above yourselves not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of others enemies rather than