

Keep On Growing: Jesus is God, God is Jesus - 18th June 2023

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[0 : 00] So we're going to try and keep on growing as we've been looking at this series in recent weeks about how we grow with God and with each other in our faith.

And I guess maturing and growing in our faith is really the name of the game of this life we've got with Jesus. You know, we worship and follow a living God. So I guess we shouldn't be surprised, perhaps, that there's a dynamic, ongoing, developing way in which we can know God and God can know us.

I say we shouldn't be surprised, but I guess if we're honest, growth in general can sometimes take us slightly unawares. For example, I remember as a kid being pretty fed up with the number of older folks who'd often comment on the way I'd got taller from one month to the next with a haven't you grown kind of comment.

Say, I got fed up as a kid. I've now become that embarrassing adult who makes a point of saying exactly that to younger ones after they've had a growth spurt. I was joking with our daughter Heidi about this the other week because after she'd got a bit taller in recent times.

She came back from church one Sunday lunchtime and she said she'd counted 17 people who had commented to her about how much she'd grown.

[1 : 24] It's a new record for the Wallace family, I tell you. Don't see if you can beat that today, but see if you can beat that today. We'll see. Now, if you were one of those 17, please don't worry.

Please don't worry. It's a comment that's usually shared with a sense of joy and wonder and encouragement for our younger ones. And I guess watching children grow, as Ruth was praying for us earlier, is one of the ways and one of the joys really of community life as the younger ones make their way through the world.

But what's interesting, if we think about it, is that we define those folks with a few years under their belts as grown-ups, as grown-ups.

It's quite a curious phrase, really, when we think about it. I'm not quite sure what the opposite of a grown-up is, but it reveals perhaps the destination, the goal.

I might say the aim of much of life is to be a grown-up, to have matured sufficiently so that our growth defines who we are.

[2 : 32] And so what might that mean for us to have a grown-up faith? Well, on the one hand, Jesus appears to counsel against thinking along those kind of lines.

For example, on one occasion, we're told this, that Jesus called a little child to him and placed the child among them and said, haven't you grown? No, he didn't. He said, truly, truly, I tell you, unless you change, speaking to the crowds around him, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

So Jesus here seems to be commending child-like qualities, you know, humility, wonder, trust, joy, simplicity, maybe. Quality, qualities which, if you're anything like me, seem to spend much of our adult lives trying to hold on to or rekindle, as life can sometimes harden us or make us just that little bit more cynical than perhaps we wish we were.

I wonder perhaps if true growth, therefore, is as much about rediscovery of what we've lost as it is about always searching for something new.

It's a word of caution here, perhaps, from Jesus to us against always striving for more and better when instead having enough or maybe valuing what we've already got, maybe a more helpful principle to live by.

[4 : 07] That's one side of it with Jesus. And yet, as Ian was saying last week, growth is still a principle which underpins so much of the way Jesus speaks about the kingdom of God, you know, the rule and the reign of God in our lives.

And in talking about our faith in general, Jesus regularly uses all sorts of imagery to do with growth, whether seeds or crops or buildings or finances or food.

So I guess for us, putting the idea of being little children and childlike together, with Jesus' emphasis on growth, I guess a question for us today might be this.

How might we have a grown-up faith while remaining childlike? Something we might define as being full of wonder, trust and joy.

Well, one possibility that I just want to focus on this morning, and which for me has been pretty transformational, I think, for my own faith journey and understanding of God, is all about the way, and this might not surprise you, but all about the way we see Jesus.

[5 : 20] And in particular, the angle I want to look at today is that I'd suggest that while we're often in the habit of declaring that Jesus is God, I'm not sure we focus enough on the fact that God is Jesus.

And if that sounds like a bit of a riddle, then let's unpack that a bit. You see, for many of us, you know, myself included, one of the ways we might have pictured God as we were growing up, there's that phrase again, is of God as this kind of massive, almighty, powerful being somewhere out there in the ether.

You know, a somewhat distant deity with a voice of thunder, perhaps, and the authority to match. Indeed, I searched for God in Google images, and this was the first picture that came up for me. You know, the earth on the left, it seems, is his footstool kind of thing, a massive God. And again, I was thinking as a kid, you know, one of the songs that we used to sing in Sunday school back in those days was, my God is so big, so strong and so mighty, there's nothing my God cannot do. So God, from my earliest years, was described and presented as big, as holy, as holy, yes, but almost scarily so.

[6 : 48] You know, someone you'd feel so keen to please, but equally, you know, looking at that face, pretty nervous, I think, that if you did mess up, you know, God's righteous anger might just boil over.

God's father, on this Father's Day, perhaps, a father figure to be revered, but probably feared as well, so that you can never quite relax in God's presence.

That's a common view of God, I'd say, perhaps for many of us growing up, especially, whereas Jesus, on the other hand, as a kid, I found he was altogether much more appealing.

You know, Jesus was the one who healed people, helped people, fed people. He was the one who welcomed children. He hung out with his friends. He told stories. He smiled.

He cried. He was vulnerable. He was the one who challenged injustice and hypocrisy, but this Jesus would never dream of hurting anyone.

[7 : 54] So he's holy, yeah, but, in my understanding of him growing up, he was lovingly holy. You know, someone, again, who you'd long to please, but if you did mess up, then Jesus' forgiveness was always on offer.

Jesus, for me, was a friend, a brother, a teacher, someone you'd long to be with and long to be like. Now, the trouble is, if we put these kind of images together of God, on the one hand, and Jesus, on the other, it's quite a conflicting pair of pictures for us to get our head round.

God the Father, who we're assured is loving, but who doesn't always seem like it, if we're honest, and God the Son, Jesus, who we're assured is God, but who seems often poles apart from the kind of God we see described in much of the Old Testament.

and in many ways, this tension between these two kind of ideas, maybe it comes in the sharpest focus on the cross, where so much of our interpretation of what actually happens with Jesus' crucifixion is coloured by our perception of what God the Father is like.

I'd say it's coloured to such a degree that somehow what became believed was that this divine father figure chooses to violently punish his innocent son so that he doesn't have to take out his anger on us instead.

[9 : 37] But really? Really? Is that what we think? Because that seems to be saying that violence, that capital punishment is somehow the key to solving the problem of sin in the universe.

And what's more, for those who might hold that kind of view, it's often said that if we don't believe in this punishing God, Father, person, you know, whose holiness demands justice and demands retribution perhaps, then we'll also be punished in hell, suffering eternal conscious torment. God punishes Jesus instead of us, but unless we believe in Jesus, God's going to punish us anyway. That never makes sense to me as an idea.

Instead, if it's true not just that Jesus is God, but that God is Jesus, I'd suggest we do well. Indeed, I'd say it's crucial for our growing faith that we allow and invite the person of Jesus to be the starting point for our understanding of who God actually is.

And I feel confident saying that because Jesus himself says just that. So for example, in John's gospel, chapter 14, Jesus famously says to his disciples, I am the way and the truth and the life.

[11:10] 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.

So no one comes to the Father except through me, says Jesus. Words that are often reckoned or interpreted to be about getting into heaven. But that doesn't seem to be really what Jesus is talking about here.

Rather, it seems to me Jesus is talking about us coming to the Father, us knowing God through Jesus. In other words, perhaps we see and understand God by seeing and understanding Jesus.

if you really knew me, says Jesus, you would know my Father as well. It's almost like Jesus says, you want to know what God's like? Ta-da!

Look at me, I'm in front of you. Now the disciples, they don't quite seem to get what Jesus is saying here as in the very next verse. One of them, Philip, says this, he says, Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us.

[12:22] So Jesus is probably thinking, hang on a minute, have you not just heard what I've just said? All right, let me try again. Don't you know me, Philip, even after I've been among you such a long time?

Listen, anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. Now thankfully, the early church and the followers of Jesus, they did soon grasp this truth.

For example, in the letter to the Hebrews, we read this statement of faith that says the Son, Jesus, is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being.

Again, in other words, it's not just that Jesus is God, but that God is Jesus. Or how about this from the letter to the Colossians in which we're told this, Jesus is the image of the invisible God.

For in Christ, all the fullness of God dwells in bodily form. So Jesus is what God looks like and more than that, everything that God is, you know, God's fullness is in Jesus.

[13:38] It's not that Jesus is a taster of God, you know, a thumbnail sketch or a kind of avatar representation. No, Jesus is God in all of God's fullness.

It seems to me the advantage of this truth is massive because unlike ideas of God the Father or even as God as Spirit, through the gospel accounts of Jesus' life, we've got a pretty comprehensive record of what he actually said and did.

In some ways, Jesus strips away much of the mystery or the confusion about God by the fact he's turned up in the flesh and lived among us.

And we describe Jesus as the word of God. Well, Jesus spoke actual words in our midst. The word of God became flesh and we could hear God speaking.

And no wonder the gospel writer Luke tells us at the beginning of his version of the events, he says, many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us.

[14:46] If you were around Jesus at a time, they wanted every word, every action, every thought, what they knew was an insight, an encounter, an expression of God himself that they wanted to capture and record as best they could.

You know, that's, for me, that's a truth which fills me with, it's that childlike wonder, I guess, coming out. That's why I'm a follower of Jesus because if Jesus is not just what God is like but who God is, then he's the kind of guy I want to follow.

Who else would I possibly go to above Jesus? No one. Who else would I dream of following other than Jesus? But what's equally brilliant, I think, about Jesus being God is that he is the lens through which everything else comes into focus, whether that's life or the Bible, church, or the cross, or eternity.

So, for example, if we think of the Bible as a book, and I've talked about this before at more length, but I'd say if Jesus is the fullness of God, then everything in the Bible needs to be interpreted through the person, through the lens, if you like, of Jesus.

So that means for me that if the Old Testament writers interpret God as saying or doing something that goes against who Jesus is or what Jesus himself would say, then maybe those Old Testament writers with the best of intentions got it wrong.

[16:29] They misunderstood who God really was. For example, if you've read the Old Testament, you'll know the pages are full of people almost wanting or hoping that God would be a warmonger who sanctioned genocide and at times seems to permit people to take women as the spoils of war.

But since Jesus, who is God, preaches non-violence, he criticizes lust, he champions the rights of women and he models laying down one's life in the face of oppression, we know that God is not a God of violence or retribution but of love and mercy.

so we're therefore I'd say to interpret the stories of the Bible with a wisdom which comes from and comes through Jesus and then that in turn makes the Bible much more interesting, makes it much more of a conversation with God which I think was always the intention behind it.

And if this idea of kind of reinterpreting scripture freaks us out a bit, then the good news is Jesus does it all the time himself. So Jesus often remarks you've heard it said in other words this is what the writers in the Old Testament said, you know, an eye for an eye or whatever.

But then Jesus says but I tell you do not resist the one who is evil. In other words says Jesus you might have heard this but I'm going to reinterpret it because it wasn't quite right in those days.

[18:09] I'm going to correct it because they got it wrong. Now of course we don't chuck out those original sayings or stories because God can teach us I think as much through people's mistakes and misunderstandings of who he is as he can through their more accurate awareness but ultimately I think we need to allow Jesus the living word of God to correct the record if you like.

Well then how about on the road to Emmaus when Jesus explained the scriptures to the two travelling companions in such a way that we're told their hearts were burning within them.

It's as if they realised in encountering Jesus ah so God isn't angry and vengeful God is you Jesus in all of your love and kindness and mercy and sacrifice and resurrection no wonder their hearts burned within them because that if God's like Jesus that really is good news I would love to be able to read the Bible as if Jesus was walking alongside me telling me you know read it through me read it through me every time could go on about the Bible but then what about church what about church we're here at St. John's if you've been with us at any time if you don't meet at all we intentionally try to focus on Jesus I mean again who else could possibly be a better focus for us but keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus for me as a vicar I think it simplifies what we're trying to do here it doesn't make it easy but it keeps it simple so for example since Jesus tells us to love your neighbour okay well let's treat our town with respect and be a kind and generous and hospitable presence love your neighbour let's try and do that let's try and do that since Jesus says do not judge okay let's not judge then let's try and accept people as they are and always assume that there's more going on for them than we realise since Jesus says watch out for those who like to walk around in long robes we don't dress up here and simply come as we are we do try to do what Jesus says since Jesus says we're to be salt and light in the world okay well let's work at being a good influence and an inspiration for our community whether that's through social action or practical support through tackling injustice through providing opportunities for friendship and service and food and prayer and play all that good stuff since Jesus says go and make disciples that's what we're trying to do not make converts as if God for some reason needs people to tick a box of commitment in order to get to heaven when they die but making disciples is about helping people to really follow Jesus in the way we live our lives lives of kindness and compassion integrity forgiveness humility generosity and so on and in all of these things that Jesus says just do them just do them we won't always get it right you know far from it and I really don't get these things right enough but going back to that child period sort of picture of Jesus

Jesus promises to be with us always even when or especially when we mess up you know in this way I don't think and we haven't got one as a church but we need a mission statement of what we do church just needs to try and follow Jesus both when we're together and when we're apart in the rest of the week and I'm so encouraged to be part of this church because I know that following Jesus is our priority like I say we don't always get it right we're not being smug about this but we try that's our aim with God's help and then if we go back perhaps to the cross how does the fact that

God is Jesus help us to see the cross more clearly or seeing God as Jesus I'd say means that the cross is not an example of God the father's violent punishment of his son in order to predate his righteous anger no rather it's God in all his fullness in Jesus being willing to die at the hands of those who would choose violence over peace and why is God is Jesus willing to die well it's not because God needs a victim but instead so that he can access death and rescue all those who have died indeed for me

I think the cross shows us in the face of human violence God doesn't respond with violence himself instead he overcomes violence he overcomes death itself indeed the very thing which violence thinks is its trump card you know the threat of death Jesus defeats by rising to new life breaking once and for all the power and the fear that death might otherwise have over us so the cross therefore is not a symbol of God's punishment but a victorious symbol of God's self-giving radically forgiving co-suffering love and in all this we talk about the father we talk about the son I'm aware I mentioned the Holy Spirit the third way we understand God alongside God the father God the son there isn't time to do the idea of the Holy Spirit justice today as if that could be done anyway but what is clear again is that the Holy Spirit is the spirit of

[24 : 22] Jesus you know since Jesus is God and God is Jesus God's spirit must be by definition the spirit of Jesus as well did you think about it when the risen Jesus says to his disciples at the end receive the Holy Spirit we're told he breathes on them illustrating that the spirit comes from within Jesus who is God himself by way of backing this up a little bit later on when the early church had worked this stuff out apostle Paul talks about the Holy Spirit as just that he says it is the spirit of Jesus the good news I say and for me the indescribable privilege in all this is that just as Jesus embodies the fullness of God because God is Jesus so too the Holy Spirit is also a way through which we can understand and relate to and most importantly receive that same fullness of God in our lives in fact it's only through the indwelling life shaping presence of the Holy Spirit the spirit of Jesus in us that we can hope to follow Jesus at all that's a whole other talk I guess for another day but for now for today I think my hope and my prayer is that as we focus on Jesus the one who is God that we would ask the spirit to strike us afresh by the gift that that is for us the gift that God gives to us through himself a way to understand and encounter and relate to God in the flesh now Jesus means that God speaks God has spoken God continues to speak God is never silent because we've got Jesus God is never absent because we've got Jesus God is never out of reach because in Jesus God in all of his fullness came to be with us and so may the person the inspiration and the presence of Jesus both in the flesh and through his spirit be our source our guide and our life

Amen Amen Amen Amen Amen