

Keep On Growing: The Importance of Ideas - 16th July 2023

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[0 : 0 0] As I was saying, we're nearing the end of this Keep On Growing series we've been doing, exploring some of the different ways you might grow in our faith, in our awareness and understanding of God, in how we can better relate and share with one another. But before Helen concludes our series next week, for today and in terms of our growth, what I'd like us to think about, please, is this, the importance of ideas. Importance of ideas. So what's an idea? By definition, it's a formulated thought or opinion. And indeed, the root meaning behind the word idea means to see, to see. So ideas are tied up with imagination, with vision, having some form in your mind, and then share or act upon it. And what's interesting, it seems, is the importance of ideas, the importance of vision is shot through all the Bible. For example, right in the very beginning, in the creation poem in Genesis 1, God is clearly portrayed as someone who's got ideas. So the earth, we're told, was formless and empty, and it was dark as well. And so if ideas are about being able to see, well, it's interesting that God's first move is to create light. God said, let there be light.

And there was light. What's more, we're told next verse that God saw that the light was good. And it's interesting that one of the first things God does is sees. He sees, he saw that the light was good. It's a picture, it seems, of God enjoying the illumination, the ideas, perhaps, that this light sparks. Ideas which God then, in the story, builds on and develops, could say evolves, creating land and plants and animals and humans. So ideas and creativity, they go together from the word go, it seems. And therefore, as people made in God's image, part of our image-bearing capacity is to image in, to imagine, to form and have ideas, to see things in new ways, maybe to have a God-given vision for what might be possible in life. Indeed, without imagination, without imagination, without vision, it seems we're in danger sometimes of losing some of that divine image-bearing quality. So the book of Proverbs puts it like this, for example, where there is no vision, the people perish. That's from the old King James version. But I also like the way the more modern message translation puts it, which says this, if people can't see what God is doing, they stumble all over themselves. But when they attend to what he reveals, they are most blessed.

Now, I guess the question is, how can we see? How can we discern? How might God use our imaginations to picture what life with God is meant to look like? Well, I suggest this verse from Proverbs gives us an initial clue to answering that question, because if you notice, it talks about people, plural, having vision. It's not just an individual thing. So ideas, imagination, vision, they seem to be a kind of collective responsibility, a joint adventure with God, if you like, in which we all have something to contribute, all have our part to play. Yes, an individual, perhaps a leader, might shape or communicate a vision, but it's rarely something that emerges in isolation or simply by the strength of one person's thinking.

If it is, that sounds more like a cult than a community. Instead, imagining what's possible with God seems to be best served by the pooling of ideas, you might call that groupthink or hive mind or something these days. Indeed, in his book, Where Good Ideas Come From, this guy, the writer, Stephen Johnson, he's at the top of his game in terms of analysing society and technology. He's got various podcasts.

You might have seen him on various TV series as well. In this book, he shares what, for me, are some fascinating insights into how ideas happen, how innovation and creativity come to be. For example, if we think about when our modern society really sort of kicked into gear in terms of inventions and progress. It's during a period in the 17th and 18th century called the Age of Enlightenment.

[5 : 04] I don't want to go history lessons on us. It's near the end of term, I know, so I don't want to go too deep into this, but it's the time when we can say what philosophy, science, economics, theology, politics, art, literature, music, and so on, they all made huge advances which have all formed the basis for much of our shared life today. Now, why, though, was this particular period in time such a hotbed of ideas? What was it about this period? Well, according to Stephen Johnson, a lot of the reason is to do with this. Coffee, coffee. That's got your thirst buds going, I know.

And in particular, not just coffee, but the coffee houses. You know, the original Starbucks, three, four hundred years ago, that popped up in every town across Europe, has this newly imported wonder drink took hold. You see, these coffee houses were places where people from all levels of society, for the first time really, would mix and meet, and crucially, they became the place that ideas could be shared and debated and improved. I'm sure the caffeine helped to get people's juices flowing, but it was mainly perhaps that the buzz of people coming together from all walks of life that led to this explosion of ideas and creativity. You see, whilst there may well be sometimes those light bulb, eureka moments, strokes of genius, which hit people from time to time, whether they're sitting under a tree or in a bathtub or whatever, most ideas, indeed, often the best ideas, seem to come from being connected with one another, with sharing where we're at and getting greater in the whole than the sum of the parts, if that makes sense. Now, putting all that together with God and a kind of godly vision for a church or community, yes, as individuals, we might have brainwaves from God. We might have individual visionary ideas from time to time with our prayer life and our meditation, but more often, it seems, vision for what God would want in the world is birthed in community.

So, where my hunch, your inkling, someone else's experience can sort of join together to produce something far more imaginative and probably far more fruitful than its individual parts could achieve.

And if you think about it, this story of shared communal collective wisdom, it's reflected, again, all through the Bible. So, Abraham is called not to do it on his own, but to start the biggest of families to share that journey. Moses is called by God to lead a whole nation out of slavery. Jacob's sons establish whole tribes and so on. Well, then in Jesus' day, he wasn't a solo guy. Now, he pulls together a group of disciples, again, from all walks of life, who in turn become a church community. And that model is one which we still follow to this day. And then if we go back to Genesis and that the second creation story that is in there with Adam and Eve, it's interesting that although the story of the Bible starts in a garden, garden of very few people, it actually finishes in the book of Revelation with a vision of a heavenly city, an urban dwelling of shared life.

Now, if the idea of living in a city for eternity makes you shudder somewhat, don't worry, God's the best town planner you could get by a country mile, I assure you. But this idea of journeying with God towards an increasingly communal, shared life is why, for us here, that's why I'm glad we call ourselves St. John's Community Church, because without a community, what other kind of church could there possibly be? So that's why we have things like pub club, book club, drop-in, creating space, little friends, F&F; house groups and so on, because they're all ways in which we try and facilitate community. That's why we'll see the mighty return of curry club in September as well. Come on. I think it's going to be on a Sunday night though, I think we're going to go for, Dana Sheik's. About six o'clock sitting, the idea being that that might be able to encourage whole families to come down, you know, a wider age range in terms of that community meal together. So more information on that to come.

[9 : 48] But that's why on a Sunday and a Monday in our services, yes, the services are important, but I'd say the refreshments afterwards, you know, that coffee house principle again, they're of at least equal importance because it's over drinks and milkshakes and tango, that conversations can be had, lives can be shared and ideas can be swapped. And out of all that stuff, that's where I think are often a shared vision for what this God-shaped life can look like, can emerge. Indeed, if you're able and time and other commitments allow it, I'd really encourage you to make a point either of getting here early, as I know a good number do, or stick around for refreshments. You know, church doesn't finish at quarter past 11, it's going on till midday or beyond often. Because that time is just as much church as this time is here. All right, that's all the sort of collective theory stuff about where ideas come from, part one, if you like. But part two,

I guess another question for us to consider in terms of our growth would be this one. In all of this, how can we ensure we remain open to new ideas? And I pose this question because I realise it's not a given, this openness. It's not a given, especially when so many of us in life are generally feeling tired or worried or in pain a lot of the time. Or when perhaps the pace of change in life leaves us feeling overwhelmed, that the world we once felt comfortable in seems to be moving on at an ever-quickening pace past us. Well, if that's perhaps where some of us certainly might be at or might be feeling, I think the first thing we can do to ensure we do our best to remain open to new ideas is to be honest about how change and new ideas sometimes make us feel. So voicing our concerns, our fears, our frustrations, our confusion with it, especially with all the AI stuff that Ian was helping us to unpick the other week, you know, that's big stuff for us to all of a sudden have to get our head around all these deep fakes and so on. But being honest about that, that's all part of the way I'd suggest that we process change and free up mental or emotional space to be open to new suggestions and new ways of thinking. Indeed, the Psalms, Book of Proverbs, Book of Ecclesiastes, they're all books in the Bible full of this kind of honesty where there's often a longing for escape or a return to simpler times. And yet crucially, those books are also full of the realisation that

God, throughout all this change, remains faithful. He remains eternal. And he promises to lead us through even the most unsettling of times. You know, sometimes we sing, morning by morning, new mercies I see. And we focus on the new, great, but there's mercy in that newness as well.

There's God's grace in helping us to work through change. But we can be honest about the struggles that we have with that on a journey with God. And I think we can also be honest with each other as well as with God. And I think as vicar, you know, I want you to be honest with me about stuff. So if there are things as a church that we do or don't do that you wish we did or we didn't do, then come and talk to me. Come and talk to me. When I say we're a community church, you know, it's just real. It's not just lip service. This is your church as much, if not more than it is mine.

And ultimately, we're all God's church. So we can have those honest conversations. Because that is also where I think new ideas, these coffeehouse kind of ideas can emerge. So for example, talking practically about this honesty at the moment, I think I'm feeling pretty unsure about how we practically manage and move forward with the number of children and young people that we're getting at the moment on a Sunday in particular. It's great that so many in general want to come. And the bottom line is more the merrier. So if you're young or you want to bring your young ones, we love to have you here. That's just a given. All right. But I think we're increasingly squeezed on space for them to meet on a Sunday. And what's more, I'm realizing better late than never that kids don't stay the same age, do they? They grow up as they go through.

[14 : 58] All right. So there's a growing need for us to ensure that those approaching year seven and up continue to feel valued and spiritually fed on a Sunday. And ideally, we'd have a group for them for years seven, eight, nine on a Sunday, as we do with FNF on a Monday. But where do we meet?

Where's the space for that? And how might we identify the right kind of leaders for that potential group as well? So that's been weighing on my mind a lot in recent weeks. I feel the responsibility of that. There's a pressure which comes with that, I suppose, if I'm honest. But it's more responsibility because these young lives are precious and we want to do our best for them. But I'm also aware that it's not just my responsibility. It's our responsibility as a community, as a church. And that means that together, we need to be perhaps open to new ideas and together, praying these things through, all while trying to support our young people and their families in the meantime, as best we can.

But ultimately, we're going to trust God in this, that God knows what the future needs and will bring. And I hope, I think, I do trust God, as I'm sure he's already in the ideas and the conversations that we're already having to see what ideas for our young people in particular can emerge.

Now, that's the need for honesty, I guess, about the challenges that come with embracing change and growth and new ideas. But secondly, aside from honesty, but connected to it, I'd suggest there's also a need for humility too. I spoke about this a bit the other week, but new ideas, new approaches, new insights, they can sometimes radically change or challenge practices or beliefs that we may have inherited that we may have grown up with or held for some time. But it takes humility to embrace that challenge to what we've always known, you know, to genuinely question whether what we've believed about God and God's ways for perhaps most of our life has always been correct, or whether we're actually in the process sometimes of getting it wrong, perhaps for many years at a time.

So pride would say, nah, I know what I know, my mind is made up, my mind is closed in fact, because I know I'm right and that gives me my security. Whereas humility says, always, I could be wrong and I'm prepared to genuinely invite God in to test my views, my beliefs, to ensure there's no falsehoods in my faith. So for example, that might be where some of us are at with the whole question of gay marriage and same-sex relationships. Again, to be honest, for me, I've been on quite the journey with this over the years. You know, from my early teens, when I basically believed that being gay was a result of a fallen world and something that God would cure, to now believing in the beauty, equality, the sanctity of being gay. And as vicar, the day I'm allowed, I will gladly pray for God's blessing on a same-sex couple. And I would do that in private anytime already. Now, on that journey that

[18 : 45] I've been on, I'm ashamed, I think, of some of the language, the prejudice, the hurt that I've caused in the past, you know, particularly as a teenager at school and college and so on. But also some of the views that I failed to challenge along the way as well. And so it's a journey which has humbled me, because I'm still learning what that means and how to make amends, perhaps, for the, where I would say, for me, I've been wrong in the past. I wonder for you, though, maybe this idea of acknowledging, perhaps, where we haven't got things right, is an aspect of growing with God and with others that resonates with you, you know, of the difficulty and complexity of being open to the possibility of God's correction on a particular belief, especially when, you know, it would involve humility to admit you could have been wrong and wrong for a lot of years, perhaps. You're welcome.

The exact nature of those possible beliefs, you know, whether on same-sex relationships or something completely different, that's between you and God to work through. But in doing that, the bottom line is that we know, as it says time and time again, that God is gracious, God is slow to anger and rich in love. And wherever we are on our journey with him, with whatever issues we're working through, we can trust in those loving, gracious, patient, kind, compassionate qualities.

So honesty, humility, but a third and final age, and closely connected to what I've just been talking about, I'd say in all of this is the importance of hope in the face of new ideas or a fresh vision of the kind of saviour God is. So to go back to what we just looked at, this idea of being open to being humbled by God as he takes us on a journey with him.

Another area of belief on which my personal views have changed is the whole area of eternal salvation and heaven and hell. Again, having grown up being taught that a hell of eternal conscious torment awaits those who reject God in this life. For me, on my faith journey, I've come to a place where I now believe and have done for some time that there is always hope for salvation for all, even after death.

And I've talked about this in more detail before. It's on the church website if you want to check back. And I guess to label this belief, it's a kind of universalism really, but not in a cheap, easy, anything goes way where everything and everyone is welcomed into heaven without regard for how they've lived in this life. I do believe in time that every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord and it's only through Jesus that we're saved. But again, for me, my understanding of Jesus is that his arms of love are always opened wider than I could ever comprehend or imagine.

[22 : 25] He's the shepherd who goes after the lost sheep until he finds them. And because God's love is eternal, I believe that to be the case both in this life and the next. Now that belief, that idea, that vision, if you like, of Jesus is love, well that gives me hope. It gives me hope. Hope which shapes how I am as a vicar, rightly or wrongly, shapes how I am with my family, most of all how I am in this community and beyond. Because I simply but profoundly believe that God has got the whole world in his eternal, loving, nail-pierced hands. And I've got to say that after much study and prayer, and we're talking decades on this, many, many conversations, you know, deep thinking after soaking up different views and weighing them all up with God, now having come to that sort of more universal conclusion, in my spirit, I am so much more at peace, so much more convinced, and I believe so much more effective in sharing my faith. Because the idea of an eventual, eternal, universal salvation for all, has transformed my appreciation and devotion to Jesus, unlike anything else that I've ever experienced. That, for me, demonstrates the importance and how life-shaping ideas can be.

Indeed, I want to finish by reading a blog post by an orthodox monastic theologian called Brad Jerzak, whose ideas have been influential on me, and who I believe really communicates the hope that being open to the idea of God's universal, saving love brings. A bit of a curveball, this to finish with, I appreciate, but it's an article he wrote in response to this question, which is kind of an ultimate question when you think about who will be saved.

If Christ's work on the cross extends forgiveness to all people, will even Hitler be in heaven? So, I'm going to read Brad's reply to that question. It's quite long, so you might want to close your eyes as I read it. But I think this morning, I simply commend his response for your consideration, as you work out with God how these ideas fit with your own faith. He says this. He says, I'm not qualified to render such a judgment. However, if you were to ask me to imagine Hitler in heaven, I would have to ask how he got there. And in my imagination, here is what it would take.

I imagine Hitler would need to appear before the judgment seat of Jesus Christ, the Jew who was slowly tortured to death by soldiers bearing the same eagle standard that the Nazis would adopt.

On that great and terrible day, Hitler would have to face the meaning of his life and the harm he had done without denial or justification. He would be unable to run and hide, to numb out or disassociate.

[26 : 07] The horror of every death he caused, every family he destroyed, every sin for which he was responsible would be laid bare before his eyes. He would experience the full weight of the hell he ignited and the oceans of blood on his hands, including the inspiration he continues to feed to this day.

I imagine Hitler would need to appear before that throne in the presence of those he had harmed. I imagine he would have to look into the eyes of every Jew, every Romani, every disabled person, every gay person, every soldier, every widow, every orphan, every last person he sent to the gas chambers, death camps, gallows, firing squad and front lines, and all their devastated survivors.

I imagine him having to face each one, listen to their story, absorb their victim impact statements, and grieve their losses as deeply as they had. I imagine that over ages of ages, his conscience would awaken to his great horror and his capacity for empathy would be restored. I imagine Hitler would need to repent without excuses, without manipulation, and without hope of extracting anything further from God or from his victims.

His sorry would have to be entirely authentic and without any agenda of reciprocation. A miracle would be required that his remorse be entirely not self-centered and that his unilateral apology would come without a single hook. I imagine that Hitler's victims would need to be so healed, so redeemed, so restored, that their scars would shine like gold and their faces like the sun.

And only in that condition where they need nothing from him because what they receive from Christ far surpasses what he stole from them. I imagine they would need to be so healed, so redeemed. I imagine they would need to unanimously volunteer to serve as Jesus Christ's agents of reconciliation, willingly pleading for him, praying, Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on him.

[28 : 38] Show Adolf the same super abundant mercy you offered Pilate, Caiaphas, Judas, Saul of Tarsus, and every one of us.

Father, forgive him, even when he knew exactly what he was doing. I imagine that Hitler would pass through the scorching fire of such grace that everything in him that is not of love's kind would melt like wax.

I imagine him being stripped of his Nazi uniform, his swastika armband, and his trademark moustache. I imagine him being reduced to the boy whose father broke his arms in spite, and whose heart was hardened and deceived by resentment.

I imagine him regressing to the child who once knew dreams and hoped to belong somewhere, to the one whose craving to be loved is satisfied in Christ alone.

I imagine that Hitler would need to experience the magnitude of these grace gifts fully and receive them completely, though it might seem to take forever and would surely feel like burning coals heaped on his head.

[30 : 00] I imagine receiving grace would be the hardest thing he's ever had to face and would resist it to the bitter end. But the fire of divine love consumes every resistance to love, heals the most damaged wills, and restores the faintest desire for good.

And I imagine that having passed through this process, in the end, Hitler would behold the face of the one who every eye shall see and fall to his knees in humility, vanquished by love, cleansed by mercy, and surrender to his verdict.

And what comes from Christ's mouth and is echoed by every witness may shock you. Salvation, which in German is rendered Heil.

This is what I imagine. But that is not the punchline. The takeaway is that I imagine I, too, must pass through the very same pattern of restorative judgment.

A great and terrible day or age or ages of ages where I, too, am cleansed by love and discover with both Hitler and with Anne Frank that mercy triumphs over judgment.

[31 : 34] Or so I imagine. Amen. Amen. Amen.