

# The Power of One

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well now if you would take out your Bible and turn to Psalm 96 at the back, it's on page 528. You know you miss a great deal if you don't hear what the children reply during the children's focus.

They're lovely moments and when Dave was asking what we fear, one young gentleman over here put his hand up and said, I have money. He's going to go a long way in Vancouver. That's what we all want to say. Well now Psalm 96, I'm grateful last week to Paul Stevens for taking us through the whole book of Esther in one week.

That's a good idea don't you think, one book in a week. We should do that more often. And that beautiful picture of how there's a time to be silent and there's a time to speak and how we often find ourselves in places that God has put us which we think is exactly the wrong place but it is exactly the right place for God and his purposes.

And God has placed us here in Vancouver to love one another and to love him and to pray that God's will would be done on earth as it is in heaven.

[ 1 : 18 ] Most of us came to faith in Jesus Christ through the prayer and witness of other people and in just six weeks time we've invited the Reverend Rico Tice from All Souls in Langham Place in London to come for a series of meetings and there is a team of people who've been praying and preparing to arrange gatherings where the atmosphere will be warm and inviting and the gospel will be articulated with clarity and with spiritual integrity.

Great opportunity to invite friends and family. But I'm very conscious that this cannot be a band-aid on top of what else we're doing. It has to come from who we are and from the reality of our faith in Jesus Christ or else we might as well not do it.

And one of the very strange things about being a Christian is that the longer you're a Christian over time we become embarrassed about being Christians increasingly. I don't know why that is. We've got lots to be embarrassed about but the one thing we ought not to be embarrassed about is the gospel. But somehow after being a Christian for a few years generally we grow kind of self-conscious and awkward about sharing our faith.

Hockey fans don't have any trouble enthusing about hockey. I wish they wouldn't. Foodies, foodies have a, you know, they're very keen to tell you their latest creation.

[ 2 : 43 ] We don't have any trouble telling others about our latest investment or the best film that we've seen recently. But something changes when it comes to talking about God.

We feel unnatural when we speak about how lovely Jesus is. And so for this week and for next week I just want us to lay two tracks down in our heart, two tracks from the Word of God that I think are absolutely essential for us if we're going to reach out to others in the name of Jesus.

I hope these two things help change the way we think and live, help us a little bit out of our self-consciousness to go beyond stereotypes. Which brings us to Psalm 96.

I mean why would we bother reaching out? Why would we do this? And Psalm 96 gives one answer, one point, and it is this.

It is a scandalous psalm. Look at verse 10. This is the heart of it.

[ 3 : 50 ] Say among the nations, the Lord reigns. And I never tire of saying that when you see Lord all in capitals, that is the personal name of God that he revealed to Moses back in the Exodus that we've just finished, you remember?

It's pronounced something like Yahweh. It's his own private name. Look at the psalm again. Verse 1. Sing to the Lord. Sing to Yahweh. A new song. Sing to Yahweh all the earth.

Sing to Yahweh. Bless his name. Verse 5. All the gods of the peoples are idols. But Yahweh made the heavens. Therefore, verse 10. Say among the nations, Yahweh reigns.

From the beginning of Genesis to the end of Revelation, the Bible makes no apology but proclaims with enthusiasm, clarity and joy that there is only one God, that the Lord who made the world is Lord of all things.

And that the most fundamental creed in all the scriptures, the one that Jesus himself repeats, is this. Hear, O Israel. The Lord our God, the Lord is one. One, or literally, Yahweh our God is one Yahweh.

[ 5 : 05 ] There is none like him. He is utterly unique. He is utterly with integrity. The universe has only one Yahweh. And what's the consequence?

You should love Yahweh with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. If there is only one God, then every person in the world owes that God their love and worship.

If there is one God whose name is Yahweh, it is right for you and it is right for me to use all our energy and all our lives to love him and to serve him and to worship him.

But here is the surprise of this psalm. This psalm is not addressed to people who believe in God. It's addressed to those who don't. Look at verse 1 again.

We miss this. You know, you hear psalms in church, but you miss this. Sing to the Lord a new song. Sing to the Lord whom? All the earth. Verse 3, all the peoples.

[ 6 : 04 ] Verse 7, ascribe to the Lord, give to the Lord, O families of the peoples, give to the Lord, Yahweh, glory and strength. There is one Lord to whom every single human being belongs.

Every single person owes allegiance. You understand the logic? It's not hard to follow. There is only one God, then every person should have a chance to know that God and to worship that God.

That is why promoting the gospel is not so much a rescue mission, it is a reality mission, if there is just one God. Look at verses 4 and 5.

Great is Yahweh, greatly to be praised, feared above all gods, for all the gods of the peoples are idols. But Yahweh made the heavens.

I told you it was controversial. All the gods of the peoples are idols. It's not saying, you know, there are some gods that are better than other gods. It's not saying some gods are kind of more ennobling and have better ethics than others.

[ 7 : 06 ] Some have more to offer. It says every god besides Yahweh is an idol. The word means a non-entity. It doesn't exist. Which means that every single person, no matter how religious or non-religious, no matter how casual or serious they are, no matter where they are born, belongs to Yahweh and owes everything to him.

It's scandalous, isn't it? And it's guaranteed to offend people in every culture. I hope you don't think we're the first culture to be offended by this.

In the day that it was written, the great offence was to say that there was one god. It was clear to everyone that there were thousands and thousands of gods. They were passionately polytheistic.

Do you know in the early centuries after Jesus went back to heaven, Christians were called atheists because they didn't believe in pagan deities.

It was unimaginable to people in the Roman Empire that you could only believe in one god. And today, in our pluralistic culture, it is unimaginable that we could believe in one truth.

Today, it doesn't matter what you believe so long as you don't make any truth claim. We've been in North America for a few years now and pluralism has changed.

[ 8 : 22 ] Pluralism used to be a way of dealing with the fact of diversity. It's now become a massive cultural commitment where we have to say every opinion is equally valid.

And I found a book recently that I've read by a young Anglican theologian called John Dixon, very helpful. He's young because he's younger than I am. Dixon distinguishes between two kinds of pluralism.

One kind he calls popular pluralism. It's the kind you meet every day, Starbucks, wherever, and it basically says all religions are the same. They use different names, but they're basically about prayer and being good and kind and God and enlightenment.

And of course, on the West Coast, this is the fashionable way of doing spirituality. Spirituality. I'll pick a little bit from here and I'll pick a little bit from there and I'll make up my own spirituality. A little bit of meditation to make me calm.

A little bit of Jesus in my Christmas. A little bit of Java with my coffee. And if you have friends who hold this kind of popular pluralism, I think the best thing to do is to invite them to investigate further.

[ 9 : 31 ] Because the only way you can hold that kind of pluralism is by an intentional superficiality. Just think about it for a moment.

Hinduism says there's many gods. Sikhism says there's one god. Siddhartha Buddha taught that there are no gods and that thinking about a god is just a distraction from the spiritual path.

Or take Jesus Christ. We as Christians believe that he's the son of God, the Messiah of God, that he died on the cross for our sins, that he rose again and he's coming to judge the living and the dead.

Judaism teaches he's not the Messiah. We're still waiting for the Messiah. And Islam says he did not die on the cross and to say that he is the son of God is blasphemy. So the only way you can sustain this popular pluralism is to deliberately close your mind to what the religions are actually saying, which is why verse 8 says, all people ascribe Yahweh, the glory due his name, come into his courts.

It's not saying different religions you should worship your own god better. It's saying you should shift allegiance to Yahweh, the one true God. But there's a second kind of pluralism Dixon calls, I think, overkindly, sophisticated pluralism.

[ 10 : 52 ] This is the kind of pluralism which I've heard taught in seminaries here in Canada. And it claims that although there's explicit disagreement between religions, there is implicit agreement on the big idea.

That every religion is an attempt to tap into the sacred somehow. That all the different religions, they bear witness to that great reality, but none of them describe that reality.

Marcus Borg, who is a frequent visitor to Vancouver, who teaches at Oregon State, he says, the importance of religions are not their doctrines, not their truth claims, but in their capacity to connect believers to the sacred that lies behind their beliefs, whatever their beliefs are.

That the different religions kind of channel bits of that great spirituality, but none of the religions possess it. They point to ultimate reality, but they don't lay hold of it, which is why all religions can be equally valid or more truthfully equally invalid.

Now, you will have heard this sophisticated pluralism, won't you? I hear it all the time. There's one grand truth behind all religions. Each religion is a different manifestation of the truth, but no religion has the truth.

[ 12 : 15 ] And I think there are two things that we need to say gently, but truthfully, about this kind of sophisticated pluralism. The first is this. It is spectacular arrogance hiding behind the pretense of humility.

See, the question to people who advocate this view is, how do you know what ultimate reality is? They never say. How do you know that no religion describes ultimate reality?

Perhaps you have access to some secret knowledge the rest of us do not. See, what looks like humility is in fact greater arrogance. Theirs is just another truth claim which demotes all religions. And it says to the religions, you don't really understand what you're saying and what you're claiming. We do. We alone understand there's a greater reality. We've got it. We've discovered the bigger truth.

It's nothing but arrogance. But the second thing to say is that it is spectacularly condescending hiding behind the pretense of tolerance.

[ 13 : 18 ] What they're saying is that God cannot reveal himself. That what the religions of the world say are the big truths are actually little truths and they're just in error. Are you with me?

Sophisticated pluralism says every religion is deluded. That we alone have the intellectual high ground. What you believe is profoundly self-deceived.

And it's been a tiny group of Western intellectuals who finally solved this problem all on their own. So you see, I think to be fair though, I have to say that one of the motivations behind this kind of pluralism is a fear of intolerance.

And history teaches us that those who believe that they have the truth can become intolerant of other views and it can lead to violence and persecution. And the answer today is let's just jettison all claims to truth.

Although we have to say truth is up there somewhere and I know about it. But that's not true tolerance. True tolerance is not treating every view as equally valid.

[ 14 : 28 ] True tolerance is treating every person with kindness and respect and with love. It doesn't matter how strongly you disagree with them. The tolerant Hindu as she leans across the fence and

talks to her Buddhist neighbour, for her to be truly tolerant doesn't mean that she has to accept the validity of the Buddhist's atheism but that she has to be respectful and treat that person with dignity.

In the same way, the Christian who is speaking to his Muslim neighbour, if he's being truly tolerant, he doesn't have to accept the Islamic view of Jesus but he has to treat that person with love, even in disagreement.

This has always been the way for us as the people of God which is why Psalm 96 was written. And for us who are followers of Jesus Christ, we need to be clear that from cover to cover the Bible teaches that there's one God and that makes mission a central because he alone is worthy of worship.

And the wonderful thing about this psalm, and I wonder if you notice this, that the tone is thoroughly positive. The God that we worship, the God who's revealed himself to us, is not a nasty God.

That's why it begins, sing, sing, sing. This is not a God who says, come to Jesus or you'll get it. He's a God who's the source of glory and of marvellous works.

[15:53] Verse 6, honour and majesty are before him. Strength and beauty are in his holy place. The Lord reigns. The Lord reigns. And when we say that, we are saying something about the past and we are saying something about the future and we're saying something about the present.

To say that the Lord reigns means that he created all things, which is why it's so futile to fall in love with this world and it's so futile to bow down and worship the sun, moon and stars.

He made them. We have just finished the book of Exodus. And you remember how God brings his people to himself at Mount Sinai so that they will participate in his glory.

And he gives them a tabernacle and at the heart of the tabernacle is the Ark of the Covenant covering their sins, the place he's going to come down and live with his people. What happened to the Ark?

It went into the land. It went around the land making the land holy. And when God gave King David the city of Jerusalem, they brought the Ark into Jerusalem.

[16:59] And in 1 Chronicles 16 you should read it this afternoon. I sometimes give homework from the pulpit. I never check whether you do it. There should be some sort of sanction for not doing this.

But if you, now I'll let you off this. In 1 Chronicles 16 what is the song that they sing as the Ark is brought into Jerusalem? It's this.

Psalm 96. This is what they sang that day. See verse 2? Sing to the Lord, bless his name, tell of his salvation from day to day. All the blessings that we lost at creation which God is bringing back to us by his presence.

all those blessings he will come and re-establish one day. He is coming to restore creation. So if you just look at the last verse halfway through verse 12.

Then shall all the trees of the wood sing for joy before Yahweh for he comes he will judge the world with righteousness and the peoples with his truth.

[18:10] You might think it's a bit of an unusual thing to call people who don't worship God to have joy over the coming judgment. But that's because we think about judgment in terms of our own guilt whereas in the Psalms judgment is not about condemnation it's about God how God is going to take his world and restore it to the place it was at creation and better.

He's going to restore order and harmony he's going to put everything right which is why the mountains jump up and clap their hands for joy. This is the gospel and that is why the Psalm opens with that line sing to the Lord a new song.

It's not new in content it's been old since Psalm 96 was written but it's new to those who sing it and I think that it's a lovely way to describe what we're doing as a church isn't it?

that we're trying to bring a new song we're trying to bring people to sing this new song and to learn how to sing it better ourselves and today we look back and we sing this Psalm I think in a different key because we look back at this Psalm through the cross of Jesus Christ and we know that God has raised Jesus from the dead and that God has given to Jesus the name which is above every name that at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father that all authority in heaven and earth has been given to him and that God is now busy putting everything under his feet that Jesus Christ was the word at creation he is the saviour of the world and he is the one to whom God has entrusted all judgement so that we might honour the Son even as we honour the Father and I think this is the first thing we need to

have in our hearts as we live in this very interesting and plural culture why would you share Jesus Christ with your happy confident wealthy unbelieving friend it's not so that she'll be happier and more fulfilled it's because she believes to the one she belongs to the one true Lord it's not to make that guy a better person it's because there's one Lord who made him who has come in the person of Jesus Christ and every person deserves to hear the invitation to know the God of creation and the God of salvation and to be part of this great restoration that he is working in Jesus Christ not just for their sake but for God's sake we have one life we have one Lord and we get to share it with one another Amen jeste you you you