

Has Christianity had its Day?

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[0 : 00] Amen. Well, good morning everybody. I'd like to add my welcome to Dan's.

I especially want to welcome guests who are with us this morning. I know it can be an intimidating thing to turn up to quite a formal church like this where you sort of have to do things. You know, like stand up, sit down, kneel, say things back. And you can sometimes be a bit anxious about, am I doing the right thing? Am I doing the right thing? And I had a similar experience when I came to North America about five years ago from New Zealand.

My wife is American and her family live in the South, so I visited a family. And her dad, who I was trying to bond with, is a sports fanatic. So I am watching one of your American sports games. What is the one with the football, like American football, a national football game? And so I'm watching one of your sports.

[1 : 09] And I don't know what's going on, but all the guys sitting around me are yelling things at the screen. And so to participate in the event, you needed to yell things at the screen.

Now, in New Zealand, if I was watching rugby, I would know what to say. I could participate. I could yell things like, feed the backs, which means pass the ball to the people at the back who are faster. Or spin it wide. Give it to the people on the edges who are faster. Or you're shepherding, or you're offside, or get the boot in, or whatever it is.

But so I'm watching your American football game, and everyone's yelling things. And I think, I've got to just participate, because I look like an idiot. So I just start yelling things.

I'm like, yeah! Go team! I have no idea who I'm supporting. Go team! Yeah, I hate the opposition, everybody.

[2 : 09] I hate them. Score points against them. For full your potential. Play within the rules.

So all that to say, guests, you're doing very well so far. We come to the point in the service which is called the sermon.

And in popular culture, that is represented in two different ways. At this end, either as something incredibly long and boring, or at this end, it's just hellfire and brimstone.

Just so you know, I'm aiming for something in the middle. This sermon will be moderately amusing, but slightly offensive. So let's get into it.

Let's get into it. So we had this card made, so you know the topic we're addressing today. And the question I wrote was this. What possible relevance can the Christian faith have in a post-modern, secular, tolerant society?

[3 : 19] It's a very good question. My feeling is there are probably a lot of people in the West who would say that surely Christianity is on its way out.

Due to the major cultural shifts in the last few years, Christianity has got to be on its way out. And now I'd probably name three reasons. The first is this.

Like using a city like Vancouver as an example. Well, we're just not that into religion. We keep it out of our public life. We like to be free from the constraints of religion.

Religion is not part of our cultural narrative. So it's probably going to die. I think people would also say this. Christianity is on its way out because, you know, places like Vancouver, we're very post-modern.

Now post-modernity is something that's kind of hard to define, but one of the aspects of it is this. It's like a cultural mood which resists truth claims.

[4 : 23] And of course, Christianity has some very specific beliefs. So I think folks would say, you know, too hard.

Christianity, surely it's had its day. I think the third reason people would say Christianity is on its way out is to say, listen, you know, places like Vancouver, we're just really tolerant. And we love our

individual freedom.

Live and let live. And Christianity is probably often seen as a moral straitjacket. So based on that assessment, society is all about this, this, this.

Christianity is all about this, this, this. You know, the obituary has been written. Except for one quite startling fact.

And that's this. That the church is growing. The church is growing. It has been growing for 2,000 years. And the church is in quite a substantial spurt at the moment in the world.

[5 : 27] So why is that? I mean, so this question is actually wrong, isn't it? The question is not what possible relevance can the Christian faith have in a postmodern secular tolerant society.

The question is this. Why has Christianity remained so relevant despite the major cultural shifts of the last 2,000 years?

Why has it remained relevant? And the answer is Jesus. Yes. But before I talk about Jesus, I know there are a few barriers to people hearing about Jesus.

And the barriers are the things I've mentioned. People would say, listen, you know, I don't want to hear about your faith because I just don't believe in absolute truth. Or I don't want to hear about your faith because it just is way too constraining.

It's way too limiting. I want to spend about 8 or 10 minutes speaking to those two barriers. Because I just don't think they're the barriers that you think they are.

[6 : 34] And after I do that, I want to give you a good hearing on Jesus. Okay, first, the barriers. Okay, the big one obviously is this.

Is postmodernity's resistance to absolute truth claims. And I think postmoderns don't like truth claims. I think a city like Vancouver doesn't like truth claims because it's connected to oppression. That's the connection that they make. And that's based in like a philosophical mood that's been around for a while now. The big players are like a French guy called Foucault.

You might not have heard of him. But he was famous for the saying, knowledge is power. And Nietzsche, famous for saying God is dead. Both of those guys were really big on the idea that any truth claims are power plays.

That they lead to oppression. That they lead to intolerance. And they're always coming from the ruling elite. And they're always there to control.

[7 : 43] Now, they're not necessarily wrong, to be honest. I mean, Jesus made similar sort of accusations against the religious leaders of his time. And it's not difficult to find modern examples in the last hundred years.

You know, like, on a smaller scale like the Jonestown cult. Or on a big scale, Stalin's Russian. Okay, so, they're right. However, it would be a mistake to say that all truth claims, all the time, are power plays.

That would be a mistake. In 2006, a guy walked into an Amish schoolhouse in Pennsylvania. And he shot ten little Amish girls.

Killing five of them. And then killed himself. Now, you might have heard about this. The amazing thing about this story is that normally the media, when they hear a story of mass murder, they tend to always focus on the killer.

They tend to focus on what drove him to this madness. What was wrong in his community that drove him to this? But in this case, the whole, that side of the story was completely eclipsed by another aspect of the story.

[9 : 00] The much more amazing aspect of the story. And that was the response of the Amish community to this tragedy. Let me read to you a quote from a guy called Jack Meyer, who was a member of the community.

He said this, within a day of this happening, he said this, I don't think there is anybody here that wants to do anything but forgive and not only reach out to those who have suffered a loss, but reach out to the family of the man who committed these acts.

The Amish community forgave a man. Forgave his family. Not only that, they took up an offering for this family, because that family had lost their breadwinner.

Now, the Amish, by anyone's standards, are fundamentalists. They have some very serious truth claims.

Some big truth claims. And did that lead to oppression? As Foucault and Nietzsche would suggest.

[10:05] Did that lead to intolerance? No. Not in this case, it didn't. And why is that? Because it depends on the truth claim.

It depends on what you're actually saying. And in this case, their truth claim was a man who hung on a cross. Jesus who hung on a cross. And who forgave the people that put him up there. And as he was hanging up there, prayed for the people that put him there. So the perceived problem that all truth claims are power plays that lead to oppression is wrong-headed.

Because it depends on the truth claim. You look at the early church in Rome, for example. First hundred years of Christianity. In a very segregated society.

In little house churches popping up all over Rome. You had slave and free man. You had men and women. You had rich and poor Jew and Gentile coming together. The truth claims of Christianity actually resulted in one of the most inclusive societies the world's ever seen.

[11:11] So truth claims don't normally lead to oppression. It depends on the claim. Okay.

Postmoderns don't like truth claims because, one, it leads to oppression. I've tried to show that's not the case. The other thing postmoderns don't like about truth claims often is that it can lead to division.

And so to avoid that, often what a society, I think, like ours does, is it takes a relativist line on religion.

And what I mean by that is it's a position which says it's all the same God. There are just many paths leading to the one truth which we don't have access to.

Okay. Now it sounds like a very humble position. It sounds very reasonable and humble. The most famous example of this would be, it's an old Indian story about the subcontinent of India I'm talking about.

[12:16] I think it's like five blind beggars go out into the jungle and they stumble across an elephant. And they each grab a hold of a different part of the elephant. And one grabs the leg and says, oh, an elephant, it's like a, you know, it's like a, like a tree.

And one grabs the trunk and said, oh, no, no, no, you're wrong, an elephant, it's like a, it's like a snake. And one grabs the, just bumps into the side of the whole elephant and goes, no, an elephant's like a wall. It's like a house.

And another one grabs the ear and says, it's like, I don't know, like a pancake or something. I can't quite remember how it goes. But the point of that, the point of that little story that people say is this, you know, we all just see a small part of the big picture.

We all just see a small part of the big picture. So let's all just get along. Now, it's kind of a humble position to take. But can I respectfully suggest it does not hold any water philosophically.

It collapses under the smallest amount of scrutiny. So let me scrutinize it for you respectfully and humbly. Leslie Newbigin was one of the great missionary scholars of the 20th century.

[13:33] And he used to be, people used to get him with this story constantly, you know. And one day he was really thinking about it and it came to him. And he said this. He said, you know, the only way you can know that none of the blind men had it right is if you could see the whole elephant.

If you claimed to see the whole picture. And that means the only way you could possibly say that all religions see part of the truth is if you assume to see the whole truth.

Which is the very thing you say nobody has got. It sounds humble. But it's actually imperialistic. It's actually arrogant.

Let me say it differently. Okay, let me say it differently. Because it's a bit hard to get your head around. When you say no one has a superior take on spirituality. When you say no one has a superior take on spiritual reality.

That is a spiritual reality that you say is superior to everyone else's. When you say you should not try and convert someone to their way of thinking.

[14:38] When you say you shouldn't convert someone to your way of thinking. You are wanting everyone to convert to your way of thinking. You are thinking if only all the religions in the world would give up their exclusive claims on truth.

And come around to my way of thinking. My exclusive claim on truth. You see the relative position. It's I think the technical word. It's self-stupefying. It collapses in on itself. It sounds humble. It sounds considered. It's actually neither of those things.

Okay. So where are we at in this sermon? So far. We've said that there are these barriers to people following Jesus. In a city like Vancouver. The first. The distrust of truth claims.

Hopefully I've shown that they don't have to lead to oppression. And hopefully I've shown that you cannot avoid making a truth claim. So you might as well pick something that's coherent. And relativism is not coherent.

[15 : 43] There's another barrier to people coming to Jesus. And it's the belief that Christianity will limit your freedom. And people just don't like that. People don't like that at all.

And this is inherently related to the previous two objections I think. Because I think underneath this suspicion of power structures. And underneath this suspicion of truth claims. Underneath all that. I think if you deconstruct it at all. At the bottom of it. Is this idea that I just don't want to be told how to live. Don't tell me what to do.

I want to be the God of my own life. I want to be free. And I want to talk about freedom for just a couple of minutes.

Because freedom is a lot more complex than you think. When you think freedom you probably think this. You think absence of restraint.

[16 : 41] You know where does a restraint come from? You know oppressive truth claims. Now think back to our reading in John 8. Jesus says this startling thing.

He says this. He's talking to some Jewish folks. And he says this in verse 32. Then you will know the truth. And the truth will set you free. Isn't it interesting how Jesus relates those two concepts. Truth and freedom.

In the complete opposite way that we do. In the opposite way that our society does. We think freedom is found from getting away from truth claims. And Jesus says no.

You'll only find freedom when you submit to the truth. When you submit to the right truth. Let me give you an overly simplistic example of this. Okay. It's hard to tell under four layers of polyester. And these kind of robes and stuff. But I am in just incredible physical condition. Just. Just.

Astounding. Physical.

[17 : 40] Condition. I can say that because my wife is not here. I am 41 years old. And I've eaten whatever I wanted my whole life.

But I'm starting to get to the age where I can't do that anymore. I have to start eating healthy. My wife tries to sneak vegetables on my plate. She tried to sneak Brussels sprouts.

Little green balls of death. Like. On my plate the other day. Now. Here's the thing. Right. If I went to a doctor. The doctor would say. Aaron you need to eat better.

Now I could argue. But. I just want to be free. I'm just. I just want to be free man. But the doctor would say this. Aaron you need to restrict your freedom.

In this area. In terms of food. If you want to enjoy the richer freedom of good health. The do whatever I want freedom. Is being restricted here.

[18 : 45] To enjoy. A full of freedom in other ways. Do you get that? Okay. So freedom is more complex than you think.

Okay. So where are we? In this sermon. Here we go. We live in a postmodern secular society. Like many cities in the world. A city which you'd think the Christian faith would flounder. But there is a growing. Vibrant.

Christian. Community here. How do we explain this? I've tried to show that some of the perceived barriers. To Christianity taking off. Namely. Truth claims. And desire for freedom. When scrutinized. Aren't as big a problem as we think. So now I want to turn to the original question. Why has Christianity remained relevant in our culture?

And the answer. Is Jesus. The answer is Jesus. And always has been Jesus. So let me spend the last few minutes.

[19 : 41] Talking about Jesus. And let's talk about his words in John 8. John 8. 31-32 here. You will know the truth. And the truth will set you free.

Okay. So what is freedom? In this context. What is freedom here? Okay. Well freedom. As we've been talking about. Is not the absence. The absence.

Or the presence. Of any restrictions. Freedom is the presence. Of the right restrictions. Ones. That are true. To who you are. Ones that are true. To who God made you to be.

For example. If you live for money. Because you're free to do so. It will shrivel your soul. It will ruin your relationships.

It might ruin your health. Why? Because you have run aground. On the rock of truth. You are out of accord.

[20 : 42] With how humans are supposed to live. So what is the right restrictions? That we find freedom in? In other words.

What's the truth? In this. What's the truth that Jesus is talking about here? Well. There's a lot tied up in that word truth. In this context here. Let me just give you one of them. The big one.

Humans were created. To serve God. And to serve others. Humans were created to serve God. And serve others. That's what it means to be a human being.

And unless we're doing that. We're not actually free. To be what we're supposed to be. Who we're supposed to be. You might be thinking. Yeah. But I'm not a Christian. And. You know.

I'm pretty free. And I don't hurt people and stuff. You know. Like I'm free. And I'm doing okay. Listen to the response. Of the hearers.

[21 : 40] And the next verse here. Verse 33. From our reading in John 8. Jesus said to them. Know the truth. And you'll be set free. Listen to the response. We are Abraham's descendants. We have never been slaves of anyone.

How can you say that we shall be set free? In other words. Jesus. What are you talking about freedom? We're already free. We've never. We've never been slaves. Jesus responds with this.

Now remember I said this sermon will be slightly offensive. Well here comes the stuff that might offend you. Jesus says this. I tell you the truth. Everyone who sins.

Is a slave. To sin. Everyone who sins. Is a slave. To sin. You are created to serve God and others. And if you're not doing that. You're serving something. And it's probably yourself. That you're serving.

And despite your best efforts. To prioritize other people in your life.

[22 : 38] We tend to be. As Martin Luther described. Using fancy Latin words. *Inci incurvatis*. We are curved in. On ourselves.

We are our own gods. And we think it's freedom. Being our own gods. And Jesus says no. It's slavery.

Because you can't escape your own desires. You're a slave to yourself. You're a slave to what you want. And it's not what you're created for.

You tend to serve your lower nature. We do this. I do this. And the great dilemma is this. Is we can't escape this. Despite our best efforts. We tend not to be able to escape this.

And I think our lived experience testifies this. I think. You might think. You're being very harsh

Aaron. I think I'm just being honest. When I think about my life. You know. Like I know. I don't love as I should.

[23 : 37] I disappoint my own standards. And all our great learnings. All our great advancements in society. Can't get to the great root of all of our problems.

And it's that. We serve ourselves. And this. Is why Jesus. Is the most relevant thing in the world. The most relevant thing in the city. The most relevant thing in your life. Because Jesus. Is the only power. That enables us to be free.

To be. Who we were created to be. That is. Child of God. Living. To serve our father in heaven. And the people around us.

Now what I mean by this is not. Jesus is. The great example that we should follow. I mean he is that. But he's much more than that.

[24 : 43] See Jesus lived the life for us. That we could never live. Jesus loved. In the perfect way that we could never do.

And why did he do this for us? Why did he have to do this for us? Again. I'm going to go to this side of the. Of the sermon a bit. Okay. It's because God is angry.

God is angry. At the state of the world. God is angry. God is angry. At the exploitation. God is angry. That Vancouver is a hub for human trafficking.

God is angry. About the over sexualization. Of little girls. God is angry. At the unequal distribution. Of wealth in the world. God is angry. That there's a billion people. Don't have access.

To clean drinking water. God is angry. About the materialism. Which sucks the life out of us. And all of these things. Have their roots. And the fact. That we want to be our own gods.

[25 : 42] But God is also loving. God is also incredibly loving. So what does this God do. Who is angry. About the state of the world.

And is completely unjust. And know that his anger. Is going to be directed at something. And this God. Who is also incredibly loving. What does this God do. With this.

Well. The cross. Is what God does. And in the cross. We see how seriously.

God. Takes the problems of the world. He pours his anger. Out on himself. But we also see. This incredible act of love. Because it was on himself. It's like this. It's like. If you had a. Let's say you were a judge.

[26 : 37] In a court. And a relative. Let's say your daughter. Came before you. You're the judge. You have to fine her. You have to fine her. \$10,000. For whatever she was doing.

You have to do that. To be true to who you are. You have to pass judgment. So you pass judgment. Judgment is. \$10,000 fine. But then you take off your robes.

You walk around. To where your daughter is. You put your arm around her. You pull out your checkbook. And you write the check for her. So both justice and love. Are fulfilled. On the cross. An incredible act of love. And the cross is where. This is the major difference. Between Christianity and other faiths. Is the cross. In terms of what it means.

Because in other religions. You tend to have to. Perform the truth. You have to do the good thing. You have to live the good life. And the gospel says. No. God has done it for you.

[27 : 32] In Christ. The Bible says. You are not saved by your performance. You are a slave. You cannot do it anyway. You are not saved. Because you perform the truth. But because Jesus performed the truth.

You can't be saved. And no freedom. By being good. You can't do it. You are only saved. And only no freedom. When you admit. That you are a slave to yourself.

And in desperate need. Of God's forgiveness. And his wonderful grace. Well. This morning. You have done well to listen.

To a difficult message. I have done my best. To present. What is the truth. And in the words of Jeremiah.

I just want to leave you. With this challenge. From our reading. In Jeremiah 6. You stand at the crossroads. And look. Ask for the ancient paths.

[28 : 32] Ask where the good way is. And walk in it. And you. Will find rest. For your souls. I have been talking about. A very ancient path here. A path that is thousands of years old.

And has been very important. To millions and millions. And millions of people. All over the world. And I want to give you a chance. To walk in it. What Christ invites you to do.

This morning. Is this. He invites you to stop. Being your own God. And let him be the God of your life. Invites you to come to the cross.

And find forgiveness. For your part. In the problems of the world. Invites you to come to the cross. And know the truth. And know the freedom.

Which you have been trying to have. Trying to get. But haven't been able to attain it. Christ invites you to himself.

[29 : 32] This morning. And to come to Christ. You just begin. With a prayer of forgiveness. And so I want to pray now. And would you pray with me.

I'll pray a simple prayer. You can make this. The prayer of your heart. You don't have to say anything out loud. Just make this the prayer of your heart. Father. Thank you that you love me. I've not lived as I should. Not always. I'm sorry. Forgive me. Thank you that Jesus died for me. And took the pain of the world upon himself.

Father in heaven. I want you to be in charge of my life now. In Jesus name. Amen. Amen. This is a truth.

Which can be hard to get your head around. But if you are new to church kind of things. If you are just beginning to think about faith. And your place in the world.

[30 : 37] And the meaning of life. This is certainly a truth worth investigating. And I want to invite you to a little course I run here. At St. John's called Christianity Explored.

It happens on Thursday nights. And it goes for seven weeks. And we run it a few times a year. The first one is this Thursday. This Thursday. 7pm in the church hall.

Basically what we do is we eat a meal together. We have this lovely lady who is going to cook a wonderful meal for us. We watch a little bit of a DVD. We read a little bit of a story about Jesus. And then there is just free space to ask any questions you like. There is no question too stupid or too hostile. I don't assume any knowledge of Christianity at all. You can participate as much or as little as you like.

You can ask lots of questions. Or you can say nothing the whole time. I would invite you to it. My email address if you want to register is on here. It is completely free.

[31 : 35] So just email it in the office. Or phone me. Or maybe fill it in and hand it to me at the end. It has been a delight speaking to you this morning. Thanks so much for listening. Amen.