

## 2. God the Father, Maker of Heaven and Earth

Series: I Believe - The Apostle's Creed

Date: 2 October 2022, 16th Sunday after Trinity

Location: St George's, Battery Point

Texts: Genesis 1:1-5, 26-31; 1 Corinthians 8:4-6; Matthew 11:25-27

*All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. Matthew 11:27*

What do Christians mean when we say we believe in God? There's a story about religions that goes something like this. You may have heard it before. Humanity used to believe in lots of gods, like Zeus, Thor, Neptune, Osiris and so on. They helped us make sense of life. Then we invented monotheism, the belief in one God (think Jews, Christians and Muslims). Then we realised that was an invention too, so now mature people know there is no God. I dropped in to the Thursday afternoon Bible study group this week and one person asked me, "How did Paul have such strong faith? Didn't he have any doubts?" Both this question and this story show that we come from a particular time and place. Most people in most cultures across the world believe in God. To say that atheism is a mature position suggests that everyone else is childish. That smacks of cultural superiority and intellectual pride. And yet today in the Western world, belief in God is problematic, whereas 500 years ago it would have been almost inconceivable to be an atheist.

This is our second sermon in our series, "I believe." We're exploring that summary statement of the Christian faith, the Apostles' Creed. Last week we saw that belief means trust. Without trust, "We would be unable to do anything in this life."<sup>1</sup> Most of the things we know we learned because someone we trusted told us and we believed them. The same is true with the Christian faith. Since the Enlightenment in the 18th century Western culture has adopted the position that we should only believe after we've tested and proved something is true. A Christian approach to knowledge, and especially the knowledge of God is the reverse: We believe in order to understand. That was last week. Today we're looking at what it means to say "I believe in God the Father, the Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth." We'll look at 3 points - God, The Father, and Maker of heaven and earth.

### 1. God

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<sup>1</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, 6.5.7. Cf. Ben Myers, *The Apostles' Creed*, p14

For the sceptics and doubters out there (and I take it that's most of us!), to say "believe in order to understand" sounds like no argument at all. That's the whole problem, I'm not sure if I can believe! Why should I? To answer this let me offer a clarification and then 3 reasons.

*What do we mean when we say God?* That story we began with of Many to One to no gods is a dominant narrative in the West. Its main problem is that it is false. Historically there is no linear progression from Many gods to One to none. But perhaps the biggest problem is conflating two distinct concepts - the gods and God. The gods and superheroes of Marvel Cinematic Universe illustrates this well. They are very powerful, yes, but they are still just things that exist in the universe. When Christians (and Jews and Muslims for that matter) say God, (with a capital G), they mean the ground and source of all existence. St Paul speaking to the Athenians for example says, "the God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth ... as some of your own poets have said, 'in him we live and move and have our being.'"<sup>2</sup> We'll explore this later, but for now the point is that God is not like Thor or Loki in the MCU. He's more like Kevin Feige, the producer behind all the films.

With this clarification, what reasons are there for believing in God's existence? These fall into 3 categories. Experience, Reason and Revelation. For the rest of this series we're going to talk about the third category, Revelation, and what that means for the other two - our experience and reason. But let me offer just 3 quick reasons for the existence of God, what have been traditionally called "proofs", which is not to say they are watertight, but rather they are coherent and compelling.

The first is the argument from existence. Why is there something rather than nothing? Everything that we experience is dependent upon something else. If we keep looking back in that sequence of causes we must come to a point where we get to that upon which everything must depend. And that, as St Thomas Aquinas said, is what everyone means by God.

Second is the moral argument. We all believe that there is right and wrong. Although we disagree over the details, almost no one thinks that this is no more than social convention. We all live as if there is an objective moral standard to which everyone everywhere is accountable. Where does this come from if not God?

A third argument comes from Anselm who was the archbishop of Canterbury 900 years ago. It's called the ontological argument, which is just a fancy word that means "Being" or "existence". This argument is not particularly fashionable, but it's one of my favourites. The argument goes like this: God is the highest or best thing you can think of. Since existence is better than non-existence, therefore God exists. I'll just leave that with you. I'd love to hear if you can think of why this argument might be wrong.

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<sup>2</sup> Acts 17:24, 28

There are plenty of other arguments for the existence of God, but when we say in the creed that we believe in God the Father, we do so not because we've reasoned our way up to God, but because God revealed himself to us. That is to say our belief in God is a response to his making himself known to us. That brings us to point 2.

## 2. God the Father

Christian belief is not simply that God exists, but we believe a whole bunch of stuff about who God is. What we believe about God begins with God as our Father. We call God Father not because of philosophical speculation but because Jesus reveals God as his Father. He relates to God as his Father and he invites us to share in that same relationship. He calls God "my Father and your Father", and "your heavenly Father". He teaches his disciples to pray "Our Father".<sup>3</sup>

Theologian Ben Myers writes, "Jesus' relationship to God is unique but also inclusive."<sup>4</sup> Jesus calls God "Abba, Father" in the garden and in Galatians and Romans we read that all who follow Christ are empowered by the Holy Spirit to pray in the same way.<sup>5</sup> That is Jesus invites us to share in his own relationship with the Father. This is what baptism means. We are baptised into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. By the Spirit we are immersed in the life of Jesus so that we come to share in his relationship with God. Jesus is a child of God by nature, we become God's children by grace. We're adopted into his family. This is the astonishing truth at the heart of the Christian faith. This is why we call the message of Jesus, the Gospel, which literally means "Good News", because God of the Universe invites us to become his children. When we confess we believe in God the Father, this isn't some abstract idea, it is the defining relationship of our lives.

The language of God as "Father" can be a bit tricky for people. Sadly, many of us have bad experiences with fathers, and certainly all our fathers have failed us in some way. Is God like a bad parent? Others argue that the language of "Father" privileges men over women. As one feminist put it, "If God is male, then male is God." The early Christians however were very much aware of this problem. In the 4th century, the theologian Gregory Nazianzus explained the words "Father" and "Son" should be used without having any "bodily ideas" in our minds.<sup>6</sup> The one true and living God transcends gender and the body. The word "Father" in fact indicates God is not like us.

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<sup>3</sup> John 20:17, Matthew 6:14, Matthew 6:9.

<sup>4</sup> Myers, 19

<sup>5</sup> Mark 14:36, Romans 8:15-16, Galatians 4:1-7

<sup>6</sup> Gregory Nazianzus, *Oration* 31.7

How do we get to know someone? We may observe what they do. We may ask others about them. But it's when they tell us about themselves and share their story that we really get to know them. It's the same with God. He tells us his story, he reveals himself, through his word the Bible. If someone introduces themselves to me as Susan, I don't then go around calling her Wilma. In the same way we use the words "Father" and "Son" because they have been given to us by Christ himself. This gets at at least some of what Jesus means when he says in Matthew 11.27:

All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

The words "Father" and "Son" are not arbitrary. They reveal what is true about God. They are fundamentally words of relationship. Neither makes sense without the other. Writing in the 2nd century Tertullian developed an important insight: "Father makes son, and son makes father... A father must have a son to be a father, and a son must have a father to be a son."<sup>7</sup> What does this mean for God, if Jesus speaks of God as Father and himself as Son? It means that God is eternally Father and Son. Does this mean that there are now 2 Gods? No. The early church particularly drew on the language of John 1.14 which speaks of the Son or the Word as "begotten". We don't use this word at all in everyday English, but it's the male equivalent of conception. Mothers conceive, fathers beget. Indeed in their begetting they become fathers. A father is the source of a son's existence, so the Father is the source of the Son. The Son derives his being from the Father. As the Father and the Son are eternal, so this relationship is eternal. So the Nicene creed speaks of the Son as "eternally begotten" of the Father. And so we speak about the Father as the "fount" of divinity, the source, the origin, the wellspring of divine life.

Does that mean the Son is less than the Father? No, because as we read in Matthew, Jesus says, "All things have been committed to me by my Father". And in John Jesus says, "as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself."<sup>8</sup> That God is One, and Father and Son, and the source of all that is, is drawn together in our reading from 1 Corinthians 8.

for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live.

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<sup>7</sup> Tertullian, *Against Praxeus* 10

<sup>8</sup> John 5.26

You will have noticed that as soon as we speak of God as Father, we immediately also have in mind God the Son. And this brings us to the mystery of the Holy Trinity. The creeds are a summary of the doctrine of the Trinity, that is to say who God is. We say mystery, because although we can speak about God with precision, according to his revelation of himself, our words point beyond themselves to his eternal reality which is beyond us. The doctrine of the Trinity guards us against idolatry. It directs us to worship the true and living God who has made himself known in Christ, and not to worship something of our own making. We can simply state the doctrine as follows. God is one. The one God exists eternally in three persons, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Each person of the Trinity is fully God, not a part of God. When you encounter the Father, the Son or the Spirit, you encounter God in full, not in part. Without the doctrine of the Trinity, Christianity falls in a heap. But this is far more than merely head knowledge. We experience God as Trinity - three in one and one in three, first and foremost in prayer.

Jesus tells us to pray “Our Father”. But we can only come through him. He is the way to the Father, and we come because of his atoning work on the cross. Again, we only come to Christ, through the power of the Spirit. Paul sums this up in Ephesians 2:18 - “Through [Christ] we [...] have access to the Father by one Spirit.”

### **3. Maker of heaven and earth**

Let us return to where we started: God as the source of all existence - or as the Nicene creed puts, the maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen. We’ve spent a lot of time on God as Father because the relationship between the Father and the Son in the unity of the Spirit is the primary relationship of God’s being. God was always Father, but he was not always Creator. He became the Creator when he created. This point is crucial. If he were eternally Creator then he would need creation to be God. This would make creation equal to God and thereby undermine its own integrity. The making of all reality is however not alien to God. The Father eternally begets the Son, his eternal life is, as it were, fruitful.

Creation then comes from the overflow of God’s own life. In Colossians 1:16 we read that “all things have been created through [the Son] and for him. Creation is from the Father and through the Son and *for* the Son. It is the gift of the Father for the Son. In that sense creation is an act of love. As gift, it is a free and unnecessary act. But neither is it arbitrary. It is purposeful and intelligible. It is this free act of divine grace that gives creation its own life as distinct from God, having its own integrity. And yet, although distinct from God, the creation is entirely dependent upon God for its life and being. Creation is contingent. It has

its own kind of dependent freedom. The freedom of creation is not independent. In fact, from our side, to seek independence from God is to turn away from the source of life and to seek death. From the side of God, were he to withdraw his gracious and life-giving hand, creation would unravel and cease to exist.

God does not create and then leave the universe to itself. He sustains and upholds all things at every point. This is what we call the doctrine of Providence: God *provides* for all things. He is the source of existence, of all that is. As we heard from St Paul earlier - "in him we live and move and have our being."<sup>9</sup>

This doctrine of creation has all sorts of implications. That creation is distinct from and yet dependent upon God means that it is open to investigation by us. It is no accident that the scientific method developed in Christian Europe and not elsewhere. That creation is a gift of love means that creation is good. What does God say in Genesis 1 at the end of creation? It was "very good." This is a spirituality that is world affirming. This is radically in contrast with Buddhism which says that the body and the material world are an illusion. It means that evil is not something that is necessarily part of creation. In fact, many Christian theologians have argued that evil is essentially an absence or a deformation of what is good. While we do experience all kinds of evils in this world, this is not how things are meant to be, nor can evil be ultimately attributed to God. We live in a sick world that needs healing and rescue, not an evil world that needs destruction. We too are part of the "very good". We are made and loved by God. And we are also made for the Father and the Son. That is to say we are made to worship, to join in and enjoy the relationship of the Son with the Father by the power of the Spirit. If that is what you and I are made for, will we join the rest of creation in singing God's praise? Or will we turn away towards nothingness?

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<sup>9</sup> Acts 17.28