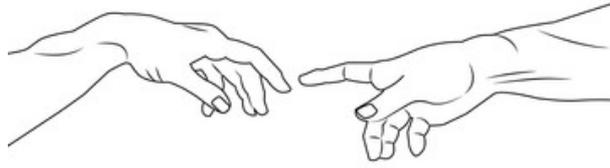


The Mystery of God – Lent course



Introduction

Our Lent course delves into the mystery of God, seeking to rediscover what it is that draws us so deeply in our search for God. We will follow Jesus through each week's Sunday Lenten readings, allowing Him to draw us, in love and wonder, into the mystery of God's plan of salvation.

In 2017, the Mission Theology Advisory Group (MTAG) of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (CTBI), ran a mission project for the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. It was called 'the 95 missional theses project' and every day for 95 days before the anniversary on 31st October 2017, the group issued a statement, based on the five marks of mission, about the sort of Church we might believe in.

The statement which, overwhelmingly, got the most attention, was:

"We believe in a Church that is more concerned with the mystery that is God than with its own success".

In this study, we start to explore the Mystery that is God.

Each week there are conversation starters and things to think about, prayer and engagement with Scripture and a section entitled "*Entering into the Mystery*".

Week 1 - The Mystery of Good and Evil

Readings

- Deuteronomy 26.1-11
- Psalm 91.1-2, 9-16
- Romans 10:8b-13
- Luke 4:1-13

Starting out - Why is there good and evil in the world?

When people say that they cannot believe in God and that the Christian faith makes no sense, it's often because they can't get their heads round the presence of undeniable evil in the world. Human beings are capable of such terrible things and good people often suffer at the hands of others who use their power to hurt and dominate. Why does God let the sun shine on good people and bad people alike? (Matthew 5.45) Why do the wicked people prosper at the expense of others? Why doesn't God do something to force the world to be more equitable and just?

These questions are not new and are part of an age-old reflection on why the world is as it is, what God has to do with the mystery of Good and Evil, and what our part is in all this.

When Jesus teaches his followers how to pray, he specifically includes the words:

*Lead us not into temptation (the time of trial),
But deliver us from evil.*

This makes the connection between a spiritual path of obedience to God's will which actively seeks out the good and learning to guard against choosing evil, because we all get tempted and tested. On this first stage of our Lenten journey, we need to think about our freedom to choose what kind of path we will take through our human life. What sort of obstacles lie in our way? As we begin Lent, we journey with Jesus into the struggle with these difficult questions.

Something to talk about – Good and Evil

- How would you start a conversation with someone who was worried about the evil in our world?
- What would a world full of goodness and mercy actually look like?

Something to think about – Temptation

The early Christian theologian, Origen of Alexandria, wrote an extensive meditation on the Lord's Prayer. This is what he writes about the petition to keep us from temptation and evil:

Quote

“It is when a man succumbs in the moment of tempting, I take it, that he enters into temptation, being held in its nets. Into those nets the Saviour entered for the sake of those who had already been caught in them, and in the words of the Song of Songs, looking out through the meshwork makes answer to those who have been already caught by them and have entered into temptation, and says to those who form His bride: Arise, my dear one, my fair one, my dove. To bring home the fact that every time is one of temptation on earth, I will add that even he who meditates upon the law of God day and night and makes a practice of carrying out the saying, A righteous man's mouth shall meditate on wisdom, has no release from being tempted. How many in their devotion to the examination of the divine Scriptures have, through misunderstanding the messages contained in Law and Prophets, devoted themselves to godless and impious or to foolish and ridiculous opinions?”

Origen
On the Lord's Prayer

Origen imagines that when we give in to temptation to evil we are caught like a fish thrashing about in a net. We are trapped and struggling and our freedom to live abundantly is stopped. Jesus, though, can free us from the net. Origen also reminds us that being religious people does not stop us from being tempted and falling into evil ways, in fact, it might be our very piety that makes us arrogant and full of pride, taking the Scriptures and using them as if we owned them, using them to prop up what we want, and not listening to what Jesus tells us through the gospels.

Questions

- What temptations have you had to resist in your life?
- Where do you see people today being trapped by evil?
- How do you think people might use the Scriptures to hurt others?
- How would you explain to another person how Jesus releases us from the nets of temptation and evil?

Some scripture to ponder – God’s Protection

*Because you have made the Lord your refuge,
the Most High your dwelling-place,
no evil shall befall you,
no scourge come near your tent.*

*For he will command his angels concerning you
to guard you in all your ways.
On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.
You will tread on the lion and the adder,
the young lion and the serpent you will trample under foot.*

*Those who love me, I will deliver;
I will protect those who know my name.
When they call to me, I will answer them;
I will be with them in trouble,
I will rescue them and honour them.
With long life I will satisfy them,
and show them my salvation.*

(Psalm 91. 9-16)

In Luke’s gospel, it is the Tempter who quotes this Scripture at Jesus. The temptation put before him is to test whether God’s promise is literally true. If Jesus puts himself in harm’s way, then God must come to save him or this Scripture is a lie. Jesus refuses, saying that God is not to be tested in this way. But Jesus has already said that we must live by God’s word. So why does he refuse to test God with Scripture? Or are we to understand that Scripture nourishes us differently and more deeply?

Questions

- What do you think this psalm tells us about God’s love for us?
- Why do you think Jesus said God was not to be tested? Why not?
- Are there times where you have really been aware of God’s protection?
- Are there times when you have experienced the presence of evil?

The Mystery of God – God became one of us

One of the most mysterious things about God is that God gives us free will to decide for ourselves how to live and even to reject God's love. Yet we are also given guidance about how to choose wisely and well.

God became a human being in Jesus, just as we are. In the story of Jesus' Temptation before he begins his public ministry, we see in dramatic fashion the life choices we all must make. No matter what our circumstances, we have the power to make some choices - whether to seek out what God wants for us and find out our vocation from God, or to turn away and forge our own paths through life.

This freedom to make a choice for God and to discover God's will in our complicated world is central to discovering the value, meaning and purpose of life. Without that freedom, we would not discover anything about who we truly are, or find what satisfies us or feels like a deep sense of rightness. But such freedom carries risk. We are free to make other choices, pursue other paths, seek out power and domination of others and ignore God's call to us.

The gospels tell us that Jesus examined those choices too. We are told of those huge, glittering temptations of power and glory in the world. Jesus knows these things are possible for him. Exhausted by his denial of self, Jesus can see that path, that easy life. Yet he rejects them all, not just for himself, but because he wants to know God's vision of the world, to pursue God's mission and God's justice.

Jesus' response to the temptations offered to him shows us the way. If we really want to know why evil exists in the world, then we must look deep inside ourselves. Human beings dominate the planet. Our choices affect the fates of all our neighbours. Jesus shows us how to make choices that open up God's will for us. He shows us how to use our God-given free will to create best possible future for ourselves, by denying what is easy and turning away from the paths to evil, and destruction of ourselves and others, even our world.

And this helps us see that the one of the most mysterious things about God is that God finds the creation to be good and continues to call us, love us and bless us despite the risk that we will turn our backs, walk away and ruin the world that God has made.

Question

- How does Jesus help us understand how to seek God's will for us?

Something to pray

Loving God, source of all goodness,

help us to follow your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord,
and with him, understand and resist temptation.

Help us to put others before ourselves,
to resist the lures of power and an easy life,
to listen and reach out for your will above all.

Amen

We finish by joining together in saying the Lord's Prayer.