

God, The Father Almighty

Exodus 3:1-17; Luke 11:1-4

What does our church really *need* right now?

There are many answers we could give to that question.

You might say we really need to be able to see each other again face to face. And we *long* for that: to gather in person, in safety and peace.

Or you could say we really need to reach out to our community. And we long for that as well! For the gospel to break out, and for many to come to know Jesus through the ministry of our church.

One of the things I love about the Bible is how it constantly surprises in what is of most importance. Consider for example, the apostle Paul as he writes to the church in Philippi. When he wrote Philippians, Paul himself was in prison, and the church he was writing to was suffering persecution for their faith in Jesus. But what does Paul pray? What does he think is *necessary for him and the church he writes to*?

He could pray for the persecution to cease, so that the Philippians could gather together in safety and in peace.

He could pray for his own release from prison, so that the gospel would continue to go out, and many could come to know Jesus through his ministry.

But this is not his focus.

This is my prayer: [he writes] that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God.

Not many of our plans for 2020 have survived all this year has thrown at us. We had, however, always planned to do this series studying the Apostles' Creed. And it struck me this week, in God's kindness, how timely this series is for us.

With all the turmoil and uncertainty of this year, the next 9 weeks are an opportunity for us to consider the stable and unchanging truths of who God is, and what he has done for us. Truths confessed by Christians all through history, and around the world.

I don't know exactly how you are feeling, but I suspect many of us come to this series like storm-tossed sailors, battered and beaten. And in the creed we don't find an abstract theory of seamanship, but we find a firm anchor for our souls, that will hold us fast in the wind and the waves.

What do we need? Many things, to be sure, but one thing above all:

A growing and deepening knowledge of God,

That will flow out in lives of love, and wisdom, and righteousness,

All to the glory of God.

So we're going to declare the Words of the Apostles' Creed together now, and hear God's Word read to us as we consider the first statement of the creed today. But first let me pray:

Heavenly Father, you know all that we face in the world at this moment. And so this is our prayer: that our love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that we may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of your name. Amen.

This morning/evening, the task before us is to consider the very first line of the Apostles' creed. What does it mean to declare, *I Believe in God, The Father Almighty?*

And to help us in this task, we're going to consider four different headings. We're actually going to return to this same structure each week as we work through the rest of the Creed.

Drama

Doctrine

Discipleship

And Doxology (this word comes from the greek word for *praise*)

It's our prayer that these four headings will be a great help for us to grasp the centrality of *doctrine* to our whole Christian lives.

We're going to see each week that what we believe about God is not the product of our own philosophical speculation, rather it rises out of the unfolding *drama* of the biblical story.

And as we think about the *truth* of our faith, we're not just scratching an intellectual itch. Rather we're growing in our knowledge and depth of insight so that we might overflow in lives of love, purity, and righteousness, all to the glory of God. We learn doctrine, so we can better *live as disciples* and better praise our great God.

Drama

So let's begin with the *Drama*.

For we have to notice right at the beginning of this series that what we have in our Bibles is not a list of spiritual sayings, or a dense theological treatise. In his wisdom, God has given us an epic story. In the 66 books of our Bibles we have this incredible diversity of songs and stories, poems and parables, letters and histories. But together, they together tell one unfolding narrative of God and the world.

And you see this reflected in the Apostles' creed itself. What we say in the creed, is not abstract. It is the story of the world, from creation to everlasting life, centred on and climaxing in the work of Christ, and encompassing the present day life of the church. What we read in the Bible and confess in the Creed are the *mighty deeds of God*; what he has done, what he will do, and what he is still doing now.

And so all throughout the Bible we come across stories like those we have just read in Exodus 3 and Luke 11. These are weighty events of enormous significance, as the God of the universe shows up, telling us His Name, and teaching people how to pray. And yet at the same time, it all takes place in the nitty gritty of life as we know it in this world. Moses is at work; Jesus and his disciples are on a road trip to Jerusalem.

The story of the Bible encapsulates the whole cosmos: heaven and earth, the rise and fall of empires, the very salvation of the world. And yet it also concerns our *daily* bread, our own personal relationships, our particular temptations and trials.

And as this narrative unfolds, a picture emerges of Who God is and what he is like. Through the dynamic ups and downs of the story we come to know a dependable unchanging God. As one writer says,

The throbbing verbs of the Drama give rise to the stable nouns of our Doctrine.

Doctrine

And through his wonderful works, God shows himself to be "The Father Almighty."

But what does this mean? What are we affirming, when we say that this is true about God? Well from the drama of Scripture, and particularly today from the burning bush and the Lord's prayer, we encounter two foundational truths about the God of the Bible:

The transcendence of God, and the Trinity of God.

In other words, we learn that God is great *and* that God is good.

Transcendence (God is great!)

So first, God is transcendent. And when we say that, we're just saying that God is really really big. It means that we don't figure out for ourselves what God is like, but he must reveal himself to us. It means that we can never hope to climb up to meet God, but he must stoop to be with us. For this God, the direction of travel is always down, from him to us.

This is the basic point that God makes when he reveals his NAME to Moses in Exodus chapter 3. As God commissions Moses to lead the Israelites, and promises to rescue them from slavery in Egypt, Moses asks to know God's name. He's basically asking *who* God is; *what is God like?*

God famously replies: I AM WHO I AM. Tell them, I AM has sent me.

The first thing Moses needs to learn is that it is God who defines who he is to us, and not the other way round. This puts an end to the little games we play doesn't it, when we say, "I like to think about God like this." There are many opinions about God, but here God gives us his:

We don't name him, he names himself. The Lord is who *he* is, not who we say he is.

But God is also telling Moses that he defines himself through what he does. We've already said this: the transcendent God reveals himself through his *actions*. God says, I AM WHO I AM, or you could translate that phrase I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE. Moses wants to know who God is. God says, *watch this space*, see how I act and you will know who I am and what I am like.

And even just in Exodus 3, we start to see who this God is. He is the God who hears and sees the suffering of his people. He is the God who is with his people. He is the God who delivers his people. He is the God who exercises his power in almighty, redeeming love.

And as the drama unfolds we see more and more of God's character. For God makes promises in this chapter that he keeps as the story progresses. As the Israelites grumble and complain, he patiently provides for them. As the Israelites heinously sin, and reject him, he graciously forgives them. As generation after generation persist in the worship of false Gods he judges them, and yet also promises a greater deliverance for them.

So what is God like? What a relief that we don't have to come up with an answer ourselves. God comes right out with himself, and he shows himself to be the speaking, saving, redeeming, righteous, powerful, promise-making, faithful and forgiving God.

This is not a God of our imaginations. He is transcendent, he is great, he is so much bigger than us. But this does not mean he is *distant from us*, he doesn't look down from heaven despising us for our weakness, or rolling his eyes at our insignificance. Rather in his greatness he

moves *towards* humanity in the abundance of his love. This is the Name of the LORD.

Trinity (God is good!)

But if we really want to know the ins and outs of his name, we have to well beyond the Exodus, and see what he did some 2000 years later.

For in the fullness of time, a man from some backwater town in Israel was baptised in the Jordan River. And at his baptism, the heavens opened and a voice spoke from heaven, "This is my beloved son."

And as he speaks with his rag-tag bunch of followers, he shows his own concern for the name of God. He teaches them to pray, "Hallowed be Your *Name*." That God's name would be honoured as the truly great, transcendent name that it is.

And yet when he addresses this God, he uses a different name, a name of stunning intimacy. He prays, *Father*.

In John 17, just before his death, Jesus prays, "*Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world.*"

In the life of Jesus, we see that the drama stretches back before the creation of the world: there has always been a Father, loving his Son, in the joy of the Holy Spirit. Goodness is not tacked on to God's greatness. This God is good in his very essence. For all eternity he has existed in perfect relationship, giving and receiving, radiating self-giving, live-giving love.

And stunningly, Jesus encourages those who follow him to call God *their Father*. Jesus puts his arm around us and says, *Pray with me. Share **my** relationship with God. For you are loved as I am loved.*

Who is God? He is the Lord of the burning bush. The great I AM. He is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. In Jesus, God has revealed himself as THE Father. And through Jesus, he is also OUR Father. He is good down to the core, and in his mercy and grace he has shown himself to be good *towards* us, too.

In the Trinity we discover the most wonderful truth. The deepest reality of life in this world is not cold indifference, random chaos, or raw power, but love. At the heart of the universe is a loving union of three: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

And so the church in every time and every place confesses both the transcendent greatness *and* the triune goodness of God. Indeed, his greatness **is** his goodness. We declare, *I believe in God. The Father. The Almighty.*

Discipleship

And I hope you can begin to see that belief in this God is going to profoundly impact every area of our lives.

For when we confess that God is the Father almighty, we guard ourselves against two opposite tendencies that both result in the same outcome.

On the one hand we can see God as distant and removed, uninterested in the affairs of our life. When we do this, we can be tempted to think that we can do without God, that we can carry on with our business, our finances, our science, our art, our politics, our families and our friendships with no reference to God whatsoever.

On the other hand, however, we can shrink God down to size, so that he is just one among many other pursuits in our life. And so again we can separate God out from our daily affairs, as if God can only help with some little spiritual aspect of who we are.

But this is not the God of the Bible. The Father Almighty is outside of the world, yes. But he is also present and active in the world. He is at once far above us and right beside us. In his greatness, there is no part of our life which lies outside of his control. In his goodness, there is no part of our life that lies beyond his interest.

And so what does it mean to live in light of the reality of who God is? The life of discipleship to this God is one of fear, and of faith.

Fear

So first, we are to *fear* the Lord. To fear God is surely the rational response when we grasp his greatness, and our weakness; when we recognise his majestic purity and our persistent imperfection. It would be the heart of folly to treat this God flippantly. The book of Proverbs tells us that the *beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord*.

And this may grate against our anti-authority Aussie instincts. But what we see in the Bible time and time again is that the wise person bows before the Lord when they encounter him in all his glory. In Exodus 3, Moses *hides his face* in fear. The disciples spend half their time at Jesus' feet and freaking out at his awesome power.

But here's the thing. God always responds by lifting up those who bow before him.

We humble ourselves before the Lord, and raises us up. Sets us on our feet so that we might then walk *with* him by faith.

For if God was only capital-A Authority, or pure power, our submission to him would be enough. We would obey him, and even serve him, but ultimately our fear would not only be the beginning but the end of our response to him.

Faith

But God is the *Father* Almighty. And so he desires not only our service but our affection. Not only our obedience but our delight in him. He wants us to receive his love, and to freely love him with all our heart and soul and mind and strength. He wants us to trust him. And so he invites us to relate to him not only in fear, but in faith.

So we ask God to give us today our daily bread, because we believe he is the good Father who provides for the basic needs of his children.

And we ask God to forgive us our sins, because we believe he is a good Father who responds to our confession of sin with a tender embrace, not a wagging finger.

And we ask God to lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil, because we believe that he is a good and great Father who is bigger than anything this world can throw at us, but also present with us to guide us and protect us.

And then we *listen* to him, because he is the Good Father who speaks to us his powerful transforming Word.

This is the life of the disciple. Each day, each week, each year, our whole lives. We say, "God, I've got nothing to offer you, but you have everything to offer me, so I'm going to go into this day trusting you and not in myself."

And as we walk forward in reverent fear and humble faith, what we find is an intimate connection between what we believe to be true about God and what we experience of him. God showed up to Moses and said, "I am who I am" "I will be who I will be", and guess what? "He still

is who he is." So as we live with him, we *will* find him to be utterly reliable, completely worthy of our trust.

One theologian expresses it beautifully,

For believers come to know the workings of the Father, the Creator of all things, He who gave them life, and breath, and all things. They learn to know him as the Lawgiver who gave out his holy commandments that they should walk in them. They learn to know him as the Judge who is provoked to terrible wrath by all the unrighteousness of men and who in no sense holds the guilty guiltless.

*And they learn to know him, finally, as the Father who for Christ's sake is **their** God and Father, on whom they trust so far that they do not doubt that He will supply for every need of body and soul, and that He will convert all evil which accrues to them in this vale of tears into good. They know that He **can** do this as Almighty God and that He **wants** to do it as a faithful Father. Hence they confess: I believe in God, the Father, the Almighty.*

Doxology

And as we confess this truth, and as we walk in it, our whole lives will have a tenor of praise to God. We will give glory and honour to God in word and in song and in deed. And Jesus also tells us that as other people see our fear and our faith, they will say, "Wow, their God is great and good." That's the thing about fear and faith – they point away from us to our Father Almighty.

And I wanted to conclude this morning by just sharing with you how all of this played out in the life of one Christian from the past. Martin Luther was a monk who lived about 500 years ago. And as a Monk he understood how big and great God was, and how sinful and weak he was. He certainly *feared* God as the righteous judge who hated sin. But early in his life, he did grasp the gracious goodness of God. And so he was gripped by terror at the thought of how God would treat him.

Looking back, Luther said this of himself: "I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners, and secretly, if not blasphemously, I was angry with God." Luther had given his life to serve and obey God, but he found that he could not *love* a God who he knew only as harsh and distant.

But then, through his own study of God's Word, he came to see the goodness of God. He came to see that the harsh God in his mind, was not the God revealed in the Bible. He said, "For although the whole world has most carefully sought to understand the nature and mind and activity of God, it has had no success in this whatsoever. But...God himself has revealed and disclosed the deepest profundity of his fatherly heart, His *sheer inexpressible love*." Here was a God that not only evoked fear, but also faith, overflowing in joyful praise.

And this understanding of God carried Luther through to the end of his life. Many people wondered whether in the face of death Luther's faith might give way again to terror at the prospect of meeting God. But Luther had discovered in the Bible a God who was bigger even than the grave. And a Father who was waiting to meet him, ready to welcome him home with open arms.

One of Luther's friends recored what was apparently his final prayer.

My heavenly Father, eternal compassionate God, you have revealed to me your Beloved Son, Our Lord Jesus Christ, whom I have known, of whom I have acquaintance, whom I love. And whom I honour as my beloved Saviour and Redeemer.... Take my soul to you. Into your hands I commend my Spirit. You have redeemed me God of truth. And God so loved the World, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whœver believes in him would not perish, but have eternal life.

Gone was the terror. Here is a man who died with the joy of the gospel, and the praise of God on his lips. May we live with that same joy and praise on ours.