

## Other Faiths – Exodus 20: 1-4

Continuing our theme of looking at thorny issues facing Christians – we’re considering today the place of Christianity in a multi-faith world, and as we’re increasingly being told – a multi-faith Britain.

It’s hard to get exact figures but in the world there are roughly:

- 2.1 billion Christians
- 1.5 billion Muslims
- 900 million Hindus
- 376 million Buddhists
- 23 million Sikhs
- 14 million Jews
- About 1.5 billion followers of smaller faith groups & agnostics

In the light of these statistics, I want us to consider together today –

- Why does the Bible tell us we should be a Christian?
- Is there anything unique about Christianity as a world religion?
- What should be the Christian approach to other religions?
- What happens to the followers of other religions if the Christian view of God’s judgment is real?

I want to start by saying that this particular issue, is for me, one of the most difficult things about being a Christian. The reason for this difficulty is that it’s hard for me to look at 2 thirds of the world and the way they try and worship God and to simply say that they’re wrong. I

also know that if I’d been born in Saudi Arabia rather in England, there’s a massively high chance that I’d be a Muslim now. Does that mean that God would reject me?

If we’re to be Christians who refuse to throw away our brains then we need to grapple with questions like these. We also need to try and come to a conclusion with the help of God’s discernment in the light of the Bible and Christian tradition. So let’s have a go together.

### **Why does the Bible tell us we should be a Christian?**

Our Old Testament reading is from the 10 Commandments. God’s law for his people as they founded the nation of Israel. The very first law told the people not to worship any other God that they were going to encounter on their travels. One God for God’s holy people was the message. But why? Doesn’t all genuine worship, no matter which god it’s aimed at, eventually get to ‘the one true God’, wherever he is?

According to the Bible – the answer is NO!

Jesus himself says that: “I am the way, the truth and the life – nobody comes to the Father (i.e. God) accept through me!” (John 14:6)

After performing a miracle of healing in the book of Acts the crowds asked the apostle Peter by what power he had performed the miracle. Peter replied: “by the name of Jesus Christ, for salvation is found in no-one else.” (Acts 4: 12)

The Apostle Paul was equally certain in his letters to the churches. He wrote: "For there is one God and one link between God and humanity – Jesus Christ." (1 Tim 2: 5)

This leads us to our next question:

### **What is unique about Christianity as a world religion?**

We find the answer to Christianity's uniqueness in the person of Jesus Christ.

1<sup>st</sup> – Jesus is unique by identifying himself **as** God and therefore worthy of worship.

- Muslims would never worship Mohammed as God. He was a prophet who taught about God. Important but still a human!
- It's not clear whether Buddha even believed there was a God. Classical Buddhism had no god.
- Hindus believe that the deities in their temple are infused with the presence of God, which makes them holy. But they wouldn't claim that they were actually God.
- Only Jesus is worshipped as God in the major religions.

2<sup>nd</sup> – Christianity is the only religion which claims to have a saviour who will **definitely** forgive us our sin and the things we've done wrong.

- The other religions are less hopeful in this area.
  - In Islam, sinners face judgement according to how they've lived their lives – good may outweigh evil but maybe not. There's no certainty of salvation.

- Hinduism and Buddhism rely on a circle of reincarnation – birth after birth until the soul becomes purified enough.
- In contrast – Jesus promises forgiveness and eternal life with him to all who ask with faith. (1 John 1: 9)

3<sup>rd</sup> – Jesus is unique by rising from the dead. This gives hope to all Christians who die that Jesus will raise them too and bring them to his presence forever after death. If Jesus is alive, it also means we can experience him through his Holy Spirit today.

- No other religion offers us the chance of being friends with God.

If Jesus Christ is uniquely God – how should Christians view the role of other religions in the world?

### **What should be the Christian approach to other religions?**

Even if we do believe that Jesus is the only way to God, that doesn't mean we should simply write off all other religions as 'misguided'.

All the major religions offer a moral framework for life and seek to regulate society and community. Elements of truth can be found in most religions and we shouldn't be surprised at that. There are a few reasons for this:

1<sup>st</sup> – The Bible tells us that God has partially revealed himself in creation (Psalm 19: 1) so it shouldn't surprise us that a beautiful landscape or some other aspect of creation causes people to dwell upon God.

2<sup>nd</sup> – The Bible tells us that humans are made in the image of God and that we're given a conscience to distinguish between right and wrong. (Rom 2: 14-15) It's something deep within us that guides us, whatever religion we follow, to try and live side by side with each other in some form of order. We've all got a longing inside us to reach out to God and make sense of our world. It's often been said that there's a 'god shaped hole' which forces us to reach out to God.

However, it causes Christians a problem to say that all religions are ultimately the same. How can we argue that all religions lead to God when some religions, e.g. Buddhism, don't even believe in the existence of God?

I think Christians can find aspects of truth in most other religions – but ultimately there will come a point where we begin to differ in our view about God's role in our world and our lives.

It's at this place of differing in opinion that perhaps the biggest question arises for the Christian when considering other faiths.

### **What happens to those who haven't heard about Jesus in the light of God's judgement?**

If Jesus is the only way to God – can anybody who hasn't heard about Jesus be saved? It doesn't seem right or fair if the answer is no!

It's a bit difficult to give a definitive answer. The Bible isn't a book of philosophy giving answers to hypothetical questions. However, we can

be certain that God will do what is right and just and that on the day of judgement, there will be a combination of real justice combined with God's love.

Also – we all need to remember that none of us are saved by our religion. The Bible speaks about us being saved by God's grace rather than anything that we do for ourselves. It's quite possible that people all over the world are living a life dependent on God's grace without making the connection with Jesus because they've never heard of him. I personally don't think that God will abandon those people. The Bible talks about God's people being as numerous as the stars in the sky – and I don't think the Christian church quite adds up to those numbers yet! (Gen 22: 17)

### **Our response**

We've heard some of the facts and ideas. What should our individual response be? As Christians we're commissioned by Jesus to go into all the world and tell other people about Jesus Christ and his offer of forgiveness and salvation.

That calling is there for you and for me to obey. People often say to me: "We can't all go overseas and be missionaries" and I quite agree – that would be silly!

But we're all called to do the job of a missionary. If you've spent the last 10 years at work, at your club, at your society or with your friends and you've not told them and demonstrated through your life their need

for God – then you need to pull your finger out! If you believe you've found good news in Jesus that will change your destiny forever, but you've kept it to yourself, then that needs some deep reflection upon.

Sharing our faith isn't easy – it takes courage and it needs to be done respectfully. However if Jesus is truly unique and is offering us the chance to know God for yourself – then we need to make sure that we're taking advantage of God's offer to us individually and offering it to others around us.