

## Believing sermon

We are at week 2 of our three weeks looking at our 3 values. Belonging, believing and becoming. I've just got back from a preaching conference, had a great time, learnt lots. so, all my sermons from now on will be at least 10% better, guaranteed. Thanks for you feedback on last week's sermon, very helpful, I always welcome sermon feedback good or bad, if I ever preach the perfect sermon I will stop.

### Pray.

This week, looking at believing, I approached with slightly more trepidation. Last week I felt we all need a reminder of the importance of belonging and why it is our first value.

We all have beliefs. They are invisible forces that help us make all our decisions and ultimately shape us. I think we all want to believe and deepen our faith. Compared with belonging, I feel you need less convincing about believing. I take the fact that you are here in the building or online, good sign that there is something about Jesus that you **believe**, or you **want** to believe in Jesus.

In our Old Testament reading, Moses has gone up a mountain to hear from God, and he's gone a long time. The impatience of the Israelite men leads to them doing some stupid things. "Aaron", they say, "Moses is taking ages, make for us a new god because our old one is just too slow, we want a new speedy god". Aaron says, ok, but I'll need gold, go and get me earrings from, your wives and children. You see that the Israelites in this story want someone else to do it and someone else to pay for it. "Aaron, **you** make us a calf, Aaron says, go get me some gold from **someone else**." And they make a new God, all because God was too slow. But you know, we worship a slow God. We believe in and worship a god who takes time. **We wait on God** not because God is too busy, or we are not important, but because God is slow.

If you are waiting on God for something, you are not alone. Psalm 13 says 'How long o Lord. Will you forget me forever?'

If you have ever been to a church wedding, you probably would have heard 1 Corinthians chapter 13 read to you, what is the 1<sup>st</sup> characteristic of love? Patience. We worship a slow God. The Japanese

theologian Kosuke Koyama talks about **Three mile an hour God**. That is walking pace. You go any faster than that and you stop following. Our culture says time is money so hurry up! God's pace dictates that we slow down. That can affect our belief because we want everything sorted and settled now. But that is not how God works.

God is slow, God's righteousness comes into our lives, slowly. That is what Paul indicates in the book of Romans. last week I mentioned a book I read on Romans. In this book the two writers write about something you can do when you encounter the word righteousness in the bible. In our culture its only regularly used with the word **self** in front of it, and who wants to be self-righteous? But the word righteous is implying the right way, or right living, and the Greek root of the word is very similar to the word justice. So, we can legitimately replace the word righteous with the word justice. And it completely changes how we hear read romans.

*“For in the gospel, the justice of God is revealed—a justice that is by faith from first to last.”*

The Christian beliefs are located within the justice of God. When we ask God to forgive us, we are taken back to the cross and Jesus taking away the sins of the world. When we ask God to restore and empower us, we are taken to the empty tomb, the resurrection. God's justice permits our forgiveness, our freedom, our right way of living. We can't live healthy lives, or live in the right way if, we feel we are eternally unforgiven. The past, present and future work of God is the spark and the fuel for our righteousness, our right way of living. That is God's justice, so that is why we believe in and wait on a slow God, because God is a God worth waiting for.

So, what if you like the sound of this God, but what if your faith is small, weak or fragile? I have some advice for you, but before I give you that advice need to take you Croydon. Not literally, metaphorically, to Croydon in the 90's, that is my era, when I lived there.

I grew up in a church in Croydon, we had a big morning service and, in the evening, an “invite-your-friends-to” gospel style service. In this service we would regularly have a testimony slot – a time where someone would share something that God had done in their lives. I can't remember the exact words, but they would often start by saying, “I want to bless you with a testimony” or “I want to encourage you all with something that happened to me.”

A few years later I read a book called “saying is believing” by Amanda Hontz-Dury she had done a lot of research in the power of testimony. One thing that she noticed is that there is power in giving a

testimony. But the person who benefitted most from that power was **the giver of the testimony**. It was as if, **in the retelling of the experience**, the person telling the story, was also reinforcing their beliefs. While the person was **describing** some “God incident” in their week, they were also **constructing**. The same is true in relationships, to construct or form a healthy partnership, you have to say somethings out loud. “I really appreciate what you did earlier..”

In short: the more you talk about something, the easier it is to believe that it is true. As we see in the gospel of John, Words become flesh.

Giving testimony doesn't necessarily involve a microphone, and an incredible experience, it could be small things spoken about in conversation, or in a small group. It could be answering a question like...

“When has God seemed most present in your life?” or

“This week I sensed God's presence when ...”

I call those micro testimonies. Small but important moments where our story intersects with God's story. These micro testimonies are great to regularly do in our small groups.

The obvious thing about giving any kind of testimony is that you cannot do it alone. You cannot have a testimony without a community. This links into last week's sermon, if you want a deep and rich faith, talk about it. I would love us to become a community that share each other's lives of faith, weeping with those who weep and rejoicing with those who rejoice.

You might say to me that your faith is fractured, embryonic. Or you are completely disillusioned with the church and the Christian faith. You might be in a situation where you feel that you barely believe anything at all that the church has to say.

1. **You are very welcome here.** Bring your doubts, your frustrations, your non-faith, bring it all to God and this community. There will be no condemnation here from God, or from me.
2. **You don't need lots of faith.** Jesus said: if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, “Move from here to there,” and it will move.

You might say, ok, I have some faith, and I believe some of it, but you just can't bring yourself to believe **everything** about Christianity. You might find the words and actions of God in the Old

Testament quite troubling. Or you might find St Paul too harsh sometimes. I would say to you don't worry about those things right now but focus on what you **do** believe.

You like the bit where the bible says that above **all things** God is love? Great, hold on to that as tight as you can. You like the bit where bible says that God removes our sin, as far as the east is from the west. Cling on to that. Because it means that you can be set free from the chains of the past and can live in freedom because of what God has done.

You like the way that Jesus deals with people; the grace he shows, how he heals, restores and values the marginalised? Let that be a foundation in your life.

If in this moment you feel you can't quite believe **everything** in the bible, make sure you really believe the bits that resonate with you right now. **But** I'm afraid you cannot do that with Christian practices.

You can't say, loving my enemies isn't really resonating with me right now, so, it's payback time. And you can't say "I've got too much going on to care about the marginalised." That's not how Christianity works. When it comes to doing Christian practices, it's all or nothing, I'm afraid. But when you go all in with following Jesus in a loving church community, my experience is that all the important beliefs bubble up to the surface.

I'm going to close with this very short story, and I'm going to take you back to Croydon. I was about 19/20 and on the leadership team of the youth group, and that meant every so often I would have to give a talk.

One week there were three new girls who came, and, but were new to church and were proper Croydon, if you know what I mean, and it was my turn to talk that week. We play games in a large hall and then go upstairs to another room for the talk. We all went upstairs to this room, and I remember it being dark, these 3 new girls sat on a table at the back so I could see them above everyone else. They all seemed to be chewing gum and looked really disinterested. But I gave the talk, and I have no recollection of what I said. We all finished up and went home. Cut to next week and these three girls came again. We were all in the hall and it was time to go upstairs for the talk, so I went over to them to invite them upstairs, I said, we are going to go upstairs now, They said something I have never forgotten; they said are you going to tell us God loves us again? Yes, we are, come! I probably gave a terrible talk, but when I told them of my firm belief that God loves them, it resonated with them.

I think our belief is both the most powerful and fragile thing we have. We're capable of doing amazing things, and also deep down we are all brittle. Like fire, belief can be a roaring bonfire or a single candle that one blow could extinguish.

That is why belief isn't a solo endeavour; it's a communal effort. We need to belong to believe. I can't fully believe without you believing in me, and you can't fully believe without people journeying alongside you, all waiting on and talking about a slow, loving compassionate God.

So, let's keep reminding each other that this slow God loves us. Then each week we can say to each other 'Are you going to tell us God loves us again?' Yes, we are.

Amen.