

74) Revelation

Acts 17:16-34

Sunday 1st March 2020

Normal Welcome

WAYNE STORY

Young people when you go to university you'll meet a lot of interesting people. I want to talk to you about one person who I will never forget. His name was Wayne.

Wayne wasn't a student, he was a local musician who was hired in to play woodwind instruments for one of the students musicals that was put on up in Durham. And he quickly made friends with a lot of us in the music circle. He lived in Newcastle, was in his late 20s and, as I got to know him, I found out he was an only child of wealthy parents, worked as a music teacher at a private school in Newcastle, and seemed sort of in a disillusioned place in life, where he'd lost touch with a lot of people his own age, was living at home in a large house, couldn't drive because he had epilepsy, and so increasingly found the music student scene in Durham somewhere he could network, enjoy music and spend time with people nearer his own age.

And he sort of became part of the community - I got to know him well, he took me out for meals occasionally when we a spare evening - and free food when you're a student is amazing. And a few times over weekends where there were shows he stayed at our house (we had a spare room because one of our housemates rented it out and then lived permanently with his girlfriend).

And he played in a number of musicals for us, and then towards the end of my second year, he said to me, "our school are putting on a show at the end of this term, I need a pianist - if I give you £60 a night would you be up for it." To which I said, "yes of course!" And I knew it's the sort of thing that private schools do, I remember my music teacher once hired in half an orchestra for a concert - and of course the younger the players look the less obvious it is.

And I knew he'd asked a few other folks as well, and we were looking forward to doing this. And as the show got closer, we were waiting for the music, but he was having real problems with the publishers who, it seemed were having real trouble getting the scores to him. And this carried on over a few weeks, until one night, when we were one week away from apparently having to do this show, I got a call at 10pm in the evening - me and my housemates, are just watching a film, with Wayne, because he was staying over that night - and it's one of the other music students on the end of the line...

"Chris, we've been talking, and this whole musical thing - it doesn't exist. Wayne is not who he says he is."

And I do the whole, "Ooh, sorry you're cracking up a bit, let me go into my bedroom."

And we chat on the phone for a bit, and I go and meet my friend and a couple of others who have been close to this thing.

And it turns out,
Wayne isn't a music teacher,
Doesn't work for a school.
He wasn't wealthy
He had hired 33 Durham musicians for an imaginary musical, some of who had turned down other work.

He had made friends by finding common ground and fabricating his own experience. One of my friends said, "oh, he was more crazy about cars than I was;" He never spoke to me about cars.

He paid for the meals he had gone on with me because he had stolen my cash card and taken hundreds of pounds of cash out.

He'd manipulated relationships, if someone had spoken badly of him, he would spread little rumours about them.

And he was a lonely sociopath - clever enough to befriend many people and gain trust. But not clever enough to realise that if you hire a bunch of people for a musical that doesn't exist, you're gonna get caught out.

And I remember getting back to my house about half midnight, getting into bed, "I'm sleeping in the same house as a sociopath. Is a psychopath? Am I safe?"

Now why am I telling you this story?

MY CAPACITY TO BE DECEIVED

Because that incident precipitated for me probably the biggest crisis of faith in my life.

Not because of, "How could bad things happen," or "Why does evil exist?"

But it triggered this much more foundational angst over how I could know what was true.

In dramatic fashion, Wayne triggered in me a very deep realisation of my capacity to be deceived.

I known him for five months - and he was a fraud.

How could I know that those who had told me about Jesus, were telling me the truth?
How could I trust that the Bible was telling me the truth?
How could I tell that this whole thing called Christianity that had been my rock growing up wasn't something else that had simply sucked me in?

And I took the best part of a year trying to untangle that question.

"How we know what we know?"

"How do we know what is true?"

"How do we know what we don't know?"

"How do we know quite how ignorant or enlightened we are?"

And the way that became unravelled for me involved the questions we're going to look at tonight.

And, I put it to you, you could listen to that story and say, "Well, I'm ok because I'm just not a gullible as Chris."

Actually, I think we live in a very gullible world where we don't realise how much we are being lied to.

QUAKER POSTER

A year a bit after the Wayne experience, I moved to Lewes. And opposite my house was a Quaker house. And it had this poster, which I passed a hundred times:

"Be open to new light, from wherever it comes."

And you compare that to the Bible's testimony: 2 Corinthians 11:14:

“Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light.”

That, for me, is much more believable.

So how do we know what is true? And good? And will lead to flourishing?

SERIES INTRO

We're starting a new series tonight about what God has done for us, not only in the sense of the historical story of how God has worked in history, through Jesus and the cross, but also how the work of Jesus Christ on the cross is applied to us today - is applied to Christians today, or, is applied to non-Christians to bring them into a living relationship with God.

SERMON STRUCTURE

And tonight, I'm starting with Revelation - the idea that God reveals himself to us, and how God has done that. I'm using Acts 17 as a structure to hang this on, but we are going to be dotting around a lot of Scripture to create a full picture.

And we're first going to look at:

1) GOD'S REVELATION OF HIMSELF IN CREATION

The passage starts by telling us about two groups of philosophers:

The Epicureans and Stoics.

Obsessed with the question of: how do we know what we know?

Epicureans:

we best see what is true by embracing experience and adjusting our passions to fit reality. It's our passions that need adjusting.

Stoics:

We best see what is true by withdrawing from our emotions and thinking more rationally and bravely weathering storms that come our way.

And they would spend all day arguing about this.

But both groups had profound confidence in the potential of the mind to discover human wisdom and human flourishing all on our own. Simply by using our natural senses and looking at the natural world.

It's something that's called “Natural Theology”: What might it be possible to work out from the world, given the world as it is?

If we look around at the stars,
if we look at the planet we're on,
if we look at animals and nature,
if we look at ourselves,
if we look at the design of the world that we're in.
if we look at the nature of humanity - our “maleness” and our “femaleness”
if we look at social anthropology - what is true about human society down the ages.
If we look at those human cravings which set us apart from animals
If we look at our need for identity, purpose, dignity, and so forth.

What can we know?

PS 16/ROMANS 1 - WE KNOW A LOT!

The Bible's testimony is actually that we **ought to** (emphasis on ought) to be able to discern an awful lot about the foundational nature of reality.

Psalms 19 says: The heavens declare the Glory of God. Day after Day they pour forth speech.

Romans 1 says this:

For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made.

In other words, a whole heap about who God is, and what our response therefore is to God, and the overflow of our lives - could be rationally and clearly deduced from nature.

If we did natural theology alone, it ought to be obvious - simply from the nature of things that:

- God exists.
- God is good.
- God is powerful.
- God is an artist.
- God is a designer.
- That we should rightfully respond to God with worship
- That we should respond with respect to God's creation.
- That we should look after the planet.
- That we are part of God's creation.
- That humanity bears the image of this God (the Athenians knew that - see v28)
- That human beings are equal to one another in value and dignity.
- That we should care about justice for all.
- That we should be good and fair stewards of what we have
- That our lives belong to God
- That our bodies are temples.
- That sex is sacred.
- That sex is designed for man and woman in exclusive relationship
- That murder is wrong
- That we are made to live in community
- That we should treat each other well.

The Scriptures tell us that "natural theology" actually tells us a great deal about ourselves, and God, and the world we live in, and our right response to God and who he is.

ATHENIANS

And that's why, when Paul reaches Athens, he finds a group of people who have never heard about Jesus, he finds these philosophes and he's able to tell them that they have some things right:

- They believe in God (v23)
- They believe it's right to bring worship to this God.
- They believe that God is in relationship with humanity - Paul can actually quote one of their own poets ("In him we live, move and have our being.")

GOOD NEWS?

"Natural Theology" - looking at the world and seeing it as it is - actually should tell us an awful lot.

Which you would have thought was good news, Romans 1 verse 20 ends with a kick:

For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, **so that people are without excuse.**

In other words - if God had not spoken at all except through his creation, except through what has been made - we can still discern so much about God, and human behaviour, that it is entirely right for the verdict to come down on humanity - ***you ought to know better.***

You ought to know better.

Every human on the planet knows something about what it means to be human - and their responsibility towards God - and yet we turn away from it.

No-one, at the end of time, will be able to say, "I would have acted differently had I had more information."

No-one will be able to say, "God hasn't done enough."

GENERAL REVELATION - ENOUGH TO CONDEMN, NOT ENOUGH TO SAVE

This sort of Revelation - the revelation that all of humanity has access to through creation - is called General Revelation. And the Bible says, General Revelation is enough to tell you what God is like, how the world is made, and how we ought to respond to God, the world and one another.

And you ought to know better.

BUT IT DOESN'T FEEL THAT WAY?

Question - how do we account for the fact that this may not "feel" true?

- Certainly atheists would disagree that this feels true.
- Much of our culture at the moment would call themselves 'agnostic' - would certainly disagree with this idea that the idea of God is obvious.
- Some of you may disagree with some of the ethical things I've said being obvious, whether or not you're Christians.

So how does the Christian worldview account for saying one thing, but our 'feeling' that it's not true?

WE ARE ALL ADDICTS

And the response of Scripture is this:

that the act of ignoring what you know to be true dulls your ability to see truth.
Resulting in a downward spiral as you become increasingly blind to reality.

Not only are there many forces in the world that seek to deceive us, we deceive ourselves.

We might this most dramatically in the lives of those with a visible addiction, whether it's drugs or gambling.

Those of you who came a few months back to hear the testimony of Justin Rees-Larcombe heard a story of a man who, with his gambling, not only broke laws, and lied and stole and cheated, but someone whose heart became increasingly dull to the effects of what was going on.

Someone increasingly detached from reality.

Someone whose heart's imagination was blinded by this huge 'other thing' that had become more important and dominated his life.

What's is the Bible's answer to the question - why aren't things obvious from creation if they should be? Is this: that we are all addicts, we all have heart-addictions. Things that essentially have become so large in our soul's worth, that we cease to be able to see reality properly.

And Romans 1 carries on affirming this:

21 For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.

God has revealed himself clearly, through Creation. We ought to be able to see this. But we can't, because humanity's hearts, not only are naturally disobedient to God, Naturally rebellious towards God,

But because of that, the eyes of our heart become dulled, and ill-equipped, and deluded to even be able to find our ways back. To see the truth of reality for what it is.

We become detached from reality.

It's what theologians called the 'noetic' effects of sin. Our hearts becoming darkened by our heart-addictions.

And another name for heart-addictions is "idols"

ATHENIANS

And so Paul found, when he went to Athens, that on one hand the culture was equipped to know something of God, but at the same time (verse 16) the city was full of "idols". A whole bunch of things, whether it be gods of fertility, or wealth, or sex, or nature, or so forth, had grown to be larger in their imagination than the God of the universe.

ARGUMENT - "JESUS DIDN'T SAY MUCH ABOUT..."

And one practical overflow of the idea of general revelation is that we should be very leery of arguments that rank the important ethical issues according to how much they are explicitly talked about in Scripture.

I once read an American article that said something like this, "Christians in America make a lot about the issue of abortion. Well, Jesus lived in a time where children who were born with deformities or disabilities, or simply weren't wanted were thrown in a ditch or a

river. And yet we don't see him speaking out against it. So maybe we should stop speaking out against abortion."

Question: did Jesus not talk much about killing babies because he thought killing babies was ok?

No - he didn't talk about it because it's obvious.
Because it should be obvious,

SAME ARGUMENT USED RE SEXUALITY

And people have used the same argument to me and in articles about sexuality.
"Bible doesn't doesn't mention sexuality much, so can't be that important."

The Bible is not primarily an ethics book listing those things that ought to be obvious from nature in density of much it matters to God.

The Bible isn't principally about affirming general revelation - although it does affirm general revelation.

The Bible is much more concerned with another type of Revelation, what's called Special Revelation.

General Revelation tell us enough to condemn us.
Special Revelation tells us how we can be saved from condemnation.

And that moves us on to:

2) JESUS' REVELATION OF GOD IN THE FLESH

Hebrews 1:

1 In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, 2 but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. 3 The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word.

God has revealed himself in Creation.

But God has also revealed himself in words. And those who carried the words of God throughout history are called prophets.

And the testimony of these prophets all point towards God's final and definite revealing of himself in the person of Jesus.

You can't get a clearer Revelation of God than Jesus Christ because Jesus Christ is God:

"He is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being."

To which, a reasonable question to Jesus, or to a Christian - would be - prove it!

And, if you're a Christian tonight, I want to counsel you, whenever anyone asks you to prove Christianity, or the deity of Jesus, or God's existence, don't launch in without asking first the question: well what sort of proof would satisfy you?

John 8

Because, we read some people asked Jesus the very same question:

Here's John Chapter 8:

12 When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

Jesus says, "I am the light of the world."

Question: how do you prove that light is light.

Can anyone forge for me an argument to say that there is light in this room?
Prove it's existence?

Open your eyes - and if you can't see it, then there's not much more I can do.
I can tell you till you're blue in the face, but unless you have eyes to see, no-one can
'prove' the existence of light before you.

Jesus is saying, "Who I am is a first principle. You can't build a case for proving light."

And we read further on, and we read that they get to another 'stalemate' in logic.

13 The Pharisees challenged him, "Here you are, appearing as your own witness; your testimony is not valid."

14 Jesus answered, "Even if I testify on my own behalf, my testimony is valid, for I know where I came from and where I am going. But you have no idea where I come from or where I am going. 15 You judge by human standards; I pass judgment on no one. 16 But if I do judge, my decisions are true, because I am not alone. I stand with the Father, who sent me. 17 In your own Law it is written that the testimony of two witnesses is true. 18 I am one who testifies for myself; my other witness is the Father, who sent me."

Jesus is challenging the Pharisees: you're asking me to find someone else who is a higher authority to prove that I am God. If I am telling the truth, who could that possibly be? Your logic doesn't hang together.

GEOGRAPHY ILLUSTRATION

It's like, imagine you're sitting in your geography lesson at school. And you're looking at a picture of a funny shaped-lake.

And you turn to your friend, who's good at Geography, and say, "It's that an ox-bow lake?"

And they say, "yes it is."

And you say, "well, that's your testimony, but I need to go to a higher authority to be absolutely sure."

And so you go to your geography teacher, and you say to them, "I just want to be sure, is that an ox-bow lake."

And the teacher goes, "yes, that is indeed an ox-box lake."

And you think, "hmmm, really need to be sure, I'll go to a higher authority."

And so you look at author's name on the textbook, and you google them, and you take a trip to Cambridge university to find the world's leading geography experts, and you say to them, "I just want to be sure, is that an ox-bow lake."

And he goes, "yes, I can affirm that that is an ox-box lake. I'm so glad we had this meeting."

And you go, "but, to be sure, is there anyone of higher authority than you who I can go to?"

And he says, "there's my other geography professor friends in other universities. But there's no-one here."

And you go, "Well, that all sounds very fishy. I guess we'll never know for sure what this lake is called."

That would be silly!

And yet here's the question: if God himself comes to earth, and claims to be God, what higher authority can we refer to to verify what Jesus is saying?

Perhaps he could do a few miracles to make it convincing.

Or perhaps he could do something even more earth-shattering.

JESUS DIES

You see, God doesn't owe it to us to show us who he is.

But he does anyway:

In Creation

Through Prophets

Through coming to earth

... and, by dying a cruel death on the cross.

I read an article this week on Premier Christianity that claimed that "Jesus died because he stood up for justice"

No he didn't. He died because he revealed himself to humanity.

He revealed his true identity.

He claimed to be God.

DIES PUBLICLY - RESURRECTION

And he had to die, for so many reasons, but one of which is this:

He had to die, publicly, shamefully, and without ambiguity,

So that his resurrection and his appearance to over 500 people would be our final proof.

And that's why Paul could say to the Athenians:

29 "Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by human design and skill. 30 In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. 31 For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead."

Paul's argument ends with the resurrection of Jesus as the final proof of who he was.

But... the Resurrection of Jesus in and of itself is insufficient to change hearts. We see that in the response of the Athenians:

When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, "We want to hear you again on this subject." 33 At that, Paul left the Council. 34 Some of the people became followers of Paul and believed.

If it is true that our eyes are blind by nature,

Because we are sinful by nature,

External evidence only serves to vindicate God of his love and mercy towards us.

What also needs to happen is an internal change.

And so thirdly, having given us Jesus's death and Resurrection, God gives the Holy Spirit:

3) The Spirit's work to open blind eyes

If we're blind, need eyes opening.

1 Corinthians 2:14-16

14 The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit. 15 The person with the Spirit makes judgments about all things, but such a person is not subject to merely human judgments, 16 for,

"Who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?"

But we have the mind of Christ.

WAYNE INCIDENT - REVELATION WAS A GIFT

When I was trying to unpack the aftermath of the experience with Wayne.

It was helpful to look at arguments from nature for the existence of God.

It was helpful to look at arguments from Scripture as to the nature of Jesus.

It was helpful to look at evidence for the resurrection of Jesus.

It was helpful - but never conclusive in and of itself.

But what I realised, eventually was this, at the bottom of my soul, there was no way that I could not believe this was true.

There was simply nowhere else to look. Nothing that compared.

And that realisation didn't stop me feeling disorientated, but it did make me realise this, that of God's grace to me - the ability to understand Scripture and to trust in Jesus was gift of grace.

I wasn't a Christian because I was clever ought to be a Christian.

I was a Christian because God himself by the Holy Spirit enabled me to have this belief and trust.

And when we understand this: that we're not Christians because we're smarter than anyone else.

And neither are we Christians because we're more gullible than anyone else,
Because Revelation is a gift, not something we worked for...

HUMILITY AND A CONFIDENCE

It gives us both a humility and a confidence internally about the nature of our faith.

And that overflows to a humility and a confidence as we share our faith.

A humility because we know that what we see is not because we are better than those who don't.

And it means our evangelism is never, "Let me give you 10 reasons why I'm right and you're wrong."

But it also gives us a confidence when we share our faith and it doesn't work.

A confidence that this didn't work neither because I didn't do well enough, and nor because the truth I'm sharing isn't sufficient enough.

Paul was one of the best evangelists.

The Resurrections was the greatest proof in the world,
Yet still some sneered.

And I'm like to quickly talk to Bella about a recent time this happened to her...