

QUESTIONS FOR GOD

I got an email a few weeks ago from a company calling itself *Christian Research*. They had identified me as a church leader and wanted me to take part in a questionnaire about churches in the UK.

So I took a few moments to fill the thing in and then they had a couple of questions for me personally. And it ended with a question like this – I don't remember the exact wording.

What has changed you in your understanding of faith and what has helped you to grow in faith?

I thought about praying and reading the Bible and going to church, but they seemed fairly general and obvious answers.

Then I thought of writing something like:

Life itself.

Maturity.

Difficult times.

Circumstances.

All these would be reasonable answers for me.

But the one that stood out for me was this - **Questions**.

What has helped me grow in faith?

Asking questions.

Some people go to churches that don't like questions being asked.

I'm not talking about stuff like:

What time does your service start?

Do you have a crèche?

Or is there a toilet?

These are all 'okay' questions - even if the answer is not known....

I'm talking about questions asked of God,

questions asked about God,

questions about faith,

questions about the teaching or the beliefs of that particular church..

It seems like in some churches the job of the congregation is to keep their mouths shut and keep any doubts to themselves.

So some people go to churches like that - that don't like questions being asked.

For some churches asking questions is like a sign of a weak faith.

"Ah! a question....so you are "struggling" with something?"

In some churches, people who ask too many questions are asked to leave.

Questions are a bad sign.

I think I would have to say that the opposite is true.
The people who scare me in life are not the ones who ask questions – they are the ones who never seem to *have* a question.

Asking questions of God helps us to come to a better understanding of God.

Although God is mystery and never be fully known, Christians believe that God wants to enter into relationship with us.
And while our thoughts or beliefs about God will never be perfect (or total) there are some views we have that are closer to the truth than others, and there are some views of God which are downright unhelpful.

A couple of weeks ago we heard about the prophet Nathan standing up to King David and daring to take him on and accuse him of wrongdoing over his relationship with Bathseba.

I'm not going to talk about that again today.
But I was thinking about something I said at the beginning of that sermon.

How scary must that have been for Nathan – to question the king to his face?

And I got to thinking -
How scary would it be for **us** to question God – to question what we have been told about God?

Let's just freeze that sentence right there – ***to question what we have been told about God.***

Because this is key.

Most of the stuff we think about God has come to us from others – come to us from the church and we have grown up believing it.
When we question things we have been told we are not necessarily questioning God - we are questioning the theory or description that others have attached to God.

In Jesus' time there was a religious system built up to help people worship God, obey God ,and live their lives in a good way.
Much of the system was helpful and Jesus himself was part of it being a worshipping Jew of his time.

But there were occasions when Jesus would point out that something in their teaching about God wasn't quite right.

It wasn't that Jesus was questioning God – he was questioning the interpretation of God that others had proclaimed.

It's by asking questions that we learn more.

It's by asking questions that we advance in humanity, technology, science and medicine.

It's by asking questions that we advance in theology.

And it was by asking questions in his parables that Jesus encouraged people to think for themselves – to use their brains, their insight, their imaginations – all God-given - to work out what really matters.

As we grow up, our view of life and the world changes.

Thank goodness.

We have a better understanding of life now than when we were children.

Now I know it can be argued that there are certain aspects of childhood that we lose at our peril – like our sense of wonder or our imaginations, but on the whole we should arrive at a better understanding of life when we grow up and mature.

The same should be true of our relationship with God.

That needs to grow change and develop.

In my own life, questions have helped me to better understand Gods nature and Gods love.

And sometimes the outcome is to change my thoughts about God – always for the better.

Let me give an example.

We need to travel to Peru to a town there called Arequipa. It's in the south of that country. And in that town is a museum which houses a dead body - the best preserved mummy ever discovered.

It's that of a 12-15 year old girl they have named Juanita who was sacrificed to the mountain gods about 500 years ago.

She was clubbed to death on the top of Mount Ampato, and because of the freezing temperatures her body has been preserved remarkably. Scientists were even able to discover what she had eaten just before her death!

These guys, archaeologists and historians have now pieced together the story.

There was a famine and the Incas killed this wee girl to placate the mountain gods in the hope that the gods would change the weather in their favour.

And part of the story of Inca customs and human sacrifice is that Juanita would have lived her whole life knowing that that was her eventual destiny. She was one of the chosen ones, set apart and honoured, worshipped even, by her community – living in a fine house with the best of food and clothes but knowing that one day her life would be taken from her.

She would serve her people by being the unblemished innocent one whose sacrificial death would appease the angry god of the mountain and thereby save her town.

Lots of folk, as they walk through the museum, can be heard commenting on how disturbing it is that human beings could believe such things and act in such ways.

Imagine believing in a mountain god who demands that innocent victims are killed before help or aid will be offered.
Imagine believing that....

And yet, there's a theme that runs through religions the world over.
And Christianity itself has its own version of the same thing.

There's the teaching that many of us have been exposed to that Jesus is the sacrifice who had to die instead of us in order for God to forgive us, because God apparently isn't willing to forgive us for our sins unless someone somewhere pays the price in blood.
And many of us have bought into that idea.
Because we were told it.
And some of us still believe it.
And some of us still preach it.
But can it be true?

Can it be true that God demands the death of an innocent victim?
Can it be true that God demands that someone somewhere has to suffer a cruel and barbaric and unjust death before God is willing to love and accept us?
What kind of God is that?

What if God is not like that?
What if God just loves and is free to forgive without having to punish us (or someone else) in our place?
What if God is like the father in the parable who ran to embrace his son and didn't have to beat him (or anyone else) before doing so?
What if God isn't the mountain god who needs appeasing but by his nature wants to love, to create, to renew, to restore?
What if God is willing to forgive us beyond our deserving and to give us more than we are owed?
What if the whole point of the cross is to show how much we are loved?
What if the cross is there to show us that God's love has no limits and can never be destroyed?

What if God is actually like Jesus?

As Christians this is what we must believe.

So we take our questions and misgiving and like Nathan we bring them to God.

Is it true God that you are like the Inca mountain gods?
Is it true that you are basically angry with us all the time?
Is it true that you won't forgive unless someone is sacrificed?
Is it true that you will condemn people to endless torment in hell?

We have heard this, and it seems like you are more monster than kind and that your anger is much greater than your love.

And God says to us – it is true that the picture you paint is of a cruel god. And even followers of Jesus have sometimes described me like this. But this is not who I am – not now - not ever.

Instead I am with you and for you and my love shall never end. This is why Jesus came into the world to show you better what I am like. This is why Jesus said that I desire mercy and not sacrifice. (Matthew 9:13)

Keep looking at Jesus. Pay attention to him. His love and compassion show truly what I am like.

This is what God says.

Daring to confront God with our questions we are rewarded with an answer. And the answer is helpful and reassuring and comforting. And the answer takes away our fears and lets us see more clearly.

I still sometimes hear the story of the angry, vengeful god in churches and many of the hymns and songs we sing have got overtones on this theme, but I don't believe it.

That old picture is faulty, it is a terrible representation of God, a twisted monster god – not a loving Creator – and a distortion of the message of Christ.

This is not the real god, the true god - the God we meet in Jesus – the God who speaks to us through Jesus.

I know that now - but first I had to be prepared to ask the questions.

God doesn't change – but our understanding of God changes as we come to know more about God.

And one way we come to know more about God is by asking questions of what we have been told.

Often what we have been told is good and right and true – but sometimes we have been told things that are unworthy of God.

We don't need to be afraid – God welcomes our questions.

Jesus always encourages us to think for ourselves, and look out for what God has to say to us.

An Australian minister called Nathan Nettleton said this.

“God welcomes and even longs for our questions, our challenges, our rebellion against the lies we have so often been told about God, for only with such courageous scrutiny can God hope to emerge from under the layers of false images we have projected onto him.”

(Sermon: Nathan Nettleton: Confronting the Almighty)

Nettleton is suggesting that
not only **can** we ask questions of God,
not only **should** we ask questions of God,
but that God is **desperate** for us to do just that so that we can see God more
clearly and accurately and get rid of the unhelpful pictures we may have
received.

The gospel is good news for us.
God is good news for us.
God's way is the way of love and inclusion.

And anything we meet in our faith which is not good news
or is less than loving
or implies rejection of others
needs to be questioned.

2 Samuel 11:26-12:7a
Matthew 5:38-47

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* The idea for this sermon and the description of the museum in Arequipa, Peru,
is based on Nathan Nettleton's sermon "Confronting the Almighty" on his
Laughing Bird website)