

1 John 1:1-4

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[0 : 00] One of the great things that I've experienced about Ealing already, even just being here a week, is that I've noticed in my brief time that it's made up of so many different people from so many different parts of the world.

And all of these individuals, many of whom are your friends and your family, maybe just your neighbours, they make up lots of different views about who God is, if there is a God, and what he's like.

Whether Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, whether spiritual, we've all got friends like that, whether atheist or just apathetic. We all have a view of God, but the question is, how do you know who's right?

With all of these different views, how do you know who's right? As Christians, what makes us so certain that while other views claim to be right, that it's only Christianity that is right when it comes to the truth about who God is?

So the question we're going to be engaging with from this text in 1 John is why the incarnation means that only Christianity can be true. By incarnation, what we mean is the idea that God, the God of the universe, became flesh.

[1 : 20] That God became man in the person of Jesus, which is what John is getting at in our text when he says, verse 2, that the life was made manifest in a way that was able to be seen, touched, heard.

Now this is an idea we're going to come back to again and again. Now even as I say, only Christianity can be true. There's a weird atmosphere, isn't there?

I sense a few feathers being ruffled because engaging with the issue of other religions is always tricky. We feel like we're stepping on other people's toes and we don't want to make people feel uncomfortable or unnecessarily cause offence.

Do you know what we do in response to not wanting to unnecessarily cause offence? I think it's actually far worse. What we do is we flatten out all religion.

We flatten out all spirituality. And pretend that there isn't any differences between any of them. We make Allah the same as Brahman. We make Nirvana the same as heaven.

[2 : 25] And we make all practices of different religions essentially the same. You must have heard this. Whether it's in coffee shops or around. People who say, well, essentially they're all the same.

It's just different religions emphasize different aspects of God. And that brings us to our first heading. The first thing we're going to look at. Aren't all religions essentially the same?

Generally people collapse these different views of God into saying that no one really knows. So we're all right. There's a well-known parable about six blind men and an elephant that illustrates this really well.

Those unfamiliar with the story, here it goes. The six blind men, they encounter an elephant. Although in the story no one really knows how they know it's an elephant.

But the first blind man, he touches the trunk of the elephant and says, do you know what, an elephant is like a palm tree. Another blind man touches its big side and says, well, an elephant's like a rough wall.

[3 : 35] Another feels its tail and another one feels, you know, says it's like rope. And a tusk says, well, it's more like a sphere. Each comes in contact with a different part of the elephant.

And it's convinced that their own explanation is correct. That all the others are wrong. The thing is, none of them realize that they're all experiencing just one part of the same elephant.

And that none of the explanations are really complete. And in the same way, it's argued that different religions are just experiencing different parts of one God.

But fail to realize that each is just part of the complete truth. Do you think that? Let's sit here this morning. Do you think that?

That all religions are just different aspects of one God? Well, maybe you don't, but maybe people around you do. But the problem with that interpretation of this parable offers, it's best phrased with a question.

[4 : 37] How does the interpreter know that every religion is just part of the overall idea of God? How does the one telling the story know that it's an elephant?

In order to know this, one would have to be able to see God, or in the story, see the elephant in all his fullness, to understand how each of the religions reflect just part of the complete picture.

You see, people who claim that they can dismiss the distinctive claims of Christianity by saying they're all the same, that's a really arrogant claim.

It claims to sit above God, and everyone else, and be able to be the one who can adjudicate who's right and who's wrong.

But we know that that's not right, is it? Who has seen everything, and who has seen God himself, in order to say who's right and who's wrong? The answer is no one.

[5 : 40] The answer is no one. No one has the right to say that all religions are the same, because it dismisses the blatant contradictions between different religions, but also puts the one who's making that claim in a position they could never occupy, above everything.

So if we're not all right, how do we know which view of God is? And that brings us to our second section. We can't say that all religions are the same, so how do we know who's right?

If all religions are not the same, how can we know who's right? It doesn't feel, often, in the marketplace of different religions, we're just fumbling around in the dark, trying to make the best of a bad situation.

This bit seems a bit right, and this bit seems a bit right. Because we're kind of trapped in this world, and we can't get outside the world to find out who's out there.

We're trapped by the laws of physics and chemistry and biology and all the other constraints on mankind. We can't get outside of ourselves to see in. In order to grasp our situation, as we fumble around to make different claims about God, I'm going to use another illustration, so park your elephant and your six blind men over here, and come with me, and I want you to imagine for a moment, that sat in this room, everything goes black.

[7 : 08] just momentarily, but when the light returns, you find that you've got no memory of how you got into this room, and no memory of what's outside.

And as you look around the room, you see that the windows are all blocked, and the doors are locked. There's no way in, and there's no way out. The question is, how would you know if there was anything or anyone outside the room?

How would you know? You have no memory or knowledge of anything outside the room. So we'd do our best with what we could from inside the room to figure it out. We'd have those that claim there is nothing outside the room.

We'd have those who imagine fantastical things outside the room. You'd have the poets among us start writing great odes about the arrangement of the chairs and the green blinds at the back.

You'd have the geography lovers measuring the distance of the room and undulations in this wooden floor. You'd have the physicists among us dropping chairs to make sure that gravity was here.

[8 : 18] You'd have the philosophers contemplating what was outside the room and the sociologists among us just monitoring the groupings of how we're arranged. But ultimately, left to our own devices, we could explore this locked room but we could never know if there was anyone or anything outside the room.

That's like us in this world, isn't it? We can explore this world, we can contemplate this world, but we could never know if there was anyone outside this world.

But it doesn't stop us, does it? You have people saying that science has got rid of God, but how could it when it can't test what's outside the world and it can't test what it can't comprehend?

And you have all sorts of religions and spiritualities claiming they have the truth about God or how we should live, but how can they when they're locked in the room, when they're trapped in this world?

We cannot know unless, unless someone came from outside the room and came into the room.

[9 : 30] And that's what our passage today is. It's taken us a while to get there, but our passage today tells us that someone from outside the room, outside of this world, stepped in.

In a way that could be seen, could be heard, could be touched. To tell us about the outside, that's exactly what the incarnation is about.

The incarnation, the coming of Jesus, means that we're not blindly groping around in the dark trying to figure out some conception of God, but God has come to us to make himself known.

He has made himself manifest. Listen to how John 1 puts it in verse 18. No one has ever seen God. The only God who is at the Father's side, He has made him known. Or, to use the Adam Wilson paraphrase, no one has ever been outside the room or been face to face with God to know what He's like.

[10 : 41] But, the one and only Son of God who is God, has made himself known to us. He has come into the room so that we are without question of what God is like.

2,000 years ago, in history, in a way that could be seen, heard, touched, God came into the world. The world that He had made in order to reveal Himself to those He had made. Knowing we could never find Him fumbling around in the room, He came to us.

Do you know what? The incarnation is God's personal introduction to the world He's made. The great writer, C.S. Lewis, he gave this great illustration, thinking of it like Hamlet stumbling around inside one of Shakespeare's plays, trying to find Shakespeare.

But how could Hamlet ever know Shakespeare, although the world that he was in would have the strokes of Shakespeare's pen surrounding him? He could never come face to face with Shakespeare unless Shakespeare wrote himself into the play.

[11 : 57] And that's what the incarnation is. The God whose fingerprints are on every aspect of this world wrote Himself into the script of history that we might know what He's like.

In each of the four Gospels, the Bible, in the Bible, we're given eyewitness accounts to the life of Jesus. Accounts of when God stepped into the room when God wrote Himself into history. history. And if you're familiar at all with the Gospels, then you'll know that John, who wrote the passage that we read earlier, and the rest of his followers, they were with Him at every turn. You know, the followers of Jesus, they ate with Him, they prayed with Him, they walked down dirt roads with Him in the hot sunshine. They saw Him do the miraculous, miraculous, and they saw Him do the very ordinary.

The followers of Jesus were witness to His life, His death, and even His resurrection. They were there every step of the way, watching, hearing, touching.

[13 : 04] This man, who was also God, and they wrote it all down. They wrote it all down for people like you and me to know the truth about what God is like.

They left no ambiguity. Thousands and thousands witnessed, marveled at His miracles as He healed the sick and cared for the weak.

They were astonished at the teaching about the rebellion of mankind, but the grace and forgiveness that God gives to all those who return to Him. A teaching which they'd never heard the likeness of before.

They believed and followed Him, having seen Him physically raised from the dead, proving all of His claims about everlasting life and life outside the room were true.

Do you know what? God coming into His creation in the person of Jesus means that He has the final word on what God is like. Do you know what?

[14 : 11] Every other religion that challenges Jesus is false. But the good news is that Jesus, in Him, when we come face to face with God, we come face to face with a God that no human imagination could ever have come up with.

A God who is infinitely powerful yet cares for the people He's made. A God holy and just and yet makes a way for sinful people who deserve justice to be forgiven.

a God that is good. All religions that imagine, sorry, all other religions imagine a God that is trivial in comparison to the God of the Bible.

To the beauty of the true God revealed in Jesus. And perhaps what's most remarkable is that He came so that people like you and me could know this great God personally.

And that brings us to our closing point. So why does all this matter? You know, if God has personally introduced Himself so there is no ambiguity anymore about what God is like, that expels all false religion, man-made religion just imagining what God is like, what are we to do?

[15 : 40] we start by asking the question why the incarnation means that only Christianity is true but I hope you can see that the answer is simple. That if Jesus really is who He says He is, if God has really come into His creation in order to make it beyond doubt about who He is and what He's like, then it means any other view can't be true.

But more than that, look at those three of our passage. That which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you.

Why? This is the so what? This is the wake up and listen point. Why have we gone and done all of this work? Why have we said, you know, this is who Jesus is?

Why has He gone to great pains to write this letter? So why has the whole Bible been recorded?

Well, this message about God incarnate is so that you too may have fellowship with us and indeed our fellowship is with, here we go, with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ.

So what John wants us, as well as his original readers, to know that God in the flesh has come so that we can know God. Now, there's a whole host of things we need to talk about because Jesus makes a lot of claims about who we are in His world and how we've rebelled against Him and the consequences for that.

[17 : 19] But the coming of God in the person of Jesus is good news. And we're going to unpack that more because Him coming is the way that it makes it possible for us to have fellowship with Him, to know God, to be friends with God.

And we're going to think about the life, death and resurrection of Jesus in a lot more detail next time. So for now, if you're a Christian, maybe new to Christianity, and you've never read these eyewitness accounts of Jesus, I really want to encourage you to do so.

We've got some copies of John's Gospel at the back. In those pages, you will come face to face with the God who made you. And for those of you who are not Christians, but are kind of interested in thinking about it, and maybe this talk has sparks for questions for you, I really want to encourage you to come and ask them.

I remember that moment when I had lots of questions about who Jesus was, and why he came.

And if I hadn't asked them, I wouldn't be stood here. But I also want to encourage you to come next time.

We're going to be thinking about the significance, why he had to come bodily and physically, and not just spiritually and abstractly. And I want to assure you, there's even better news than that.

[18 : 44] Let me just pray.