

**“BELIEF – BRING IT TO LIFE!”**

*James 2:14-26*

For a couple of years now Guinness have been running an advertising campaign with the strap line “*Bring it to life!*” Last week I was having a lift down to Selly Oak railway station with a couple of other ministers and there by the station was huge hoarding with a Guinness advert and, instead of the word “Guinness” on the bottle it had the word “Belief” (another theme in its recent campaigns). I didn’t get all the details, but as we went past, I said to my two colleagues, “What a great title for a sermon – ‘*Belief: bring it to life!*’ ” And here it is, because it’s not simply a great title for a sermon, it’s a great way to sum up what we’re about as followers of Jesus.

Belief is the very foundation of our Christianity. The whole thing is based on what we believe about God, about ourselves, about the world, about Jesus Christ. Many churches will regularly use a creed, a statement of what they believe about God, saying or singing it as part of the service. We tend not to do that in our tradition but to express our beliefs in the words of our songs and prayers. Many denominations will have a declaration of faith – the Church of England has, for example, The Thirty-Nine Articles; others have catechisms; there are various Baptist and Reformed Confessions of Faith and Statements of Belief. Most of us, I’m sure, would express our Christianity in terms of what we believe.

Unfortunately, that expression of belief, those words of faith often remain just that – words. We say that we know what we believe, but it doesn’t necessarily make much difference to the way in which we live our lives. There’s a big gap between what we say and what we do. True Christian discipleship, really following Jesus, means that we bring our faith and our daily living together. Discipleship is bringing our belief to life. If it’s not, then our belief is a mere academic exercise, effectively sterile and useless. That’s basically what James is saying in the words we read from his letter a few moments ago: there’s no point having a belief unless you allow it to affect your actions. If you don’t do that, no-one’s really going to take your belief seriously anyway. We need to live out what we say we believe. And what we’re going to do this morning is look at four key aspects of what we believe and think about how we bring those beliefs to life. Let’s begin at the beginning.

## **1. CREATION**

We believe that God created this world. Quite how he did it will no doubt be a continuing source of debate until the end of time, but we believe that there is a God, that he somehow made this world and that he continues to sustain it. And as part of that belief, we recognise that human beings were created as the apex of creation and called by God to manage, to steward this amazing world.

Reading through the account of The Creation in *Genesis*, we discover that, having called this world into being, God pronounced it to be very good. He gave humankind the run of creation to sustain them and for them to enjoy. It was an amazing place, with all that was needed for food and survival freely given to men and women. We know, too, that due to the wrong choices, the disobedience and rebellion of humanity, the world was spoiled and is not now as God originally intended it to be. But it is clearly still a place we can enjoy and a place we should look after as God called us to do.

And if we believe all that, it should affect the way we live our lives. We live in a world which is still amazing – full of wonder and awe. Whether we are contemplating the vastness of space, the splendour of the landscape, the beauty and variety of plants and animals, or the intricacy of the human body, the delicacy of the smallest insects, the sheer complexity of the microscopic world which we can experience only through the latest advances in technology, this is a magnificent creation and we should enjoy it. God has created us with the senses of sight, hearing, taste, touch and smell so that we can get the very best out of what he has made. He has given us intelligence and curiosity to explore every aspect of this world. We live out our belief in that by making the best possible use of all that he has provided, by enjoying this world. And, as we enjoy it, we recognise that it has come from God and give him our grateful thanks for

it. That thanksgiving is part of our worship of God. And living in this world, enjoying it, appreciating it, thanking God for it, that is what Jesus called “*living life to the full*” (*John 10:10*).

But the way in which we enjoy God’s creation is to be done within that calling to be good stewards. It does not mean that we appropriate it all for our own ends, that we abuse creation solely for our own benefit. We need to consider every aspect of it and ensure that what we do does not ruin creation for others or further destroy what God has created and called good. Our care of creation, our respect for the environment, our husbanding of its resources in a way that is sensitive and sustainable – all of that should be a means of our expressing a belief that God created this world, pronounced it good and called us to look after it.

## **2. CRUCIFIXION**

We believe, too, that Jesus came into this world to help us restore our relationship with God and to deal with the sin which had affected our lives and spoiled God’s good creation. And we believe that he accomplished that by his death on the cross. In terms of sacrifice or atonement, Jesus’ death on the cross meant that humanity could once again approach God as a friend and could know his forgiveness and freedom. It’s an aspect of Christian belief that is unique amongst the major religions of the world and the one which we mention most often in our songs and prayers. Jesus died for our sins. Jesus was nailed to the cross on Golgotha so that we could know freedom from the tyranny and the consequences of sin.

So bringing that belief to life means that we live in freedom. Paul writes about that to the Christians in Rome in *Romans 8:1,2*. We have been set free, so we should live in such a way as to express that freedom, living as forgiven people. And that freedom from sin is really in three parts.

**Freedom from the guilt of past sin.** The death of Jesus brings us the possibility of forgiveness. As we recognise before God that we have done wrong, we can experience his forgiveness. Those things which bring with them a sense of guilt or regret have been dealt with so the guilt which can hang over us long afterwards can be taken away. We do not have to torture ourselves with the thoughts of past sin. It’s over. It’s dealt with. You do not have to keep worrying about it. That in itself can enable you to live a life that is more care-free – in the best sense of that word. But there is also ...

**Freedom from the power of sin in the present.** When Jesus was nailed to the cross he joined battle with the forces of evil that had held sway over humanity from the time of man’s first disobedience. It seemed that the power of sin was pretty well unassailable and there was really no choice but to capitulate to it. Again, Paul writes at some length to the Romans about it in the first couple of chapters of his letter. When Jesus broke the power of evil on the cross he made possible a choice – humanity can now choose to do the right thing. Sinning is not always inevitable. We express our belief in that as we live our lives making the right choices, exercising in Christ our ability to do good rather than evil. Admittedly, we don’t always get those choices right, but we do try to do the right thing as often as we can. When we fail, we can know God’s forgiveness, as we’ve already said – and we can also know ...

**Freedom from the consequences of sin in the future.** All that we do has consequences. Many of those consequences are immediately obvious. But God has also promised eternal consequences as well. Those who persist in sinning, those who ignore the sacrifice of Jesus, those who choose to live their lives without any reference to (or, indeed, belief in) God will pay the penalty when this life is over. God will judge us on our response to him and to the work of Jesus and there will be those who spend eternity cut off from him, suffering the consequences of their sin. The cross of Jesus declares that we do not have to worry about those consequences if we believe in him. We know that our punishment has been taken by Jesus – that’s what atonement is all about – and we can live now without that worry about the future.

So a belief in the crucifixion is brought to life by our living in freedom, living without the anxieties and fears that unconfessed sin can bring, without the anxieties and fears about our eternal future, and with the power to resist temptation. We live lives of care-free holiness and peace.

### **3. RESURRECTION**

Of course, inextricably linked to our belief in the crucifixion is our belief in the resurrection. We believe that Jesus was brought back from the dead on Easter Sunday. He went through death and came out the other side, blazing the trail that all those who believe in him can expect to follow. We will go where he went. On Good Friday he broke the power of sin. On Easter Sunday he broke the power of death, the power of death to scare us and to force us into a life of anxiety, a life which we cannot live to the full because of our fear about the future. Easter Sunday was an expression of the ultimate victory over all that cramps and confines us, all that restricts our living life to the full.

So it follows that our belief is brought to life by our living lives of victory, lives that express our release from fear and oppression. In his great chapter on resurrection in *1 Corinthians* Paul writes about victory in vv56,57. You and I – those who say we believe in the resurrection, who say that we are disciples of Jesus – live out our belief as we claim the victory over sin, over death, over all that is opposed to the good that God wants for us. We are allied to Jesus Christ, the one who has won the greatest victories of all time. We are part of his team, co-victors with him. That's bound to affect the way we live. It will be seen in our confidence, in our refusal to be down-hearted, in our joyful realisation that we are included in the victory of Jesus. When you watch two teams leaving the field of play after some sporting encounter – football, cricket, rugby or whatever – you can usually tell by their expressions and by the way in which they are walking off (heads held high or hanging down) which is the winning team and who are the losers. We bring our belief to life as we live with the confidence of those who know they are champions. Which leads us on to the last aspect of our belief that we'll look at this morning.

### **4. ANTICIPATION**

We believe that one day Jesus is going to return. Just like creation, this is something we read about in the Bible but it's difficult to know exactly when it's going to happen. There are all kinds of things written in the Bible about the return of Jesus and the renewed creation and the final cataclysmic defeat of evil, but the details are not easy to interpret. We can be sure, though, that Jesus will return and that God will set things to right. Creation will be restored and we will have the opportunity to live with Christ forever. So, ultimately, we know that nothing can harm us. Whatever may happen to us here in this present world will not spoil our eternal future. And we believe that what we see now, what we experience now is not all that there is.

So that belief should be lived out in lives of hope. We have the hope of a glorious eternity. All that currently causes us pain and suffering, all that currently threatens us with harm, all that currently scares or depresses us will be taken away and we'll be safe in God's presence for ever. Paul calls it "*the hope of glory*" in *Colossians 1:27*.

But it's not just that faraway hope, that pie-in-the-sky-when-you-die kind of hope. It's also the hope of a life filled with good things now – not necessarily material good things, but good experiences, a good relationship with Jesus, a sense of the Holy Spirit's presence with us. I was talking to the Monday Fellowship last week about the number of people who spend their time moaning and complaining about things. Listening to many people, reading most newspapers, watching much that is on television – you'd get the impression that life is full of despair and depression. And that is basically because many people – especially the moaners and whingers – have no hope. They are completely hope-less. They see stuff going on around them and assume that that is all there is.

Our belief means that we know that this is not all there is. We do not need to despair. God has got it sorted out. He has a plan and one day that plan will come to fruition. We can live a life of real hope. It will mean that we don't spend all our time complaining, that we do look forward to a brighter future. It's unfortunate that very often the worst moaners are Christians. But we should be the ones who complain the least often. We don't need to complain, to moan because we know that it's going to come right in the end. We have a hope.

So keep believing in these things. Stick to your faith in God's creation, in Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, in the anticipation of his return and the fulfilment of the Kingdom of God. They are vital, non-negotiable beliefs. But don't let them remain simply beliefs. Belief without action is useless, says James. Bring them to life by living life to the full, living in freedom, living in victory, living in hope. And let other people see that our beliefs are not just words, not just nice ideas, but are life-inspiring, life-motivating, life-changing realities.

*Discussion notes on next page*

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- **Freedom from the power of sin in the present.**
- **Freedom from the consequences of sin in the future**

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**Questions for discussion**

1. How do you think you could "*live life to the full*"?
2. What does it mean to you to live in freedom?
3. "Victorious Christian living" has been a watchword for many over the years. How do you understand it?
4. What do you look forward to most about the return of Jesus Christ? How does that affect the way you live your life now (if at all)?

5. We have considered just four aspects of our Christian belief. Think of some others and discuss how they could be "brought to life".