

Hinde Street Methodist Church

Sunday 13th January 2019 11am

'What does the most asked question on Google tell us about the human condition?'

Isaiah 43: 1-7

Acts 8: 14-17

Luke 3: 15-17, 21-22

I wonder if you can guess the most asked question on Google last year?

'What is my ip?'

When I read that, I had to type a slight variant into Google – what is an ip?

It's an internet protocol address.

The unique identification for a laptop or a smartphone.

I suppose that question tells us something about our technology dependent culture.

And its reliability - you need your ip address when something needs fixing.

And it tells us something about our search for identity.

Because an ip address doesn't just identify your piece of hardware.

It defines your location – your city, your region, your country.

I am here – or at least, my computer is.

And I am sitting in front of it.

But then I read something much more interesting.

A couple of months ago, DAVE TV did a survey of the questions we wish Google could answer.

And the answers were fascinating.

The top 25 questions fall into four broad categories:

- Conspiracy theories (Who shot JFK? Did Donald Trump rig the election?)
- Our desire for success (Will I ever be rich? What are the winning lottery numbers? – that was the top question, with 33% wishing Google could answer it!)
- Our personal anxieties (Do people like me? Am I good in bed? Will I ever be thin?)
- And – most fascinating of all – some of the ultimate questions about life (What really happens when you die? What is the meaning of life? Is there a God? Am I a good person? Which came first – the chicken or the egg?)

Interestingly – if you type ‘Is there a God? Into Google (and I did), the first two responses are for the Restored Church of God, which instructs us to read the Bible and prepare for the end of the world, and the Atheist Alliance, which provides ten questions which believers can’t answer.

These questions – the questions we wish Google could answer – tell us a lot about ourselves.
Because they are about insecurity.
About our low self-esteem. (Google – do people like me?)
About our yearning for certainty.

And of course, in this technological age, we turn to Google to provide the definitive answer.

I suspect that 2000 years ago people wanted John the Baptist to give them the answers to their questions in much the same way.
In the verses before today’s reading, we hear how crowds came out to hear him.
To be baptised by him.

And the crowds asked him, ‘What then should we do?’

Even tax collectors, Luke tells us, came to ask the same question, ‘What should we do?’
And soldiers.
And John has a nice set of prescriptions for his questioners.
The crowds are told that if they have two coats they must share with anyone who has none.
The tax collectors are told to collect no more than the amount prescribed.
The soldiers are told not to extort money by threats and false accusations.

So I can see why people found his message of judgement attractive.
His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing-floor ... and the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.
It’s harsh – but if you have been overcharging taxpayers, or bullying people into paying protection money – or even just sitting pretty with two coats – there is something rather satisfying in being told how wicked you are.
And being offered a simple solution.
Just do this.
Be baptised with water.
And be good.

If only it were that simple.

I wonder how many of us made New Year resolutions?
Vegan January (I never know how to pronounce Veganuary) ...
More exercise...
Less screen time...
And whether we have kept them up for the first 13 days of 2019?

If we are honest, our desire to live a new life, to start afresh, the appeal of the clean slate – we are not very good at keeping it up.

I wonder how many of John's converts went home and turned their lives around?
Perhaps they gave away a coat (their second-best one).
But did they give away half of everything they owned?
And did they stop accumulating stuff?

John Wesley suggested that instead of giving away a proportion of our wealth, we should decide on a modest income that meets our basic needs, and give away everything above that amount.
However much we earn.
However much we accumulate.
How many of us can say that we do that?

(Google – will I ever be rich? What are the winning lottery numbers?)

So we're stuck in a very human dilemma.
We are deeply attracted to nice clean directions.
Be baptised.
Go and be good.

And we are constitutionally incapable of living up to them.

I want to suggest that one of the core messages of the incarnation is that it doesn't have to be like this.
This is not the right place to start.

Just a few verses after John's scare tactics about winnowing-forks and unquenchable fire, Luke tells us that Jesus comes for baptism.
This is a much quieter scene.
Jesus is praying.
Heaven was opened.
The Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form, like a dove.
And a voice came from heaven:
You are my son, the beloved.
With you I am well pleased.

Jesus has done nothing so far, apart from be born, and worry his parents by hanging out in Jerusalem when they were on their way home.
No preaching.
No healing.
No miracles.
Not confrontation with the authorities.
No conversations with seekers after truth (Google – what is the meaning of life?).

But this is the beginning of his public ministry.
And it begins with love.
My son, the beloved.
It begins with affirmation.
With you I am well pleased.

It begins with the presence of the spirit for no reason other than that is what God's spirit does – it affirms God's presence.

It tells us that we are loved.

We don't need to know all the answers.

We don't need to go and be good for a whole year.

We are just loved.

Because that is the nature of God.

I am a big fan of the writings of Julian of Norwich.

And I was struck by an essay on Julian's theology by Rowan Williams, which I read just before Christmas.

Julian's writings are called 'Revelations of Divine Love'.

Rowan Williams reminds us that we might expect 'Revelations' to be the divine answer to our every question.

A sort of heavenly Google which resolves all our dilemmas, and tells us how to live a good life.

But Julian's 'Revelations' are not solutions.

They are just the start of her questions.

Her urge to turn her inherited theology upside down.

To critique what the church has taught, and get underneath the easy assumptions, the glib jargon of theology.

So, as we wrestle with our conviction of sin, our fear of the apocalyptic winnowing-fork, our desire for baptism and a fresh start, our fear of failing yet again to live up to our good intentions...

... we might turn to the doctrine of atonement.

It's OK.

Christ has died for our sins.

That's the difference between John's theology and Jesus' message.

It's not all down to us.

Jesus has paid the price.

In chapter xxii (22) of the Revelations, Jesus asks Julian if she is 'well apaid' that he has suffered for her. When she says yes, he replies, 'If thou art apaide, I am apaide.'

All those thousands of pages the theologians have written about what atonement means – what does it take for Jesus to square the circle of God's justice, to make the necessary sacrifice to satisfy a vengeful God, that angry headmaster in the sky...

...Julian turns it all upside down.

Her revelation is this.

The problem is with us.

We paint God into a corner.

We project onto God all our own desire for – and fear of – judgement.

We tell a compelling story of how God has to meet a set of arbitrary requirements in order to satisfy himself.

But all along, says Julian, it is I that needs to be satisfied.

The problem is not with God, but with us.

What do we need in order to be satisfied that God loves us?

What inner conflicts and insecurities and frustrations prevent us from being able to stand there quietly, as Jesus does at his baptism, and allow the Spirit of God to descend, bodily.

To hear those words from an open and vulnerable heaven – you are my son, my daughter.

The beloved.

Atonement is about what we need in order to be satisfied.

To be 'apaide'.

And so we are attracted to John's message of judgement.

His new years' resolutions offer of a fresh start and a set of rules for better living.

Even as we know that it won't last until February.

But Jesus shows us a different understanding.

Not a set of rules.

But a life and ministry that begins by being grounded in a felt, bodily experience of being loved by God.

Not because of what he does.

But simply by being himself.

By opening himself to love.

To God.

But this isn't an easy theology.

It doesn't mean that we can stop trying to be good.

That we can hang on to as many coats as we like, and stop worrying about our impact on our community, or on our planet.

The work of the spirit in our lives is not a neat and tidy set of rules for living.

It's quite messy.

And a bit wild.

And it demands an awful lot of wrestling with how to respond.

In that odd little reading from Acts which we heard earlier, we are told that Peter and John were sent to Samaria.

The community there had heard Philip preaching, and had committed themselves to this new faith.

They had been baptised.

They had started a new life.

But the apostles in Jerusalem were a bit unsure about what was going on.

They sent a couple of representatives along with CPD to check that things were being done properly.

So here is our first problem with simply accepting the gospel of love.

We do like things to conform to our understanding of how they should be.

Even God.

If it's a bit outside the rulebook, we want to tidy it up.

And there's another problem.

These new converts were in Samaria.

You'll remember that the history of antagonism between the people of Israel and the outsiders of Samaria has deep roots.

You'll remember how shocking it was that Jesus asked a woman of Samaria for a drink of water, and sat chatting with her by the well.

You'll remember how challenging it was that the man in the story who demonstrated what it means to be a neighbour is a Samaritan.

So for the apostles to recognise that Samaritans – archetypal outsiders with very odd ideas about where God should be worshipped – could be recipients of God’s grace, was quite a big step. Throughout the stories of the book of Acts, the apostles are dared – over and over again – to recognise the messy reality of life in the Spirit. All kinds of odd, alien, undesirable people are invited into the kingdom. And it’s quite a big ask for them to accept that this is OK.

And these verses are part of a longer story. One of the new converts in Samaria is Simon, a magician who has amazed the locals for a long time. Simon is impressed with Philip’s miracles – the healings, the exorcisms, the preaching. He is even more impressed with the baptism in the spirit which Peter and John offer. So he offers them money for the secret.

Give me also this power, so that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit!

So we are tempted to hem the Spirit in with our rules. We are tempted to put up barriers to the life of Christ, to keep out the outsiders. We are tempted to manipulate the Spirit for profit.

This is another of the great themes of the book of Acts – how things start off so well, and then go wrong. Because we human beings are just not very good at long-term commitment. In the first flush of enthusiasm we are full of good intentions. But we can’t keep it up.

No wonder we feel we deserve judgement (bring on that unquenchable fire). No wonder we long for rules (Veganuary. Don’t even look at that Greggs sausage roll, unless it’s the new vegan variety.) No wonder we want instant answers to the difficult questions. (Google – am I a good person?)

Jesus invites us to just stand there, allowing the water to drip off our shoulders, allowing the love of God to descend bodily. To know ourselves loved. Julian reminds us that the life and death and resurrection of Jesus is not about appeasing God. It’s about showing us how much we are loved.

Isaiah has an insight into how much God loves us.

*I have called you by name, you are mine.
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you
When you walk through fire you shall not be burned.*

Being human, he understands this love in terms of favouritism. God loves the people of Israel so much that God gives Egypt as their ransom, Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for them.

*I give people in return for you,
Nations in exchange for your life.*

But our new understanding of the love of God, in Jesus, is that we are no more precious than anyone else.
We are not worth more than those Samaritans.
The Spirit, the love, is for all.

And to stand in that love is not to have all our questions answered. (Google – what is the meaning of life?)
Or to be given a prescription for how to behave.
Or even the tempting certainty of being judged.

It is just the beginning of a life of passing through waters, walking through fire, wrestling with questions about vocation, deciding how many coats to give away, learning to be people who open the door rather than shut the gate, and debating just what that means on the streets of Marylebone....

We are redeemed – for a life of rather scary freedom.
A life of wrestling with all those questions to which Google can't provide a simple answer.
But we step into that life in the knowledge that we are beloved.
And we are not on our own.
God is with us.

*Since the son hath made me free
Let me taste my liberty
Thee behold with open face
Triumph in thy saving grace
Thy great will delight to prove
Glory in thy perfect love.*

WH 57 Since the son hath made me free