

If you're really there, God, why don't you prove it? (John 14:1-11)

If you could ask God one question... (Graham Cousins)

Sunday Morning 10:45am 1 June 2008

* If you could ask God one question - what would it be? That's the new series we're starting this morning - and just to get the obvious question out of the way, I'm afraid that we're not going to be asking God what the numbers for next Saturday's lottery will be! Anyway, I guess that if you did ask God that, his reply might well be, 'Do you really think I'd trust you with information like that!'

If you could ask God one question. There are some big questions in life, the ones that often lurk in the back of our minds, but sometimes come to the front. And I think that the fact that we are here in church means that when it comes to the big questions of life, we think that God should have the answers. But - even if God does have the answers - how do we find them? Because sometimes it seems as if God himself is more of a question than an answer. * Let's look at Jim Carrey facing that problem, from the film Bruce Almighty.

CLIP 1 (20.18 - 22.35 minutes)

* It was art time in the classroom, and a room full of 5 year olds were busily painting. They'd been told that they could paint whatever they wanted, and the teacher was wandering around looking at the pictures, making encouraging comments. After a while she came to one very colourful picture. 'That's a very nice picture,' she said. 'What is it?' 'Oh, that's God,' said the little boy. 'But - no-one has ever seen God, so no-one knows what God looks like,' said the teacher. 'Well they will when I've finished.'

What is God like? In Bruce Almighty, Bruce starts off thinking that God is cruel, constantly messing his life up. Maybe your experience sometimes makes you think like that. I remember someone telling me about a conversation they'd had with a young boy, who told them 'I don't believe in God.' When she asked why not, the boy replied, 'because he made my gran die.' Admittedly there was a slight breakdown of logic in there somewhere - but maybe what the boy meant was that if God stays silent when we need him, then what basis do we have for believing in him anyway. Why doesn't God do something to prove that he is there? As Woody Allen once said, 'If only God would give me some clear sign! Like making a large deposit in my name in a Swiss bank.'

The problem is that God seems so ...hidden. That's not a new problem - in Isaiah 45 the people over 2500 years ago cried out Truly you are a God who hides himself, O God and Saviour of Israel. Even though they were God's people, and believed in him, they still had to admit - God often doesn't seem to make himself obvious.

If you are really there, God, why don't you prove it? * I guess one answer to that question could be to look at the wonder of the universe. Earlier in this service we sang 'Jesus is Lord, creation's voice proclaims it', and Psalm 19 begins, * The heavens declare the glory of God, the skies proclaim the work of his hands. For me that does ring true. The world is such an amazing place. The physicist Paul Davies wrote a few years ago 'Through my scientific work I have come to believe more and more strongly that the physical universe is put together with an ingenuity so astonishing that I cannot accept it as merely a brute fact. There must, it seems to me, be some deeper level of

explanation. 'But Davies himself doesn't believe in God in any personal sense - as a scientist he just sees hints of God in the wonder of the universe. But only hints.

When I look at the stars, or at the intricacy of a flower, I think I do see something of God. But the truth is that God hasn't left the sort of mark on creation which absolutely proves that he is there. And even if you do look at the wonders of creation - it doesn't tell you much about what God is like. And so really we are left with the question - if you are really there, God, why don't you prove it?

It's actually not a new question - it's one that people have been asking for centuries. In fact, one of Jesus' disciples once asked Jesus the same sort of question. Let's listen to what happened. *

READING

It has to be one of the most audacious claims that anyone has ever made. Jesus was with his disciples, and having told them that he was soon to die, he makes the big claim that he is the way to the Father - those famous words of Jesus *I am the way, the truth and the life, no-one comes to the Father except through me. That in itself is a pretty amazing thing for someone to claim - but it is only the start. Because Philip, one of Jesus' disciples, isn't just interested in how to get to God - what he really wants is to see God - *Philip said, 'Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us. Not asking for much, was he! 'Show me God, and I'll be satisfied!' He'd have got on so well with Bruce Almighty!

So what does Jesus do? Point to the stars, or the wonders of nature? No - he points to himself. *Jesus answered, 'Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you for such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. Philip - you want to see God? Well - look at me, because I am God.

Jesus' answer to the question, 'Why doesn't God prove himself?' is that God has proved himself - in Jesus. See what I mean about it being one of the most audacious claims ever made? There have been so many people throughout history who have claimed to be able to tell people about God - but I don't know of anyone else who has seriously made a claim like this.

And it wasn't a one off claim. It's true that Jesus never actually said 'I am God,' as bluntly as that - but that was because if he had, he would certainly have been stoned to death. But throughout his ministry, Jesus repeatedly said things that were as good as claims to be God. He said things like *I am the light of the world. (John 8:12), *I am the bread of life. (John 6:35), *I am the resurrection and the life. (John 11:25), and *I am the good shepherd. (John 10:11) In each case, Jesus picked up a phrase that was used to describe God, and applied it to himself.

So what do you do when someone makes claims like that? The writer C.S. Lewis once wrote 'A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic--on the level with a man who says

he is a poached egg--or he would be the devil of hell. You must take your choice. Either this was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse.'

But it wasn't just the things that Jesus said. Read the gospels, and you'll find time and again that Jesus did the things that we would associate with God. Admittedly that means we have to be sure about what the Bible says, which is why our big question next week is about that - but for now let's just see what the Bible does say. In the first few chapters of Mark's gospel, you find Jesus healing the sick, calming a storm, feeding a hungry crowd with just a few bread rolls and some fish, and even raising a girl who had died back to life. How could he do those things? Because he was God. *Why doesn't God show himself to us? Perhaps he has!

But even when Jesus was on earth, so many people failed to recognise him. Let's go back to Bruce Nolan, and his challenge to God.

CLIP 2 (26.00 - 27.15)

So Bruce finally meets God, and his response is ... to walk away. That's a pretty strange response from someone who wants some proof that God is there! Or is it? There was such a perceptive throw away line in that clip. When the light comes on, Bruce makes a comment about how bright it is, and God replies, 'It is for most people. Spend their lives in the dark, trying to hide from me.'

That is so similar to something a bit earlier in John's gospel - after talking about why Jesus had come, John says, *Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. (John 3:19)

Why was it that so few people recognised who Jesus was? Because deep inside - they didn't want to. At the end of our reading, Jesus said to Philip Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or at least believe on the evidence of the miracles themselves. Jesus did plenty enough to show who he was, but people didn't want to acknowledge it.

Jesus did plenty enough to prove to us that God is there - but maybe our problem isn't that there's not enough proof - maybe our problem is that we don't really want there to be a God.

You see - if God is there - that can never be just an academic fact. It has real personal consequences. I can't acknowledge that there is a God, without being willing to let him be God in my life, and that is a big ask. So maybe it is easier to keep my eyes closed to the evidence.

*If you are there God, why don't you prove it? The Bible makes the claim that God has proved it - by coming to earth himself. In Jesus we don't just see that there is a God - we actually see what that God is like. And I think that if you read through the gospels, you'll find that it is a very attractive picture.

But proof is personal. I read this week about an American author and speaker, Doug Herman. When he was quite young he had the horrendous experience of losing his brother, his wife, and his baby daughter, all in the space of a few months. He wrote, 'One afternoon, entering the office of one of my professors, I slumped down in a chair across from his desk. 'What's wrong, Doug?' he asked. I slid my Bible across the desk to

him. 'Prove to me that God is real,' I said numbly. He paused for quite some time, and never looked at the book. Instead he studied my face. Then he gently leaned forward and slid the Bible back to me. 'Prove it yourself,' he replied. Although it felt harsh at the moment, it was one of the best pieces of advice I have ever received.

Prove it yourself. If you were here last Sunday, you'll know that I was dishing out bits of chocolate cake, because the only way I could prove to you that it really was a good cake, would be for you to try it yourself.

Now - it really was good cake! You had my word for that - you'd seen me eat some. Taking a bit of cake wasn't some sort of wish fulfilment - it was based on solid evidence - and solid cake. But the only absolute proof you could have that it was good was to try it yourself.

And ultimately, the only way God can prove himself to you, is if you are willing to let him. The only alternative to that would have been for God to force himself onto us. And that would take away any freedom we could have.

Let's look at one last bit of Bruce Almighty. If you know the film, you'll know that Bruce was given God's powers - but that he didn't make a very good job of being God. Here God meets up with him again.

CLIP 3 (1.05.10 - 1.05.46)

How do you make someone love you without affecting free will? Welcome to my world, son!

God could have chosen to force himself onto us - to overwhelm us with his greatness. But he didn't. Instead, he gave us glimpses of himself in creation - there is quite enough there for those who are willing to see.

But more than that, he proved himself by coming to us. Jesus is God's answer to the question, why don't you prove yourself? But God isn't in the business of answering abstract questions - life is too important and too serious for games like that. God can only prove himself to those who are willing to go where that proof leads.

If your question to God is 'If you are really there God, why don't you prove it?' God's answer is - why don't you let me?