

2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

Relationship with God

Presented by Margaret Hall

Introduction

The film Casablanca is over sixty years old, but still appeals with its portrayal of the realities of life in the Second World War for people in Occupied France. As was the custom in those days, it was filmed entirely in Hollywood. I remember being surprised to discover that the plane, towards which Ingrid Bergman walks in the closing scenes, was actually a cardboard cut-out of a plane. Well, Hollywood is all about pretending, and that's O.K. when we're just being entertained.

But in other areas of life we need to know whether something's real or not. For instance if it could be proved to me that my relationship with God isn't real, I'd be devastated. I would have lost the sense of meaning and purpose I've found. Even if you told me what's often said these days, that as long as it's real for me, that's all that matters, that would be no comfort at all. I need to know the relationship with God I depend on isn't just a figment of my imagination, the result of childhood indoctrination, a mere feeling brought on by my personal inadequacies. So how do I know it's real?

I

Richard Dawkins in his best seller *The God Delusion* argues insistently for his belief that God doesn't exist. But to insist God isn't there because we can't physically see or hear him is an essentially foolish claim that we know all there is to know.

What we do know is that humankind in every age and culture has had an instinct that God exists - a sense of a power outside ourselves. We seem instinctively to perceive this power, not as some vague, impersonal force, but as a person to whom we can connect and to whom we're accountable. So depending on what's happening, we might be moved to thank God, or to say sorry, or to cry out for help, even hurl questions at him - all ways we relate to a person. But for us to know he's heard us, or what he might have to say, we need God to make himself known.

Sometimes we may have a sense of his presence. I have a very clear memory from my teenage years of being at a Christian Leaders' Conference at the old Blue Gum Lodge at Springwood. Outwardly I was a leader in the Christian group at my school, but inwardly I knew myself to be on a path that would take me far away from God. One morning I woke early, slipped out of my bunk and through the French windows into the garden. Sitting at the foot of an old tree, I felt the presence of the crucified Christ in a way not felt before or since. As he stood by me I saw how much my attitudes and actions were dishonouring him, and the hardness building up inside me was broken down. It was a major turning-point in my life.

When my father died, and I had to deal with the loss of one who'd always been there, I was overwhelmed with a sense of God as the everlasting Father.

Such experiences are special, whether confronting or comforting. But they are rare, and some would explain them away as only to be expected, given the right psychological moment and early conditioning. It's true I'd

been taught since childhood that Jesus died for me and that God is eternal. That doesn't necessarily mean I imagined God's presence, but still my experiences were subjective. What about objective evidence that God is real and seeks a relationship with the creatures he made in his image?

As it happens, there's an abundance of evidence, way more reliable than our experiences, however precious they are, and certainly more reliable than feelings, affected as they are by whether people have been nice to us, whether God's done what we want, or even by what we had for breakfast. We have a body of evidence that God has made himself known to the world, through a series of events which took place publicly at an identifiable time and place - 'a bunch of stuff that happened', to use Bart Simpson's definition of history. In the New Testament we have four compelling accounts of those events. There we meet a man who insisted he'd been sent by God, in fact was God, come to give his life to set free all who trust him, and to raise them to new, eternal life as he himself would rise from the dead.

II

Jesus' enormous claims - to be God in human form, and that he would rise from the dead - were supported by the astounding ways he dealt with disease and death and nature out-of-control. And every New Testament document agrees that the third day after his dead body was put to rest in a tomb, that tomb was empty and he himself was seen alive.

As ancient historical sources go, those documents are as good as it gets. Questions are often asked of them, like: But weren't they written long after the events they describe? Well, no. Most historians do write about things that happened before their lifetime. But the New Testament writers described what had happened in their lifetime, which some of them had personally witnessed.

Some might ask: But haven't all the translations altered the original meaning? Well, no. Our modern translations are from the original Greek, and world's-best scholarship agrees they're accurate.

Others might ask: With so many copies done by hand, couldn't the copyists have changed the originals - intentionally or not? Fortunately scholars can check the accuracy because of the sheer number of surviving copies - well over 5,000. That figure jumps to over 10,000, if you add the early translations into Latin and Syriac. For most ancient manuscripts only a few copies remain.

The age of the New Testament manuscript copies is impressive. Take, for example, the oldest copy we have of Plato's works. It dates to about 895, over a thousand years after Plato wrote the original. Compare that with the oldest portion of John's account of Jesus. It carbon-dates to the year 120, a mere forty to fifty years after the original was written.

So it makes good sense to accept the four gospels as reliable accounts of what happened. The big question is: how does all that solid evidence about Jesus help us to relate to God?

The writer and historian John Dickson tells the story of a mother whose daughter ended up lost and alone in a city far from home, living as a prostitute. One day the mother set out to look for her daughter. She searched tirelessly, without success. Finally she decided to leave an enlarged photo of herself at a place in the city where many people passed by. On it she wrote, "I love you forever. Come home." In the course of time her daughter did pass by that place. She saw the photo. Overcome by such sacrificial love, she broke with her way of life and returned home to make a fresh start relating to the one whose love she could depend on.

In the life of Jesus God left the world a photo of himself. To use Jesus' own words, "Those who've seen me have seen the Father." In the death of Jesus we see the sacrifice that was made to restore our relationship

with God. In the resurrection of Jesus God gave the world a sign of what's to come, when all evil will be dealt with, and God's rule of love fully restored.

III

When we look carefully at what Jesus did and said, we see enormous love and mercy. And it touches us, because Jesus is not just another prophet waving rules in our faces. His life and death are unique, and he uniquely deals with our inability to keep the rules that matter - the ones about relating, about loving God and our neighbour.

First, he claimed a unique relationship with God. "I and the Father are one," he said. He uniquely backed up his claim with supernaturally powerful action. The religious authorities were outraged, but they were unable to argue against the miracles, so they resolved to kill him.

Then his death was unique - the three-hour darkness over the whole land - at the moment of death, in the Temple nearby, the tearing apart of the thick curtain that hid the signs of God's presence. Having no sin of his own to pay for, he was paying to set us free. He is the sacrificial Lamb God provided to take away every shameful thought and act that cuts us off from God.

Finally, Jesus left the world a unique gift - God's own presence through the Holy Spirit, taking up residence in those who accept that his death was on their behalf. The Holy Spirit is the down-payment of what we'll enjoy in all its fullness in God's promised new creation - unbroken fellowship with him.

But does a relationship with God make any difference?

A while ago I watched a television programme about a couple whose small daughter had been killed in an accident. Their agony years later was palpable. They said they'd realized at the funeral service that the priest didn't have any answers. At least he was honest enough not to pretend there are answers. But answers are what we all want - some kind of certainty, as life as we know it falls apart. We're not happy with the thought that our suffering might bring some sort of benefit. When we're going through it the idea there'll be an end to it seems unreal. This couple said they'd found some comfort in what a Buddhist had told them - that their daughter was always around them, in the very air they breathed.

While that kind of comfort was being explained, I thought of a baptism service I'd been to the week before, for a little girl born with a damaged chromosome. She won't be able to walk by herself or talk normally and her life expectancy is twenty to forty years. For however long she lives her parents' lives will be shaped round meeting her needs. They spoke about the strength they drew from knowing, through Jesus' suffering, how much God loves them. They spoke about the unstinting support they get from their church community, praying with them, weeping with them and daily supplying all kinds of practical help. And they spoke of the bright hope that keeps them going - the knowledge that one day, because of the new creation Jesus' resurrection signalled, their little girl would be running and dancing and singing. It was a moving testimony to God's presence in their lives - their real relationship with him.

Conclusion

To walk through every day with Someone who knows all about you and loves you anyway, who'll never give up on you no matter how often you fail, who patiently works out his good purpose for you, who wouldn't grab the chance to have all that?

Jesus said, 'Ask and you'll receive.' He wasn't talking about material blessings. He was talking about the God the Holy Spirit - God himself with us, loving us. That's God's gift to us to enjoy forever, when we come to the end of ourselves and turn to Jesus for what he alone can offer.

In the end that relationship is the only real thing I have. One day I'll lose connection with everything in this world. Relationship with him is all I can bank on to outlast everything else.

Let me invite you to pray with me:

Almighty God and Father, thank you for loving me so much that in Jesus you died my death, to wipe away everything I'm ashamed of. I accept the eternal relationship you offer me, and the gift of your Holy Spirit with me now. Amen.