Doing and Saying – a Christian Pilgrimage

Review, the Church, a question, and the Sacrifice – Week 15

Being introduced to the people of God – and the sacrifice of Jesus.

Day 99: Review

Umm – I've said the words you asked me to to test the hypothesis. That's it?

That's the start. Only took 99 days! ☺ Review what we've gone over so far. Make ongoing prayer (i.e.: talking to Jesus) a daily habit. Read the bible daily. Change your path (adjust your life as necessary to follow Jesus' commands and guidelines which we've covered)! Reflect on the results you find. All of these are further testing of the hypothesis, if you will.

That's an involved test.

We're talking about a total change of your view of reality, remember. As you've shared the 'ultimate reality from at least one Atheist's point of view' (Day 80), I'll briefly share the story of reality from a Christian point of view. And then, we'll introduce you to the Christian Community, using the Anglican branch as our model.

When you reviewed what we've covered so far, what jumped out at you? Why was it significant for you?

Share your answers with others whom you trust.

Day 100: The Christian Story

(From *Atheists Finding God – Unlikely Stories of Conversion to Christianity in the Contemporary West* by Jana S. Harmon, Copyright © 2023 by The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc., *with editor's notes in italics*):

"You are a human being deeply longing to understand the world. Briefly, the Christian story is one of a broken world created by and reconciled to God and given new life through the death and resurrection of Jesus, the self-sacrifice for the sins of all people *(note: These are concepts which we will continue to explore)*.

"God ushers shalom *(peace, wholeness, completeness, wellness, relationship)* into chaos, brings order into disorder, wholeness into brokenness and fragmentation, light into darkness, and life into death towards the restoration and renewal of all things. The historical Christian narrative does not begin 2,000 years ago with the birth of Christ; rather, the Christian narrative begins with its origins from and even prior to the beginning of time in the person and creative work of God. The biblical account begins with an eternally existent triune God (Father, Son, Spirit—one essence/nature, three persons) who created and sustains the universe and humanity with an end goal in mind. His purposes are accomplished throughout history from creation of the world and humankind, pointing towards the person of Jesus as the central person through which all happenings before and afterward are understood. The narrative progresses through themes of Creation of the universe and humanity as good, the Fall of creation and humanity due to sin *(the stories of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, etc.)* resulting in corruption and separation from God, *God repeatedly reaching out to humanity*, the Redemption of humanity and the reconciliation of humanity with God through Christ and His work of salvation on the cross, *the community struggling to understand and live according to Jesus' Way,* and finally the Restoration of all things to goodness, although any given person may choose to reject that redemption.

"This grand narrative is lived out by a faithful church *(community)* and personally appropriated by the believers actively embodying and carrying forward a historically unfolding drama of Christianity. Finally, the Christian story climaxes in Restoration when all things on heaven and earth are made new, and all who are 'in Christ' find intimate eternal dwelling with God in an abundant life freed from brokenness and pain. This overarching narrative is first and foremost an account of what God did, is doing, and will do in the world and in the lives of those whom He created."

It sounds like a fantasy story.

It's the Great Story, the Story Arc of Creation, from which all other stories can be said to be derived. It's also a living story, which you, I, and all of creation are part of.

Why didn't you start with this 99 days ago?

When you learn music, do you first study all the theory and then only when you fully understand that, try to apply it in playing?

No.

Same here – living the Great Story of God is a bit like playing music – you start by doing, then learn against what you've done, so theory and practice grow together. I wonder if you possibly weren't ready to hear the story until you understood (a bit at least) the world view that it comes from? And for that, you needed to be exposed a bit to the ways of Christians, and to their leader, Jesus the Christ.

Day 80 mapped out a generic Atheistic view of reality. The above maps out a generic Christian view of reality. Write out <u>your</u> understanding of ultimate reality:

Share your answers with others whom you trust.

Day 101: A useful interruption

Yesterday we mentioned …

Hold on, hold on – I've got a question for YOU.

Oh? I'm delighted! Please, ask away.

I've decided to take this "test" seriously, and have found a bible (a contemporary translation, I think it's called "NIV").

Great!

And I'm immediately skeptical and frankly find it hard to believe.

I see…

How can you expect me to believe all this stuff? Angels and miraculous births and people speaking in poetry… It's very far-fetched! As I said before, it fits to a fantasy story.

I can understand your skepticism. Remember I said on Day 86 that the Jews of Jesus' time commonly believed in three heavens, with the third being where all the spiritual beings were. Luke is telling us right up front that a momentous thing was happening, and spiritual beings (both good and bad) were coming in like crazy to make sure things happened the way they wanted them to -- from the third heaven right to earth and the first heaven (our atmosphere).

And this was commonplace? If I was there, I would have seen this 'star of Bethlehem', or the angels (multiple times), or the devil tempting Jesus?

Not commonplace, no. It's the same today – some Christians have claimed to see visions of God or various spiritual beings, most have not. For example, only the Wise Men saw the star – no one else is recorded as having seen it, even though it was in the same sky for everyone. Only the priest Zechariah and Mary met an angel, only Jesus met the devil, and only the Shepherds saw the angel chorus, though you would think that would have been a very impressive sight and hard to miss! So, if the spiritual beings intended you to be aware of them, then you would have been, otherwise you would have missed it (as most people did in fact).

So, Luke made this stuff up to convince us of something great happening?

I don't think he made it up. He did select according to an agenda, to encourage (and confirm) our belief in Christ, and document Christ's teachings. However, he also tried to be as accurate as possible – which is why sometimes you will read things not all that complimentary about the disciples and their behaviour, in all four of the gospels. Luke collected the stories he could (since he wasn't there himself when Jesus was born), and then wrote down those he thought most likely to be true.

I don't see how he would think these things could be true.

Try and understand from Luke's perspective: he has met Christ.

He knew Jesus while He was still alive...

No – he met Jesus after He died. Luke decided he believed that Jesus was (and is) the Son of God, the Ruler of the Earth, alive and able to be with His people – and He had a supernatural experience of Him.

He hallucinated?

I don't think he hallucinated either. He may have had a dream, he may have heard a voice, or (most common), he may have had an emotional reaction, an experience of extreme joy and happiness, of being loved despite all, forgiven everything he had done wrong and brought into the family of God. That emotional reaction probably told Luke "Jesus is real, is alive, and I have met Him." He may have experienced it with others or experienced it individually and those around him didn't experience it.

Ok…

Since he has had an experience of the supernatural, he knows that these 'in-breakings' across the heavens can occur. So when he hears that Mary was visited by an angel, or that the shepherds have seen angels, he is not as rejecting as you are, but considers it against the evidence.

What evidence?

How credible were the people telling him the story, how does it fit against the teachings of Jesus and the teachings of His first students, does it fit in with previous scripture writings, and does it reinforce the experience and belief of Jesus held by the wider community of followers? Key questions all.

What if I want Luke's experience? What if I want to meet Jesus?

Any time you want to meet Jesus, He is knocking at the door of your heart for you to let Him in. All you need to do is open it to Him.

How?

Maybe say something like,

"Jesus, if you're real, I'd like to meet you. Sorry I am doubting your existence. Please reveal yourself to me in a way that I will understand and believe it is truly you, and yet know I am not crazy. Please guide me to you so that I may understand you and have relationship with you. Thank you."

What if I'm not ready?

You don't have to invite Jesus in – the choice is always there for you.

Maybe I'll just continue to test the theory for a while longer yet.

I am glad you are continuing with us.

Please note down some parts of the bible you find hard to understand or that stretch your belief, if there are any:

Share your answer with your fellow explorers.

Day 102: The Church

Two days ago we mentioned, "This grand narrative is lived out by a faithful church (community) and personally appropriated by the believers actively embodying and carrying forward a historically unfolding drama of Christianity."

Yes…

I think it's time to introduce you to them – the faithful community, each trying to personally appropriate what they believe. Specifically, the Anglican branch.

What if I don't want to meet them?

Well, in a small but significant way, you already have.

I have?

Yes – the church is a group of people who wrestle with questions about who God is, what is their place in God's story, and the best way to live in the manner God desires.

Sort of like what this small group is trying to convince me of.

Yes, though they're not actually trying to convince you – they're wrestling with it themselves.

Eh?

The challenge for each and every person on earth, whether they realize it or not, is to understand and choose if there is a God, who that God is, what is *their* place in God's story, and how best to live that out. From a Christian perspective, we are all Images of God, and we are lost until we realize that.

So this is a community of explorers?

Yes! You've hit the nail on the head.

How is / is not the church a community of explorers? What is your experience of the church?

Share your answer with your fellow explorers.

Day 103: Attending a church worship service.

To fully test out your hypothesis, it is wise to test it against those who claim to have the faith you are investigating. In other words, this week, please attend an Anglican church service near you.

Seriously? This seems a bit much.

Don't worry – we're not asking you to swim yet. Just to get your toes into the water and see what the temperature is.

I guess so. I can look that up … a local Anglican Church…

Thank you. I'll explain some things that you can expect to encounter.

I think I'm ready.

When you walk in the front door of an Anglican church worship centre, you will probably see rows of benches facing the far end, with a central aisle going up it. Near the far end, some benches may face towards each other across the central aisle. At the far end, there will be a railing, and behind that and raised up a step or two, a rectangular piece of furniture (like a tall table) covered with cloth. Behind that on the wall there is usually a large cross. As well, there are often windows, often filled with coloured (or 'stained') glass figures.

Are they all like that?

No, but that is the traditional arrangement for most Anglican worship centres. It is very intentional.

Ok, I'll bite: why?

The hope is that the architecture itself and the arrangement of the furniture will draw you towards God.

God is in the furniture?

Well, no. The central aisle, and the direction almost everyone sits, focuses on one end, where the altar (that large piece of furniture) sits. Over the altar is the cross. Everyone's focus is therefore to be on the altar and the cross. The altar is the place of sacrifice – in this case, our sacrifices, and the sacrifice of Jesus. The cross is also the place of sacrifice of Jesus. We join our sacrifices with those of Christ Jesus for His people, to be, more and more, one with Him.

Now you've gone weird.

The architecture and the furniture are all trying to draw you physically in, to being part of the Great Story of God, starting at the point of Jesus' sacrifice for us.

I take it this sacrifice is important.

It's the most important thing of all.

So of course, you're going to explain it.

Of course! In fact, we should focus on that a bit before we continue explaining what you're encountering as you 'attend church' (go to the weekly worship meetings). Let's spend a few days on Jesus' sacrifice, and then we'll return to the community worship gatherings. In the meantime, please continue to attend your nearby Anglican worship gathering once per week. Perhaps sit at the back so you can observe what happens and how it is done, and listen to what is said and how it is said.

When you enter church for worship this week, let your eye follow the lines of the building and furniture. Focus on the altar, then the other items. List below the items you see, assigning an order of importance as indicated *purely by the architecture and furniture placement*. If you don't know what something is called, ask someone there or just describe it in general terms.

Compare your list with that of your fellow explorers.

Day 104: The Great Sacrifice (part 1)

We've told you that Jesus was a great moral teacher (weeks 3-7), and He did many fantastic and hard-to-explain actions (weeks 9-11). He taught and tried to show what God's Country was really like, many people followed Him, He claimed to be one with God, and we even believe that He lives today.

Yes.

We have not told you how He died.

No, you haven't.

It started one Thursday evening. You could claim it started back when God created the universe itself, but let's not go back that far – we'll pick it up on a very specific, very special Thursday evening. Jesus and His students had gathered for the evening meal. Jesus stood up, took a bowl of water, and started washing their feet. Now you need to understand; either you washed your own feet, or a slave did it for you -- washing feet was given to the lowest slave, one whose place was to wash all the dirt and dung off people's feet. Donkey, horse, sheep, and goat dung was everywhere, and it was common to get it on peoples' feet. Foot washing was an unsavory task to say the least.

Jesus was a respected teacher – that He would do this was so demeaning, so shocking, that one of His students, a man named Peter, said to him, "You will never wash my feet!" Jesus replied, "If I do not wash you, you have no share with me." …. when Jesus had washed their feet and put his outer clothing back on, he took his place at the table again and said to them, "Do you understand what I have done for you? You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and do so correctly, for that is what I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you too ought to wash one another's feet.

I have given you an example—you should do just as I have done for you. I tell you the solemn truth, the slave is not greater than his master, nor is the one who is sent as a messenger greater than the one who sent him. If you understand these things, you will be blessed if you do them.

There are three things to learn from this:

1.) Jesus loves us so much that He wants to wash us – wash all the filth, the dirt, even all the unmentionable stuff – wash us clean of it, so we can be healthy. He wants us to be physically, socially, spiritually clean – clean in every way. He will even bend down in front of us to wash the manure off our feet – whatever is needed to be clean, that is what He will do for us. Wherever you have dirt on you, wherever you are unclean, wherever you need care, wherever you have sin – Jesus says "Let me serve you. Let me wash you. Let me heal you. Let me love you."
2.) If we do not let Jesus clean us, we do not allow Him to have a part in our lives. We must let Him clean us of everything we've done wrong, every misstep we make, every 'sin'. If we do, we let Jesus into our hearts. If we don't, then we block Him out. When we let Jesus in, we are indeed healed, we are indeed made clean. When Jesus said "unless you

let me wash you, you have no part of Me," He was saying, "unless you let me love you to the fullest, to the most extreme degree possible, you have no share of Me."

3.) He tells us to do the same with each other – to wash the dirt, however it may manifest itself, off from one another. No matter how uncomfortable, how unpleasant, how much we need to bend down – we are to wash one another. We are to seek that all are clean in every way, healthy in every way. In humility with Christ, we go forth and care for each other, and others, as well. As Jesus said: "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples: if you have love for one another." Jesus is saying – just as I have loved you to the fullest, so you are to love each other to the most extreme degree possible. That is what it is all about.

How do we let Jesus clean us? I encourage you to let Him love you if you can, and to reach out in love to others.

Write down some ways:

- Jesus can love you,
- you can love others, in doing what is healthiest for them.

Do some "love experiments" for others and write down your findings.

Share with your fellow explorers.

Day 105: Rest

We come again to the seventh day, so today we rest. Reflect on the past week and care for your needs (body and spirit). In the evening get together with a group you trust and share what you would like to from the previous week – good points, hard points, what you've learned, what you've struggled with, etc. Decide again if you wish to continue journeying together or want to stop.

Know that God loves you, whatever your understanding.