



This Sunday at Magdalen Road church we concluded our short topical series. This week we were thinking (I'm very broad terms) about the religious beliefs of the younger generation.

(1) We began by thinking about the concept of God being dead! It's a theme that is common, we thought about Philip Pullman's trilogy and particularly the moment in the Amber Spyglass when the 'ancient of days' dissolves and disappears. We considered Frederick Nietzsche's famous "God is Dead" statement - expressing the idea that the enlightenment had killed the possibility of a belief in God. We also remembered John Lennon asserting that the Beatles were "more popular than Jesus" and that Christianity (he said) would vanish and shrink.

Perhaps we can feel something of that picture? With Western Europe having so many empty church buildings, but also the fact that we can feel in the minority and awkward when people hear that we are believers. Oxford and all its intellectual prowess and academic arrogance looms over us as we are sat in a primary school gym on seats designed for nine-year-olds (!)

Indeed some have called Europe and the West a 'cut-flower culture' that is, its been chopped off from its Judeo Christian roots. For now there is still an element of beauty but we are beginning to wilt and struggle, for example confusion surrounds where we find inherent value and worth in the individual if God does not exist.

(2) Having said that it's not just a wholesale walking out on God! Some are coming to the Christian faith completely new and there can be a willingness and openness to explore- perhaps that's even exemplified by the missions week in Oxford last week (and Brookes this coming week - do pray!) with lots of people coming with good questions and indeed a number who trusted Christ for themselves. This can be a great time of opportunity and fruitfulness.

(3) Another interesting aspect of the picture is that the new atheists who have been so vocal in the past decade or so are perhaps beginning to face mainstream criticism having

overpromised what their worldview provides? People are suggesting now it lacks sufficient coherence, leading to many questions unanswered and indeed for those who have tried it can be fundamentally unsatisfactory in an actual day-to-day framework to live by.

(4) A final piece of the picture which is where we ended up spending time in the Scriptures is that the iGen culture does not entirely dispose of God, but rather shapes and fashions him into the kind of god we want him to be. One who serves our wants and is essentially here for my purposes.

We looked at Romans 1v 16 to 32, noting initially that Paul sets up this passage with the idea of him not being ashamed of the gospel. To put it frankly our problem can be that we can be ashamed. The gospel sounds so out of keeping with our modern culture-the talk of a God who cares about our wrongdoing and sin, perhaps he doesn't think we are entitled to whatever (or whoever) we want and that we are not at the centre of the universe!

We also noted the reality of Gods wrath being revealed in the present tense. At the heart of the passage are three cycles where people - firstly - suppress the truth about God and believe something false, - secondly - live a different way and so - thirdly - God gives them over to what they want. Perhaps our culture is a symptom of God simply giving us what we want? We want comfort and pleasure and for us to be at the centre - and so God gives us that. It's more than that though, not only do we serve little gods that we create, but also we shape the true God to be like them. Hence we worship comfort and believe that God must want us to be comfortable, or we worship things and then believe that God wants us to have things, we worship happiness and think God only wants us to be happy. Both are examples of idolatry.

The pastor Tim Keller said ***"if your God never disagrees with you, you might just be worshipping an idealised version of yourself"***. We noted how prosperity theology (also word of faith) is essentially God being made to serve us. So often now God is sanitised in such a way that his anger or righteousness is removed and so our sin is removed and our need of the cross is removed.

In Romans 1 there are three cycles each ending with God handing people over to what it is they want. Paul talks about sex a lot in this passage, it's not because he's hung up on it, but rather it's such a fundamental example of the order of creation being flipped over. Mankind challenges God in Genesis 1 and 2 type terms. When God is removed from the equation so sex goes topsy-turvy, the world goes wrong and people get hurt.

Paul's conclusion in chapter 1 though, is that we all appear somewhere on the list (V 28 to 31). All sin is unnatural and flows from denying how things were created to be in this world. They are the fruit of us being at the centre of the world rather than him.

We finished with the reminder that we ought not be ashamed of the gospel because we have what this confused world needs and is looking for in all the wrong places. We have the power of God for salvation, we have life.

+ Here are some questions to start your group off

- What one thing, if any, has struck you most from the series?
- Do you ever feel ashamed and so cautious about sharing the gospel? Why?
- Think of your colleagues or family or friends who are not Christians. What are their fundamental beliefs about God? (I'm aware we didn't focus on other religions at all for this sermon)
- Why is Paul not ashamed of the gospel in Romans 1?
- How is God's present judgement seen in this passage? How does that make you feel? What does that look like?
- How do you think we shape God into the kind of god we want him to be?
- Talk through each of the three cycles that Paul outlines (v21-24, v25-27 and v28-32).
- Why do you think Paul focuses in on the topic of sex so much? What is his main point from the passage as a whole, particularly as you examine the final cycle?
- How can we help each other not be ashamed of the gospel?