

Sunday 23rd October 2022

Glynde Lutheran Church

Sermon on John 14:6

**Theme: “What will happen to those who have never heard
about Jesus?”**

“Now is the time for Jesus!”

* No. 3 of series on “The Big Questions”

Introduction:

You know, I like travelling by aeroplane. It is a thrill to be up above the clouds, looking down on the country-side below.... But the problem is that I don't get to do it very often, especially in these Covid times....

Of course, there is always the expense of having to buy the tickets, *although these days that is less of a problem than when Jenine and I had the boys at home....*

Part1: “...to those who have heard about Jesus”

This morning, I want to begin by talking about one air-flight, of sorts, that is free. I guess that if a travel agent here in Adelaide offered flights to the Gold Coast in Queensland for free, the line would be so long that you'd almost have to camp out there to get one of the tickets....

But what if a sign said: “Flights to heaven: FREE!!”. That's what God offers to each of us, to all human beings. Maybe, that's the sort of sign that we should put up outside our church here: “Apply here for flights to heaven: FREE. Pre-paid by God”.

God has given us a whole bunch of tickets to hand to whoever wants to go there. They are free to whoever wants one! They are free to us, and to whoever wants one, but as most of us well know, it cost God plenty to make them available to us.

It cost God the suffering and death of His own Son. There, on that

cross, God's own dear Son, part of His very self, suffered and died for each of us.

There, Jesus, God's Son, took upon himself the punishment that we human beings deserve from God: he suffered in our stead, and made it possible for us to be forgiven by God and made it possible for us to go to heaven (*Mark 10:45; Isaiah 53:4-6, 10*).

The tickets to heaven are now available: FREE, pre-paid for by God, at great cost to Himself.

All we have to do is to take one for ourselves and hold onto it. The tickets read:

**“One entry into heaven.
FREE Paid for by Jesus”.**

Of course, I'm talking in picture language, aren't I? But in plain, ordinary English, what I am saying is that the good news of the Bible is that God has made it possible for us all to go to “heaven”, *to God's coming Kingdom*. All we have to do is to receive the gift of His forgiveness that He offers us. And we do that by trusting in Jesus as our Saviour, by holding on to the ticket marked “Paid for by Jesus” (*Rom. 3:20-28; Eph. 1:6,7; 2:8-9*)

No other tickets to heaven are valid. No ticket marked “good person”, or “sincere Hindu”, or “sincere Moslem”, or anything else will gain a person entrance into heaven. That's what Jesus is saying to us in our Bible reading for today. He says:

“I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one goes to the Father except by me” (*John 14:6*).

And so what's the other side of the coin?

Separation from God and from “heaven” in a place that Jesus calls “hell” (*cf. John Dickson, 666 and all that*). Those who have turned their back on God will have God say to them:

“You didn't want anything to do with me in your earthly life. O.K., if that's what you want, then let it be so. Depart from me” (*Matt. 25:31-46; Luke 16:19-31; Rev. 20:11-15; cf. Addenda re C.S. Lewis and “There are only two types of people...”, and The Great Divorce*).

As Jesus makes very clear, there is only one way into God's presence: and that's through him, though trusting in him as our Saviour (*point to Jesus on the cross*). That's the situation for *all of us who have heard* the good news of God's love and His forgiveness through Jesus: to grasp hold of the ticket or to reject it.

Part 2: "...to those who have never heard about Jesus?

But what about *those who have never heard* the good news of God's love and His forgiveness through Jesus? What about those who lived before the time of Jesus?

And what about those who lived after Jesus and who lived in foreign lands before missionaries came, or who only heard the good news of Jesus in a distorted way? What about them!?

These are questions that a whole lot of people ask, when they come to understand the good news of God. Some people ask these questions because their Christian faith drives them to ask these questions: they wonder how the wonderful news of God's love and forgiveness could possibly be bad news, in effect, to those who have never heard the message about Jesus.

Then there are those who are vitally concerned about what will happen to someone whom they love, who has died without really understanding the good news about Jesus.

And then there are those who just ask these questions as a way of avoiding coming to grips with Jesus: because if the message about Jesus is only for a select few, then it's unfair and the God who has organised it this way isn't worth relating to....

So for all sorts of reasons, people ask these questions with regard to those who have never heard the good news about Jesus.

How are we to answer them? Well, we can point out firstly what *we do know*, and secondly, I believe, we can talk *with hope* about the fate of those who have never known the good news of Jesus.

Well, firstly what can we say with certainty, because that is what God's Word says:

1) We know from Scripture that there is *no possibility of self-salvation*. There is no way that we can stand before God and say:

"I'm good enough for you. I've led a good life.

I wasn't greedy or selfish. I gave to those in need, I was generous to good causes, I looked after my family..."

You know, that's what the Pharisee in Jesus' story of the Pharisee and the tax-collector said. Remember the story that Jesus told: **Once there were two men who went up to the Temple to pray: one was a Pharisee, the other a tax collector.**

The Pharisee stood apart by himself and prayed, "I thank you, God, that I am not greedy, dishonest, or an adulterer, like everybody else. I thank you that I am not like that tax collector over there. I fast two days a week, and I give you a tenth of all my income".

But the tax-collector stood at a distance and would not even raise his face to heaven, but beat on his breast and said, "God, have pity on me, a sinner!"

"I tell you", said Jesus, "the tax-collector, and not the Pharisee, was in the right with God when he went home. For everyone who makes himself great will be humbled, and everyone who humbles himself will be made great" (Luke 18:10-14).

Jesus made it clear that those who are proud about themselves, and who try to justify themselves before God, are not right with God.

Rather, it is the person who humbles himself or herself before God and confesses his or her sinfulness, he or she is the person who is right with God and will be with God in heaven. This story, on its own spells the death knell of self-salvation. And it's a message that is echoed again and again throughout the New Testament: that there is *no way* that we can earn our way to heaven by doing good deeds, as we *emphasised last week*. For regardless

of the good things that we do, we are still sinners under the Judgement of God, for all the things that we have done to hurt and harm the people around us (*Mark 7:20-23; Matt. 25:31-46; Romans 3:23; Ephesians 2:1-3*).

- 2) The second thing that we can say for certain as we try to answer the question, "What about those who have never heard?", is that Jesus is *the only Saviour*. Only through him are people put right with God (*John 14:6*). It is on account of Jesus' suffering and death for us on his cross that we are saved.
- 3) The Old Testament people of God trusted in God and threw themselves on His mercy. They were forgiven, *not because of their sacrifices* which were expressions of their repentance, *but because of the cross of Jesus* of which they weren't aware.

What then can we say about those who haven't heard about Jesus? The Bible says nothing explicitly about their fate, but we can talk, I believe, *with hope* in their regard.

Listen to what some prominent evangelical Christians have to say. Firstly, Michael Green:

David and Abraham, and millions like them in Old Testament days, were saved because they trusted the living God whom they perceived with varying degrees of unclarity. How could God accept them? Because of what Christ was going to do on the cross. And how could he accept you and me? Because of what Christ has done for us on the cross.

The mighty cross and resurrection are situation at the mid-point of history. Their shadow is cast both forward and back....

That is how we may believe *that* God can with perfect justice and in perfect love welcome all, from every religion or philosophy, who genuinely want to find him. If they do not rely on their own fancied goodness, but cast themselves on his mercy, they may well be among those who are surprised on the day of judgment to find themselves sheep rather than goats.... (*Michael Green, Evangelism, 72-73*).

Next, David Watson:

It is my personal belief that those who put their trust in God's love and mercy *insofar as they understand him*, will be accepted by him.

As a motorist may cross a bridge on a motorway without realising that the bridge is even there (let alone the details about it), so it may be possible for a person to come to God 'over the bridge' of Christ without knowing anything about him (*David Watson, Fear No Evil, 166*).

And also, John Stott:

We know that Jesus Christ is the only Saviour..., and that salvation is by God's grace alone, on account of Christ's cross alone, by faith alone.

What we do not know, however, is exactly how much knowledge and understanding of the gospel people need before they can cry out to God for mercy and be saved. In the Old Testament, people were certainly 'justified by grace through faith', even though they had little knowledge or expectation of Christ.

Perhaps there are others today in a somewhat similar position. They know they are sinful and guilty before God, and that they cannot do anything to win his favour, so in self-despair they call upon the God they dimly perceive to save them.

If God does save such, as many...Christians tentatively believe, their salvation is still only by grace, only through Christ, only by faith (*John Stott, The contemporary Christian, 319-320; cf. Essentials, 327-329*).

Well, so write three of my favourite Christian writers, people who have led me gently, and at times not so gently, through God's Word.

The final answer, I think, to the question, "What about those who have never heard about Jesus?", is:

"We leave them in the hands of the God of infinite mercy, and though we cannot know their fate, because God's Word doesn't give us a clear answer, we can be hopeful that many of them who

have cried out to God for mercy and forgiveness will be saved on account of Christ and his cross”.

But, regardless, we can have no uncertainty about our responsibility!! Jesus, our Lord, has commissioned each of us to go out and make disciples of all nations: to tell our friends and our neighbours about Jesus who is our only Saviour (*Matthew 28:18-20; Acts 1:8*).

Conclusion:

Can I finish by reminding you of that story of the two friends meeting together on the Last Day, at the gates of heaven. There it was found that one was a Christian and one was not. The one, who was not a Christian, was turned away from entrance into heaven.

This poem is what the non-Christian said to the Christian:

**My friend I stand in judgement now,
And feel you are to blame somehow,
On earth I walked with you each day,
Yet never did you point the way.**

**You knew the Lord in truth and glory,
Yet never did you share the story,
My knowledge then was very dim,
You could have led me safe to him.**

**You taught me many things, that's true,
I called you "friend" and trusted you,
And now I learn the truth too late,
You could have saved me from this fate.
We walked by day and talked by night,
And yet you showed me not the light,
You let me live and love and die,
Yet you knew I'd never live on high.**

**Yes, I called you "friend" in life,
And trusted you through joy and strife,
But now I've reached this awful end,
I cannot now call you my friend.**