

I'd just turned 21 and the church I was attending was looking for volunteers. So, I decided that I'd sign up. But this wasn't any usual church rota. This was to be part of a mission team going to the town of in the south of England – along with 100 other people – to share the Christian faith. And in preparation for the mission, the vicar was running a training course on ... *How to Explain the Christian Faith*.

Now – I wonder what *you'd* expect from a course entitled ... *How to Explain the Christian Faith*.

Maybe something ... about believing in God – or about living a respectable life – or going to church – about Jesus taking away our sins – or going to heaven when you die.

I've heard people talk about the Christian Faith in *all* these ways ... and more!

All these answers are OK. – Not bad. – But do they tell the whole story?

To get to the heart of explaining the Christian faith – we really need to go back to the beginning.

We begin with God – the Creator. The wonderful poem – that opens the first book of the Bible – Genesis ... tells us that God looked at the world – at *all* of creation – and:

“It was good. – It was good. – It was *very* good.”

The word “good” – here – is the translation of a Hebrew word ... *tov*.

Now, *tov* means “good” in a very *specific* way. It means everything just as it ought to be ... everything – like Goldilocks' porridge – just right. You might want to call this right-ness – “*righteousness*”.

The sun and moon mark days and seasons. Creation is rich, fruitful and abundant. And people live ... in harmony – with one another – in harmony – with creation – and in harmony – with God.

But – of course – things didn't stay like that.

As a result of human arrogance – selfishness – short-sightedness – and sin ... all this has been lost – and we live in a world that's damaged – divided – and broken.

We see this in human guilt and shame and fear.

We see it hatred, prejudice and discrimination.

We see it – in the oppression and exploitation of the poor and vulnerable – in the insatiable greed of unbridled consumer culture – in the wanton destruction of our precious – yet fragile – planet – and in the way that people deliberately and wilfully turn away from God.

Now God – the Creator – is not *un*-moved, *un*-bothered by all this.

Rather, God *cares* ... And God is determined to put things right again ...

To bring healing ... To bring wholeness ... To make the world good – *tov* ... Once more – the place it should be.

So, God gave laws – sent prophets and teachers – to show us the way – and to teach us what is *tov* ... and – when human beings stubbornly refused to listen – God finally sent his Son – Jesus – to restore the world to a state of goodness.

And so – in his ministry – we read of Jesus putting right – making good – all that he encounters – that's broken.

Damaged bodies are made whole.

Disturbed minds are calmed and quietened.

Those in need are fed, comforted and strengthened.

Outcasts and pariahs are accepted, loved and embraced.

When creation is out of kilter with itself – Jesus calms the storm.

When enemies are squabbling – Jesus enables Herod and Pilate to become friends.

When people are held captive by guilt and fear and shame – Jesus frees and liberates them so that they could live life – and live it *abundantly*.

Finally – on the cross – Jesus even repairs the chasm – between us flawed human beings – and our heavenly Father ... so that we might enjoy a renewed and reconciled relationship with God.

How do you explain the Christian faith?

Well, I might say something like this ...

God made everything wonderful and good.

But we've messed up our world and our lives.

Now God longs to put them right again.

And he begins his work through Jesus.

So, with these thoughts in mind – let's turn to today's Gospel reading – the account of Jesus healing the ten lepers.

God made everything wonderful and good.

That was certainly the case with these ten men who were suffering from leprosy. They wouldn't have been *born* with the infection skin disease that blighted their lives. And we know – for certain – that God didn't *want* them to suffer as they did. God made them good and whole.

But we've messed up our world and our lives.

On the most basic level, these individuals would have been suffering. But – it was their fellow human beings who really messed up the lives of these unfortunate men. Thanks to the regulations of their society – they were obliged – to survive outside the safe familiarity of the community – and to humiliate themselves by having to warn people about their condition. This wasn't the kind of world that God had in mind.

Now God longs to put them right again.

These lepers have clearly grasped this fact. They realise that God longs for wholeness. And so, they call out for mercy.

And God begins his work through Jesus.

So, in the account in Luke's Gospel, we read how Jesus sees them – and heals them. As they go on their way they are healed. And not only that. They can return to their homes – their families – and their communities.

This seems like a wonderful story to illustrate the Christian faith. It's a story that we – too – may learn from. After all – even though we're not lepers – we may also find *ourselves* in need. Maybe we're sick – or feel unloved or excluded – or find that our lives are messed up – and not all that they might be.

In which case – we, too – can call out for mercy – in confidence to the God who longs to make the world a place that's – right – and *tov* – and good.

We turn to God in faith for the things that we need – knowing that God longs to put right everything that's broken.



And that's my sermon. Or at least it could be. Because – actually – I'm not quite finished. There's one final part of the story that we've not looked at. Probably the most crucial element of all.

All ten were healed. Each one had their life made whole. All ten might've received what they wanted. But only *one* returned to give thanks.

And what happens? What happened when this solitary leper *gave thanks*? We read that Jesus commends his faith. And not just that. Jesus says to him:

“Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.”

We've already come across the Hebrew word *tov* ... and now for a *Greek* word. For the phrase which our Bible translates as “made you well” is – in Greek – the language in which the New Testament was written ... That word is *sozo*.

And *sozo* means – literally – *saved*.

Jesus tells him: “Your faith has saved you.”

And how is this faith expressed?

And how is this salvation seen?

How does the man *show* his faith? He does so by giving thanks. So, Jesus is saying that – it's because of this man's *gratitude* to God – he is saved – he finds salvation.

And what is this salvation?

It's the life that Jesus offers. It's real and eternal life – more and better life than we've ever dreamed of – a life of peace and joy – hope and love.

What this story is showing us is that ...

When we come in faith with our *requests* – God in Christ gives what we *ask*.

But when we come with heartfelt *gratitude* – God gives far more than we can ever dare to ask.

Ask – and God will give.

Be grateful – and God will pour out blessings more than you can possibly imagine – even eternal life.

Of course, gratitude isn't easy, though. Being grateful – means acknowledging that – all you have in life – isn't through your own – ability – or hard work – upbringing – or education – personality or character ... but is thanks to God's abundant and overflowing generosity.

If you want to gauge someone's spiritual health – don't look at how often they turn to God in prayer – instead look at how often they turn to God in gratitude – in thanksgiving – in worship.

So – back to our original question:

How do you explain the Christian faith?

Well, I might say something like this ...

God made everything wonderful and good.

But we've messed up our world and our lives.

Now God longs to put them right again.

And he begins his work through Jesus.

Pouring out in generous love – blessings more than we can imagine – on those who come to him in gratitude and worship.

Many thanks to our visiting preacher Reverend Canon Tim Bull, Director of Vocations ,
St Albans Diocese from St Mary The Virgin, Baldock