

What work does God require?

John 6:28-29

Friends, just two verses for our sermon reading today,
but two verses which I think are among the most helpful in the whole Bible.

John 6:28-29

The reason I think they are helpful is that they summarise so much.

We live in an age where the *tweet* is a preferred method of communication for many,
a short sharp statement of 140 characters.

It's an age where people want the executive summary, the quick sound bite.

Well, if you want a quick summary of what it is that most humans are striving for,
and of what answer the Christian faith provides for that striving,
then verses 28 and 29 is as good a summary as you're going to get.
I've had that impression of these verses for a number of years,
and so I thought I would devote a whole sermon to them
because I find them to be such a clear outline of what we believe.

And they are *almost* tweetable.

A tweet is a statement of up to 140 characters

(that's letters, spaces and punctuation marks all together)

These verses in our NIV translations amount to 146 characters,
so they're not *quite* of tweetable length, but it comes pretty close.

And within these 146 characters we find two great truths are outlined,
one truth from each verse.

The first is there in John 6:28,

as we hear a question put to Jesus by the crowd who've been listening to him.

Then they asked him, "What must we do to do the works God requires?"

It's this question, or at least, it's a very similar type of question,
that drives so much of the religious activity
that's characterized human society for thousands of years.

We humans have a long history of sensing that
there's more to the story than simply living, breathing and dying,
and that to discover the rest of the story
is to discover something so much better than what we have on our own,
and that in order to discover what's better there's a task that's set before us.
In the words of Christ's listeners "What must we do to do the works God requires?"

I thought what we might do in this sermon is go on a quick tour
to discover how the "big four" religions
have attempted to answer this this question.
Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism and lastly, Christianity,

have all attempted to provide an answer to this question of what work is required of us humans to successfully move beyond our imperfect existence.

More than once this week as I've prepared I've asked myself "Why on earth did you set yourself this task?" It's going to be impossible for me to adequately explain the *ins* and of four great faiths with all their variations and subtleties, but I'll try!

And I do hope to indicate how Christ's own answer to this question in v29 marks Christianity as being unique in one very important way. But to see how Christ's answer is unique it's worth spending a bit of time thinking about what many of our neighbors here in the Hornsby Shire believe.

So first of all, *Islam*. What would a Muslim say about the work that God requires?

In terms of what lies beyond our merely human existence, The there is one thing a Muslim would say that aligns with what we Christians think. Like me, the Muslim would say that there is one God. Christianity and Islam are what we call *monotheistic* faiths. Unlike Hinduism which has upwards of 300 million Gods, together with Islam we in the church believe in one God.

However, our conception of that God is very different. Christianity believes in one God who exists in three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Three distinct persons, yet all made of the one divine substance and all dwelling within one another

On the other hand the Muslim would say "What are you talking about? There's one God who is one person. There's just Allah. So in terms of what's out there, Muslims believe in a god although Allah is a very different being to the God of the Bible.

Why is it important for the Muslim to think about and interact with this God? Well, again like Christianity, Islam teaches that God is holy and righteous, and that he expects the people he made to live up to his standards. Like us, muslims talk about sin, and they believe in a day of judgment. They even believe that Jesus is the figure who will carry out this judgment. So like the crowd in Jesus day, the thoughtful Muslim is left with a Question. What do we need to do to please God and survive this day of judgment?

The answer is found in what's known as the five pillars of Islam.

If you want to improve your chances of survival on judgment day, here are five things you can do to—hopefully—evoke Allah's mercy.

1. Say the Shahada. This is a simple statement of belief saying that Allah is the only God and Muhammad is his prophet.
2. Say your prayers 5 times a day
3. Give money to the poor
4. Fast during the month of Ramadan,
5. Perform the *Hajj*, the pilgrimage to Mecca.

If by the time you meet your maker

you've faithfully applied yourself to these 5 tasks,

then that's a good basis from which you can try and gain Allah's mercy.

What work must you do? These five pillars are a start.

What about Buddhism?

Buddhism has a very different way of looking at things

and is perhaps the more complex option out of the ones we are looking at.

Classical Buddhism doesn't necessarily require a belief in a god,

although there is a major branch

which does believe that Buddha is a divine figure.

But like the Christian, the Buddhist has a very clear understanding

that something is seriously wrong with the world.

Like us, they see the suffering that's all throughout the world and they ask

"What must we do to overcome this terrible situation?"

Buddhism begins to answer this question

by making the claim that our suffering is a product of our internal desires.

When we see something and desire it, but can't act on that desire,

then that's when we suffer.

And so the work we need to do is to somehow free ourselves of all desire.

And if you manage to successfully free yourselves of all desire,

then you attain a state of being which they call *Nirvana*.

So how might we go about doing this?

Well, while Islam has its five pillars, Buddhism has its eightfold path.

Eight practices and disciplines which will help you get rid of your desires.

1. *Develop a right understanding* about where suffering comes from and how to alleviate it. This means a commitment to studying the Buddhist Scriptures.

2. *Aim your mind in the right direction*. Don't let thought arise at random, rather concentrate your thinking towards what Buddhism teaches.

3. *Develop the right habits of speech*. No lying, no being rude, because such language feeds the very desires that you are trying to address

4. *Start acting in the right way*. Avoid violence, alcohol, and the wrong use of

sex.

5. *Work in the right kind of Profession.* Avoid any job which promotes the wrong kind of thinking or actions. No working as a butcher, no working in a brewery.

6. *Make sure you're making a diligent effort* in all these paths. You can't just be a casual Buddhist; you have to be serious about it.

7. *Develop the right mindfulness.* This is a discipline where you are focusing your attention on the things and sensations that are around you.

8. The last path is a more intense version of mindfulness, *it's the discipline of meditation.* The goal of all this meditative activity is to learn to recognize your cravings—your desires—as feelings that come and go and so you can then more easily deal with them.

And so, Buddhism teaches that successfully walking down all these paths will enable you to one day attain nirvana, the release from all your desires and therefore the release from all sensations of suffering.

Now Buddhism didn't appear just out of nowhere; it was born out of Hinduism which is a much older faith. As Hindus think about what else there is to life what conclusion do they come up with?

Well, they believe in a universal energy—or force—called *Brahman*, and they believe that we each have a part of that *Brahman* within us.

The problem is that the spark that exists within each of us is trapped in an ongoing cycle of reincarnation within this world: we live, we die, and because of our poor actions in this world our spark of *Brahman* comes back entrapped in some other life form, we live, we die, it comes back again and so on.

The goal is to find release from this cycle and have our bit of *Brahman* rejoin the main body of energy.

So according to Hinduism, what work must we do to escape this cycle? Well, there are *five* pillars of Islam, the *eightfold* path of Buddhism, Hindus speak about the *three* paths to salvation. It doesn't matter which one you pick, so long as you make the journey on your chosen path successfully.

Path number one is the *Path of Duty*.

By reading the Hindu Scriptures you can work out which actions are the ones that are appropriate for someone of your position in society. People are divided up into different castes,

and each caste has different duties.
Diligently carrying out your own duties is one way to break free of the cycle.

If that sounds too difficult, then you could try the *Path of Knowledge*
This involves lots of meditation and self-denial
to the point that hopefully your inner self starts to recognize
its connection with *Brahman* and you find a release from the cycle.

But it's the third path that's most popular: the *Path of Devotion*.
This path involves choosing one of the 300 million Hindu gods
and devoting your life to the worship and service of that god.
These gods are divine manifestations of *Brahman*,
and so a life of committed service should gain you release from the cycle.
And so when a Hindu friend tells you they are going to worship at the temple,
then it's probably this third path that they have selected to take.

And so these are some of the popular answers to this age old question:
What works must we do to please God, or remove desire, or to find salvation.
What work must we do to find something better?
It's in verse 29 of John 6 that Jesus gives his answer,
and the so it's in this verse that we hear what Christianity has to say.
Jesus answered, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent."

It's very different answer to what we've heard from the other religions,
and I want to suggest its different in two ways.

First of all, it's *not* an answer that focuses on what we can do,
rather it's focus is on someone else, its on Jesus, the one God has sent.
In Christianity, our salvation from sin, our access to something better,
comes not from our own discipline or from our quality of worship,
it comes from what Jesus has done on our behalf.
Our task is to place our trust in what he has done.
This is what Jesus means when he says *believe in me*.
Believe that I am the one who can lead you out of sin and into eternal life.

Secondly, its important to note that Jesus is the one whom God has sent.
Jesus is coming from a source from outside of the human world, which is vital.
The problem with the other options
is that they seek a solution from the same place as the problem.
We are the ones who sin,
we are the ones who desire,
we are the ones who produce bad karma,
Yet we are the ones who need to overcome these issues.

Imagine you took a drink from a well full of bacteria and pollution.
And so you start to vomit and you get diarrhea,

You become severely dehydrated, and so you think
 "I've got to get some fluids into me",
 and so you go back to the polluted well and you take another drink.
 You can't expect to get better, can you?
 And so this is the problem with all these other religions,
 they instruct us to look to ourselves,
 but in doing so we're going right back to the source of the problem!

By way of contrast, Jesus comes to us as a fresh source of water;
 he's come directly from God and so can secure for us
 what we cannot secure ourselves:
 the salvation from our sins, the pathway to eternal life.

I know that we've covered a lot of ground,
 much of it may be new to you,
 it certainly was for me this week.
 Perhaps one simple way to summarize what we've discovered
 is to remember just four digits: 8, 5, 3, 1.
 Four simple numbers in descending order: 8-5-3-1. That's tweet-able, isn't it!
 The 8-fold path of Buddhism, the 5 pillars of Islam, the 3 paths of Hinduism,
 the 1 savior of Christianity:
 Jesus, who has done the work for us and who asks us to trust him.

And so the question is asked again, but with a twist.
 Which work *will you rely on* to find favour with God
 and to find a better future for yourself?
 The human work of the world's religions,
 or the perfect work of Jesus Christ?

I'll lead us in prayer, and if you would like to rely on the work of Jesus,
 if you would like to place your trust in his work, now is a good time,
 and you can do so by allowing me to pray on your behalf,
 and if you agree, just say Amen after I do.

Lets come before God now.

Heavenly Father we believe that Jesus was sent from you,
 and that he is the one true, effective path for salvation.
 We believe that by his work of an obedient life,
 by his work as a perfect sacrifice,
 we are able to have our sins removed and enter into eternal life.
 We thank you and praise you for this gift that we accept,
 a gift which means
 we don't have to rely on our own imperfect attempts at a good life.
 All thanks and praise go to you, the one and only God;
 Father Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.