

AFFIRMATIONS OF THE BIBLE

Autumn 2016 studies for Fellowship Groups
Chelmsford Cathedral

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INTRODUCTION

When Michael Faraday, the great scientist, lay dying, a friend asked him, “What are your speculations?” Gently Faraday replied: “Speculations? I have none. I rest my soul on certainties”. Goethe, the great German playwright, once said: “Give me the benefit of your convictions, if you have any, but keep your doubts to yourself, for I have enough of my own”. The Bible is the Word of God which points us to the Rock on which we can build our faith. It is a book full of great affirmations. I have selected six of some of the great affirmations.

Along with the six ‘studies’, every session starts with a time of ‘shared reflection’, and then an opportunity of prayer for one another. The fact is that in our journey of faith we need the help and encouragement of our brothers and sisters in Christ – so let’s make the most of that help and encouragement by being open and real with one another.

Unless otherwise specified, the studies are based upon the text of the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible.

SESSION 1: I AM WHO I AM

Shared reflections: How has God blessed you in the week that is past? How has he challenged you?

Prayer for one another – and for those for whom we are concerned.

Prayer for illumination: “All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching the truth, rebuking error, correcting faults and giving instruction for right living” (2 Tim 3.16 GNB). Father God, tonight shape our thinking and our living as we study your Word together.

Reading: Exodus 3.1-15

Here at the burning bush Moses hears the call of God to return to Egypt and lead his people out from captivity and into the promised land. The writer senses the crucial character of the occasion. For in a sense Israel’s true history only began at this moment. It was only at the time of the Exodus that Israel was born as a people. Yet for us the true significance of the burning bush is not that it was here that God called Moses, but rather it was here that God revealed himself to Moses under a new name (see also Exodus 6.2-3).

Our English versions translate this new name as ‘The Lord’, but this is not an exact translation: literally God’s name is *Yahweh* – or is it *Jehovah*? Although this name appears some 6700 times in the Old Testament, there is uncertainty about the pronunciation: in the Hebrew Bible the consonants appear, but not the vowels. The name was so sacred that when Jews read from the

Scriptures and came across the word *Yahweh*, instead of saying *Yahweh*, they used another Hebrew word *Adonai* ('Lord'). Unfortunately the exact significance of the name is uncertain. In our study we will look at some of the possibilities and implications

1. **'I am who I am'**: i.e. **'I am the God who is'**. On this interpretation Yahweh affirms his existence against the non-existence of other gods: he alone is the true and living God. But how true is this statement? Is there not a sense in which it can be said that there are other gods, albeit false (see 1 Corinthians 8.5)? What are the other gods that rival Yahweh today? In what sense are they false?
2. **'I am who I am'**, i.e. **'I am the God who is with you'**. The bush – symbol of God's presence – continues to burn: there is no end to the fire. Yahweh, as Moses discovered, is the God who is ever present: for when Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt" (3.11), God replied, "I will be with you". As one commentator put it: 'Who Moses is is not the question: it is rather who is with Moses.' (John Durham). God is the ever-present God, ever-present to help. Reflecting more generally on the presence of God, it is often said that there is no such thing as a 'god-less' person. In what sense may God be said to be with his people as distinct from being with others?
3. **'I am what I will be'**: i.e. God reveals himself, and yet does not fully reveal himself. There is an element of intentional 'hiddenness' in the divine name. According to one commentator, "God was telling Moses that in faith he had to go forward on the basis of what he knew of him, and in so doing

he would learn more of God, and the new would be a deepening of what was already known” (Ellison). Has this been true in your experience? It has also been said that ‘Although Yahweh is continually present as a God who does not change, he is at the same time present in every generation with new connotations and implications’. Can you see a development in the idea of God in the Scriptures? Does God continue to reveal himself today in a new light?

4. **‘I am the one who causes to be’**: i.e. Yahweh is the Creator God, who brings into being. What consequences flow from this affirmation? See Psalm 24.1-2; 1 Timothy 4.4. What difference does this belief make to the way in which we live our lives today?

A prayer of St Augustine to be said together: “Eternal God, the light of the minds that know you, and the joy of the wills that serve you; grant us so to know you that we may truly love you, and so to love you that we may fully serve you, who to serve is perfect freedom, In Jesus Christ our Lord”.



SESSION 2: HOLY, HOLY, HOLY IS THE LORD OF HOSTS

Shared reflections: In what ways did you meet with God last Sunday? Or was worship more a duty than a joy?

Prayer for one another – and for all those involved in leading Sunday worship.

Prayer for illumination: “Human beings must not depend on bread alone to sustain them, but on everything the Lord says” (Deut 8.3 GNB). Lord, we confess that all too often our minds are centred on the things of this world, Create within in us a real hunger of your Word, not just today but also in the week that lies ahead.

Reading: Isaiah 6.1-8

Like Exodus 3, Isaiah 6 tells the story of the call of a man of God. Significantly this vision does not come at the beginning of the book: it would appear that Isaiah had already embarked on his career as a prophet: i.e. he was already involved in God’s service when God ‘called’ him. Perhaps here we have a reminder that religious experiences are not always limited to the beginnings of a life of faith?

However, in this study our interest lies more in what this passage affirms about God – and in particular in what it affirms about the holiness of God. See also Habakkuk 1.13: “Your eyes are too pure to behold evil, and you cannot look on wrongdoing” [GNB: “You cannot stand the sight of people doing wrong”]. Holiness is a concept which many find difficult to grasp. Many find it helpful to think of God’s holiness in the sense of his being ‘wholly other’. With this definition in mind, we can see this passage affirming God’s ‘wholly-otherness’ in three respects:

1. **God’s majesty:** “In the year that King Uzziah died [740 BC], I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple” (6.1). The death of a national leader can throw a nation into confusion, but Isaiah discovered that

though “the king was dead, the throne was not empty” (G.A. Smith)! It was in the temple – in the midst of the worshipping assembly – that God appeared to Isaiah. The first thing that impressed him was his majesty. Did the clouds rising from the altar of incense become to his mind’s eye God’s long flowing robe? When we go to worship God do we become conscious of his ‘otherness’ in the sense of his majesty? Do the more modern forms of worship put us on too familiar a term with God? When worship takes place ‘in the round’ or in a ‘collegiate’ style, is there a tendency for the focus to be more on one another than on God?

2. **God’s distance:** “Seraphs were in attendance above him” (6.2 These strange creatures – ‘glowing beings of light on whose wings forked flashes of lightning may have appeared’ (Kaiser) – emphasise the ‘otherness’ of God: even they could not look upon the face of God.. Jewish commentators used to say: ‘With two he covered his face that he might not see, and with two he covered his body that he might not be seen’. If the seraphs emphasise the infinite distance between God and his creatures, in what sense can Isaiah be said to have seen God (6.1)? How can the finite encounter the Infinite? See John 1.18; 1 Timothy 6.16.
3. **God’s purity:** “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips.” (6.5). God’s ‘otherness’ contains a specific moral content with the result that. Isaiah’s vision leads to a sense of conviction of sin. Probably this vision formed the theological basis for his denunciation of the social injustices of his time. Do you find that the nearer you get to God the

more conscious you become of your own sinfulness? How does your vision of God affect the way you live?

Isaiah was overwhelmed by this vision of God. To his amazement, however, he experienced not only God's judgement but his pardon symbolised by the burning coal pressed to his lips. It has been suggested that this action 'says to us that there is no painless cure for our sins'. If for us God's pardon is only a soothing balm, then perhaps we have yet to come to grips with the implications of the Cross: for the Cross is a call not just to faith, but to repentance, which can be both painful and costly.

A prayer of David Adam to be said together: "Lord, you are the love of my life, the light of my way, the peace of my mind, the power for my task, the Presence. Help me, Strong One, to be a strength to the weak; help me, Caring One, to be a support to the sad. Help me, Saving One, to be a helper of the lost. Help me, Present One, to be a comfort to the lonely; Help me, Holy One to worship you now and forever".

SESSION 3. I AM THE WAY, AND THE TRUTH, AND THE LIFE

Shared reflection: What opportunities have you had in the past week to talk to others about your faith? What challenges have you encountered?

Prayer for one another – and for the mission of the church.

Prayer for illumination: “God’s secret... is Christ himself. He is the key that opens all the hidden treasures of God’s wisdom and knowledge” (Col 2.3 GNB). ‘God of the living word, give us the faith to receive your message, the wisdom to know what it means, and the courage to put it into practice’ (*A New Zealand Prayer Book*)

Reading: John 14.1-7

Surveys have shown that the vast majority of people have some kind of religious feeling. They search for a reality beyond themselves, but do not always feel that they have found this reality we call ‘God’. Jesus came to bring men and women to God.

Note the context of the claim of Jesus to be the way, the truth, and the life. Jesus is speaking in the Upper Room the night before his death. He encourages his disciples to ‘keep on believing’ (present tense). He is going “to prepare a place” for his disciples. The preparation which Jesus had in mind was his dying and rising for us.

1. I am the way: Jesus claims to be the only way to God – No one comes to the Father except through me”. In today’s pluralist society many find this offensive. But note the difference between Jesus’ way and the way of other religions. Jesus does not say, ‘This is the way: follow it’, but ‘I am the way: follow me’. The Christian faith differs from all other religions in that it rests on the person of its founder. For ultimately the Gospel is not about religious ideas, but about an event: ‘Christ died for our sins’. In the light of this claim, how should we approach people of other religions? How do you answer Gandhi who claimed: ‘The soul of religion is one but it is encased in a multitude of forms. Truth is the

exclusive property of no single scripture.’ What do we teach our children?

2. **I am the truth:** Jesus claims to be the true way to God in the sense that he reveals the demands of God in his teaching, and the character of God in his actions. The Cross is the supreme revelation of God. Other religions may have insights into spirituality and ethics (see for instance Rom 1.20; 2.15), but saving truth is found in Jesus alone. Or as Tom Wright put it “They all provide *a way towards the foothills of the mountain, not **the** way to the summit*”. Jesus is the truth in the sense that in Jesus we see the truth concerning God and his love. Discuss the life of Jesus in the light of C.S. Lewis’ statement: ‘A man who was merely a man and said the sort of thing Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic – on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg – or else he would be the Devil of Hell.’

3. **I am the life:** Jesus claims to be the true and living way to God in the context of death (14.1-2). He is the way to life, for he has gone to prepare a place for us in his Father’s house. In other words, Jesus through his resurrection has blazed a trail through the valley of the shadow of death, and it is for us to follow in his footsteps. How significant is it that the life to which Jesus leads is life with God (“in my Father’s house”)? Would mere everlasting life be hell to you? “In my Father’s house are many dwelling places” – how do you understand this statement? We are told by Paul that ‘There is no preferential treatment so far as God is concerned’ (Romans 2.11). Does this mean that there is always room? The message of the New Testament is that

there is salvation in Jesus alone (see Acts 4.12; 1 Tim 2.3-5). Roy Clements commented: “You may speculate all you wish about how God is going to judge the heather who have never heard of Jesus. The Bible never addresses itself to that question... What the Bible does make absolutely crystal-clear is that there will be no dissident voices in heaven. There is going to be nobody in heaven saying what a wonderful chap Mohammed is for getting him there. Nobody will be praising the Buddha. The Bible insists that heaven is united by one single chorus of praise, ‘Worthy is the Lamb who was slain’”

A prayer of Richard of Chichester to be said together:
“Lord Jesus Christ, we thank you for all the benefits you have won for us, for all the pains and insults you have borne for us. Most merciful redeemer, friend and brother, may we know you more clearly, love you more dearly, and follow you more nearly, day by day”



SESSION 4: JESUS IS LORD

Shared reflection: What has been the best thing that has happened to you in the last week? What has been the worst thing?

Prayer for one another – and for those for whom life is tough.

Prayer for illumination: “Your word is a lamp to guide me and a light for my path” (Psalm 119.105). Lord, in a world which is so often dark, may tonight your Word give us fresh direction and inspiration.

Reading: Philippians 2.5-11

'Jesus is Lord' is the primary confession of the Christian faith. It was with these words on their lips that the first Christians were baptised, and later martyred. "If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord", writes Paul, "and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (Romans 10.9). This confession is likewise found in the early Christ-hymn of Philippians. Note how the lordship of Christ and the resurrection belong together – they are like the two sides of one coin. Note too how this confession encompasses the world. For when the first Christians took up their lips this confession, they were not simply saying 'Jesus is my Lord', but rather they were proclaiming Jesus as Lord of the world: he is 'Lord of all' (Romans 10.12). The significance of the confession 'Jesus is Lord' may be approached by looking at it through the eyes of the three great cultures of the Roman empire:

1. The lordship of Jesus in the Greek world.

When Christianity arrived on the scene, it arrived at a time when a real religious awakening was in progress. For not finding the answer to their needs in rationalism and scepticism, Greeks were turning to superstition and magic – and in particular to the mystery religions, which met the need for personal religion. They offered salvation to people who felt themselves bound by evil spirits and hemmed in by blind fate. Significantly these 'saviours' were known as 'lords' (see 1 Cor 8.5-6). To proclaim Jesus as Lord against this background was to proclaim him above all as Saviour – for to him 'every knee' would 'bend', whether they be spirits

“in heaven” or “under the earth”. Can we speak of the lordship of Jesus in a world, where despite all our best intentions, peace and justice ever elude us? Are there not times when things seem out of control or beyond us? What does the lordship of Jesus mean then?

2. The lordship of Jesus in the Roman world. In the Roman world ‘Jesus is Lord’ came to stand over against the cry ‘Caesar is Lord’. Indeed, in the Eastern half of the Empire to say ‘Caesar is Lord’ implied far more than ‘God save the King’; it implied divinity. The relevance of this confession to people living in a totalitarian society is obvious. Less obvious is its relevance to us now – our politics, for all their faults, do not claim to be ‘gods’. But have they not made gods of such things as ‘a fair standard of living’? What conflict does faith in Jesus bring about in our society today?

3. The lordship of Jesus in the Jewish world. When Jewish Christians confessed Jesus as ‘Lord’, they confessed him as *Kyrios*. *Kyrios* is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew *Adonai* (My Lord), which was used by devout Jews in the place of the divine name, Yahweh (translated in the AV as LORD. In this context to declare Jesus as Lord was by implication to declare that he was God – ‘this is what God is like’. How is such ‘divinity’ to be understood? Philippians 2 speaks of humiliation, suffering and death. Do these fit in with your ideas of divine ‘omnipotence’?

A prayer of David Adam to be said together: “Lord increase my zest for living, my vision of glory, my hearing of your call, my grasp on reality, my response

to your love, my sensitivity to others, my gentleness to creation, my taste for wonder, my love for you”



SESSION 5: GOD IS LOVE

Shared reflection: What opportunities this week have you had to ‘do good’ to others? Or how would you have liked to have done good?

Prayer for one another – and for those who care for others.

Prayer for illumination: “When the Spirit comes, who reveals the truth about God, he will lead you into all the truth” (John 16.13 GNB). Father God, may your Holy Spirit inspire our thinking and talking this evening. Help us to see the amazing truth of your love for us in Jesus.

Reading: 1 John 4.7-16

‘I shall always be convinced that a watch proves a watch-maker, and that a universe proves a God’ (Voltaire). But what sort of God is God? John declares that “God is love” (1 John 4.8). Not that for John this was no complete definition of God; elsewhere he says that “God is light” (1 John 1.5). But ‘God is love’ is often held to be what is distinctive of the Christian view of God.

The love of God has been likened to the rings which appear on the cut-face of a log – those rings are the visible cross-section of lines that run right up the trunk, hidden from view by the bark. So the cross of Jesus is the visible appearance in this world of love that

stretches back beyond our vision into the depths of eternity. Note the pro-active nature of God's love: love is not just a moral quality, but rather expresses itself in a series of actions. Note too the amazing nature of God's love, for God loved us "while we were still sinners" (Rom 5.9; also 1 John 4.10): by contrast Aristotle said 'Only he who is deserving of love can be loved'; similarly Plato wrote, 'Love is for the lovely'.

1. When did God first show his love for us? It has been said that the love of God is the explanation of creation. For if God is love, then it means that God cannot exist in lonely isolation - for love must always find an object? Do you agree? Were we created in God's image specifically to be loved and to return God's love?
2. God's love is supremely revealed in the Cross (4.9). Yet the Cross is the place where the problem of human sin is dealt with. It is often said that, on the Cross, sin was judged. How can ideas of judgement and love be reconciled?
3. If God is love, then presumably his intentions are of the very best toward us. Yet some have found this difficult to accept. Indeed, it has been said: "It is not we who should apologise to God for our misdeeds, but God to apologise to us for all the suffering in the world he has created". How do you reconcile suffering with the love of God?
4. Can the love of God be proved? John suggests that it can: for the reality of God's love is evidenced in the lives of his people (4.12). If God's love is seen in the death of Jesus (see Romans 5.8), what

qualities would you see in that love? How should we show the same qualities in our lives?

A prayer of William Temple to be said together: “O God of love, we ask you to give us love; love in our thinking, love in our speaking, love in our doing, and love in the hidden places of our souls; love of those with whom we find it hard to bear, and love of those who find it hard to bear with us; love of those with whom we work, and love of those with whom we take our ease; that so at length we may be worthy to dwell with you, who are eternal love”



SESSION 6: SEE I AM MAKING ALL THINGS NEW

Shared reflection: Where have you seen God at work this week? Where did you want to see God at work?

Prayer for illumination: “Open my eyes, so that I may see the wonderful truths in your Word [literally ‘law’]” (Psalm 119.18 GNB). Father God, deepen our sense of wonder of the new world you have prepared for those who love you.

Reading: Revelation 21.1-8

After all the visions of doom and damnation, John sees a new vision, the vision of the city of God. The sea – a symbol of evil from which the Antichrist-Beast emerged (Revelation 13) – is now no more (21.1): i.e. evil has been abolished, and therefore God’s city is described as “holy” (21.2). Neither are sorrow nor death any

more, for “the first things have passed away” (21.4). It is hard to imagine a world so different from ours.

Then, for the first time in the Book of Revelation, God is described as saying: “See, I am making all things new”. The newness of the new world which is coming is indicated by the Greek adjective John employs (*kainos*): it denotes something quite ‘unknown’, ‘strange’, ‘remarkable’, even ‘marvellous’. The new order is not only different but also superior to the old. Yet for all the radical newness of the future, there will be a sense of continuity with the past. Note that John does not say God will make ‘all new things’, but “all things new”. On the basis of Rev 21.24,26 it has been suggested that in a way which defies our imagination, the best of human life and culture will be found, albeit transformed, in the new Jerusalem!

Note that the focus here is on God and his action. God is seen as the goal of all things, and this means that Christians can put their confidence in God and live in hope. In this respect Christian hope differs from secular hopes. Marxists hope for a classless society, but their hope lies in human effort. In the forecourt of a Moscow art gallery stands the statue of a workman beating a broad sword with a hammer, with the underlying inscription ‘We must bend our swords into ploughshares’, an allusion to Isaiah 2.4 & Micah 4.3. However, the prophets believed that men would beat their swords into ploughshares on the day when God establishes his kingdom on earth. Our hope rests in the victory God achieved in Christ.

From this passage four things emerge about Christian hope:

1. **Ours is a certain hope.** “And the one who was seated on the throne said, ‘See I am making all things new’. Also he said, ‘Write this for these words are trustworthy and true” (21.5). In what sense is the Christian hope ‘certain’ for you? What role does the Holy Spirit play in your understanding of hope (Ephesians 1.14; 2 Corinthians 1.22)?
2. **Ours is a God-centred hope.** Speculations about the furniture of heaven and the temperature of hell are futile. One thing is certain: heaven is life lived in the presence of God (21.3). Note that God is not just one ‘item’ in a list of things to be found in the new Jerusalem, rather the new Jerusalem is defined by the presence of God. The new Jerusalem, like the Holy of Holies in the temple, is described as a perfect cube (21.15-16). The whole city is a sanctuary in which God is present everywhere and immediately accessible to all (21.22). No wonder John describes heaven as a ceaseless round of worship (22.3). ‘Heaven is not heaven because joy is there, but because the praise of God is there’ (Luther). How do you picture heaven?
3. **Ours is a corporate hope.** This is an emphasis that some Christians forget, and instead they individualise salvation. But life in the Kingdom of God is life in the community of the Kingdom. We see this in many of the parables of Jesus (see Matthew 22.1-14; 25.1-13). Likewise here the goal of redemption is the “city” of God in a new world (21.2: see also Galatians 4.6; Hebrews 12.22). John pictures heaven as a mega-city, where the population is too large for any official to count (7.9). If the height of the walls in John’s vision are anything to go by, then the city will contain huge

high-rise dwellings (21.16)! The thrust of this picture is that the heaven will be about community, about life-together. We may be buried in our own separate boxes, but we shall not be confined to a pigeon hole in heaven! To what extent do you look forward to life together in the Kingdom of God? What difference should this corporate understanding of the Christian hope make to our present relationships in the church of God?

4. **Ours is a present hope.** Note the present tense: “See, I am making all things new” (21.5). This is more than just a ‘prophetic’ present – it is not just another way of emphasising the certainty of God’s future actions. Already God has begun his re-creative process of making all things new. How would you apply this true to the individual, to the church, and to the world?

Prayer of John Henry Newman to be said together: *“O Lord, support us all the day long of this troublous life, until the shades lengthen and the evening comes, and the busy world is hushed, the fever of life is over, and our work is done. Then, Lord, in your mercy grant us safe lodging, a holy rest, and peace at the last, through Jesus Christ our Lord”.*