



God is ... Good (Psalm 100; Acts 14:8-18)

The Psalm we read today ends with a strong claim. *“For the LORD is good; his steadfast love endures for ever, and his faithfulness to all generations.”* (Psalm 100:5) This phrase is repeated over and over in the Bible. It is one of the key statements of who God is. But what does it mean when we say that God is good? Turn to someone near you and come up with some ideas.

You know, not everyone believes that God is good. Stephen Fry was asked what he would say to God, if he exists. He replied:

I'd say, “Bone cancer in children? What's that about? How dare you? How dare you create a world in which there is such misery that is not our fault? It's not right. It's utterly, utterly evil.” That's what I would say. Why should I respect a capricious, mean-minded, stupid God who creates a world that is so full of injustice and pain? The god that created this universe, if it was created by a god, is quite clearly a maniac, an utter maniac, totally selfish. Yes, the world is very splendid, but it has in it insects whose whole life cycle is to burrow into the eyes of children and make them blind. It eats outwards from the eyes. Why? It is simply not acceptable. If he exists, what kind of God is he? It is perfectly apparent that he is monstrous, utterly monstrous and deserves no respect whatsoever.

Those of us who love and honour God, react in horror to statements like this. But I think we need to realise that Stephen is voicing an anger that many feel at the way the world is. How can it be this way if there's a loving God in charge? They look at the suffering in the world around them and feel that either God could stop it and doesn't want to, in which case he isn't wholly good, or wants to change things but can't, in which case he isn't all-powerful. When you hear Stephen Fry talking, you realise he is being deliberately and emotively provocative to further his own ends – he wants to shock people. However, there are many people in difficult circumstances who struggle with seeing God as good in a world that contains so much that is not good.

However, when Paul introduces God to a group of people who only knew the Greek gods of their culture what did he say?

“We bring you good news, that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them. In past generations he allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways. Yet he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness.”
(Acts 14:15-17)

What a contrasting view of God! In our diagram that we are using to organise our thoughts about God, we see that the two key aspects of God's character are that he is love and he is good. Together, these two ideas encompass what we mean when we say that God is holy.

What makes God good?

So, why do we say that God is good? What makes up his goodness? In Psalm 33, the writer brings together several things that I think make God good.

For the word of the Lord is upright and all his work is done in faithfulness. He loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of the steadfast love of the Lord.... Behold the eye of the Lord is on those who fear him, on those who hope in his steadfast love, that he may deliver their soul from death and keep them alive in famine. Our soul waits for the Lord; he is our help and shield. (Psalm 33:4,5,18,19)

- God is Benevolent

“The earth is full of the steadfast love of the Lord ...”

God’s benevolence grows out of His love for us and causes Him to seek our good, even if it means sacrificing Himself for us. This general benevolence spreads to all of His creation. *“The LORD is good to all, and his mercy is over all that he has made.”* (Psalm 145:9) It extends particularly to those who are his people. This special benevolence is seen most clearly in God sending His Son for our salvation, but it spreads to a generous giving of all we need to live as His people as Paul reasons, *“He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?”* (Romans 8:32) God’s benevolence is God’s desire for the very best for us – God’s love leads to God’s goodness.

- God is Righteous

“For the word of the Lord is upright ... He loves righteousness and justice.”

The word ‘righteous’ carries with it the idea of something straight and true and which is beneficial to all. God’s righteousness is not tainted by anything. According to John, *“God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.”* (1John 1:5) God’s character is pure and this comes through in his words and actions. Psalm 119 says:

*O LORD, you are righteous, and your regulations are fair.
Your laws are perfect and completely trustworthy.
Your promises have been thoroughly tested; that is why I love them so much.
Your laws are always right; help me to understand them so I may live.
(Psalm 119:137,138,140,144 NLT)*

God is good because all that He does is controlled by His righteousness which is the standard for all that is good.

- God is Wise

Behold the eye of the Lord is on those who fear Him ... that he may deliver their soul from death and keep them alive in famine.

Wisdom is more than just knowing a lot (which God does!). Wisdom is knowledge applied to life. It has been defined as the power to see and the inclination to choose the best and highest goal together with the surest means of attaining it. In other words, wisdom is knowing how to act righteously and beneficially in every situation. Sometimes we want to do the right thing, but it proves to be the wrong thing because we have limited knowledge and experience and our decisions are tainted by our own sinfulness. This is never a problem for God. And He doesn’t have a “one size fits all” approach. His eye is on us – He knows us and what our needs are and how to best deliver us. His wisdom means that He knows the best way to deliver us, to do good for us, in any situation.

- God is Trustworthy

“...all his work is done in faithfulness ... Our soul waits for the Lord; he is our help and shield.”

Because God is unlimited in power, knowledge, space and time, He is always able to fulfill his promises and complete what He starts. He is utterly reliable and faithful. Paul affirms this when he says: *“I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.”* (Philippians 1:6) We are not always able to do the good that we would like, but God can and always does. We can wait for Him to act – for however long it takes - and know that He will always be faithful to us. His goodness never fails.

Therefore ...

This is our good God. But in a sense, this description is a bit theoretical, a bit abstract. Maybe we can make it more concrete by looking at some of His roles that He has in relations to us.

- God is a good King and Judge

Kings and Judges regulate the life of those in their nation – they set the rules and enforce them. Often in the Old Testament, they were the same person. The King made the laws, and he was the final court of appeal. Good kings and judges must be able to discern the truth and make wise decisions. A King who makes laws only to benefit himself is not a good king. A judge who enforces the letter of the law with no consideration for each unique situation and possible mitigating circumstances is not a good judge. How we need good leadership like this today!

God’s goodness never compromises righteousness, but always does what is best for all involved. I am reminded of the cities of refuge in Israel provided by God for cases of unintended death. And Jesus’ compassion for the woman caught in adultery – not denying the wrongness of what had happened, but also knowing that the woman was not the only guilty party. And the ultimate goodness of God in providing a way for Him to justify us – removing our guilt – while still judging the seriousness of our sin. This cost Him everything, but He didn’t hesitate because of His love for us.

- God is a good Parent

Most commonly called our Father, but also occasionally referred to in motherly terms, God chooses to relate to us as a parent relates to their dearest child. Love is essential in parenthood, but we all know that love alone doesn’t make us a good parent. It takes wisdom, patience and faithfulness over the long haul. Very few earthly parents are good all the time, and some, sadly, are far from good most of the time. But God is a good parent. We see God’s goodness in that He knows the right thing to do for His children and He is always motivated by His benevolence towards us. When we stray, He sometimes needs to discipline us, but He always seeks our good as He helps us to develop into the people He created us to be – even when it costs Him everything.

- God is a good Saviour

It is here that God’s goodness shines against the backdrop of a world gone wrong. For, unlike Stephen Fry supposes, this world is not the way God made it. Once humanity turned their back on God in the Garden of Eden, we see sin spread and destroy people and relationships throughout the book of Genesis and beyond. And this sin also harms the earth. Hosea, the prophet, says to Israel:

*Hear the word of the LORD, O children of Israel,
for the LORD has a controversy with the inhabitants of the land.
There is no faithfulness or steadfast love, and no knowledge of God in the land;
there is swearing, lying, murder, stealing, and committing adultery;
they break all bounds, and bloodshed follows bloodshed.*

We see a land filled with sinful people doing sinful things. And what happens to the land in which they live?

*Therefore, the land mourns, and all who dwell in it languish,
and also the beasts of the field and the birds of the heavens,
and even the fish of the sea are taken away. (Hosea 4:1-3)*

The land suffers from the sinfulness of its inhabitants. Paul confirms this when he says that in some mysterious sense the whole of creation is "*in bondage to decay*" because of humanity's sin (Romans 8:21). In response to Steven Fry, I personally don't believe that cancer was a part of the world before sin. It is God's good creation gone wrong. I don't know about eye-burrowing worms, but I can't help wondering if their current habits aren't somehow a corruption of the world which God created. I think it is essential to understand the extent of the destruction of sin if we are to understand the world in which we live and how God relates to it.

If we can begin to see that destructive power of sin, then I think we can begin to appreciate God's good response to it as He stepped into this troubled world and experienced its suffering in order to save it. As a good Saviour, He gave Himself to defeat sin and death and to save us from destruction. The Gospel – the Good News – is the greatest demonstration of the wisdom of God. (Eph 3:10) He has made a way for the restoration and renewal of the whole of His creation – both humanity and the world we inhabit.

Jesus's death provides the way of salvation and the church as His Body is that through which He continues to work out His purposes. The salvation of the world is a work in progress. As we accept His salvation by faith, He not only cleanses us from sin and gives us His righteousness, but He also gives us the ability to live good lives, lives which spread His goodness to the world. We read that Jesus Christ "*... gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.*" (Titus 2:14) As his people, we are to be good people doing good works. Often, the most powerful witness to the goodness of God is the goodness of His people.

In the same week that Stephen Fry was railing against eye-burrowing worms that caused suffering, it was announced that another similar affliction was coming to an end – that of the guinea worm. At the forefront of the effort to eradicate it is the organisation led by former US President Jimmy Carter. There were 3.5 million cases of guinea worm worldwide when they started tackling the disease in 1986. In 2019 there were just 53 known cases and there is hope that it will be completely eradicated in the next couple of years. Jimmy Carter has been motivated to this work by his faith – faith in the God that Fry rejects. The Carter Foundation's next goal is to eliminate river blindness, caused by a worm which causes blindness when it burrows into the eye. Perhaps his legacy is the best answer to Fry's complaint.

Because God is good, we can trust Him.

He is benevolent – always seeking our good.

He is righteous – always just and true.

He is wise – always knowing the best for us.

He is trustworthy – always doing what He says He will do.

God is good. And as we receive His goodness, we must share that goodness in our attitudes and actions towards others, witnessing to the goodness of our God in all we do.