

John 1:1-14

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[0 : 0 0] guests this morning by showing you an image that may be familiar to you. It's from this past week, and so as I say, if you've been watching the news, this is an image I imagine that many of you will be familiar with. So there's the face of an individual there, and then there is some text, and I'll just read what it says. I think you probably, if you've got keen eyesight, you can probably read it yourselves or if you're close to the screens. It says, believe in something, even if it means sacrificing everything. Now we'll keep the image on the screen just for a few moments, but let me just explain that a little bit for those who maybe aren't familiar with the image or with the face that is portrayed there. The face belongs to an athlete by the name of Colin Kaepernick.

He's an NFL, National Football League quarterback, formerly of the San Francisco 49ers. And back in 2016, almost exactly two years ago, he famously kneeled during the singing of the U.S. National Anthem in protest, as he saw it, against police brutality directed at African Americans. And if you were following the news from a couple of years ago, and it's been a kind of news story that has been popping up now and again throughout these past two years, you may recall that Donald John, that would be the president of that nation, wasn't very impressed with Mr. Kaepernick.

Now, let me just say at the outset, for those of you who are concerned that I'm going to make some big statement about what he did, I have no opinion, or perhaps more accurately, I'm not going to express an opinion on the original protest of Mr. Kaepernick. That's not what I want to do. It wouldn't be appropriate for me to give an opinion on that this morning. My interest is in the slogan that accompanies his image in this new Nike ad campaign. So, he and some other athletes have been adopted, I guess, for this advertising campaign of this company, Nike, the sports good manufacturer.

And this is the slogan that accompanies the image of this particular individual. Believe in something, even if it means sacrificing everything. And I guess the ideas or what is being suggested is that here is somebody who stood up for something, believed in something, and paid certain consequences as a result. Clearly, that's the intended connection. But I want us to just think about what is being stated. And of course, what I'm going to do is move on from that particular philosophy, if you wish, to suggest an alternative. But let's begin with the one that we have there on the screen. Believe in something, even if it means sacrificing everything. Well, what do you make of that call? Believe in something. Does it inspire you? Do you read that and feel inspired to adopt some kind of cause?

Maybe it simply intrigues you. Well, what does that mean? Well, I want to share some thoughts on the slogan before, as I've said, suggesting an alternative for your consideration. I think that the slogan does resonate with our human experience, even what we might call our need to believe. We are, as men and women, incurable believers. We may not be religious. We may even, or there may be those who even glory in their professed unbelief. But at heart, we all yearn to believe in something. And so, in that sense, I think these words, believe in something, do resonate with who we are as human beings. And the slogan picks up on that yearning that we have to believe in something. I think the slogan also echoes what we might call the spirit of the age in this particular sense. We can all choose the something that we will believe in. You know, believe in something. The implication seems to be that it doesn't matter what you believe as long as you believe in something. Believe in something. You want to. You need to. So, take your pick. You know, there's a whole menu of possibilities, and it's up to you.

[4 : 34] You decide. You choose. It's your life. It's your decision. You decide what you will believe in. But believe in something. You need to do that. It's good to do that. Believe in something.

So, in that sense, I think that the slogan, I guess, echoes what we might call the spirit of the age. That sense of everything is okay, you know, and it's up to each individual to decide what they're going to live for and what they're going to believe in.

So, you simply need to say that. Believe in something, full stop. Or to pick up on the American theme of the advert, believe in something, period. That is all that is being proposed.

Well, what do you think of that when we think of it along those lines? Does such advice make any sense? Believe in something. Believe in anything. What if the object of your belief or faith is unbelievable? It's untrustworthy. It turns out to be not true. You know, what are you to do in those circumstances? Well, believe in something. It doesn't matter if it's true. It doesn't matter if the cause or the object of your faith proves to be a great letdown. Just believe in something.

What if the object of your belief is evil or just plain foolish? What if your cause, if it's a cause that you're adapting, what if your cause is wicked or fatuous or grounded in lies or self-interest?

[6 : 15] Do you think that every belief is equally valid or worthy of respect and tolerance? What about two belief systems that are mutually incompatible, are both equally valid?

Let's say, for the sake of argument, and I do stress, for the sake of argument, let's say I'm a pastiferian. Do you know what a pastiferian is? A pastiferian is somebody who believes in the flying spaghetti monster. Have you anybody heard of the flying spaghetti monster? Surely you've heard of the flying spaghetti monster. Anyway, those who believe in the flying spaghetti monster are termed pastiferians. So, I'm a pastiferian. I believe in the flying spaghetti monster. Now, you, on the other hand, believe really quite resolutely that spaghetti monsters don't exist.

And even if they did, they certainly couldn't fly. That's your decided opinion. Now, the question is, I believe in the flying spaghetti monster and that they can fly and they can do loops and all kinds of things, and you don't. So, are both of those beliefs equally valid? Can they both be true? They may both be false, but can they both be true? It's simply not possible. It's incoherent. They can't both be true.

Believe in something. Believe in anything. What do we make of that piece of advice that Nike is throwing out there for us to consider and presumably respond to? It does sound good.

It sounds, I think, maybe, you know, you read it, you think, well, that's quite inspiring. Yeah, believe in something. But let me suggest that it's actually quite vacuous. It's a soundbite that doesn't resist close examination. Well, what do you think? Do you agree with me in that regard? You don't have to agree with me. You can have a different opinion. Now, what about the second part of the slogan? We don't need to put it up on the screen again. I think we have it in our mind. The slogan went, believe in something even if it means sacrificing everything. Now, that part of the slogan also sounds inspiring and noble. I think we generally admire those who are willing to sacrifice personal advantage on a point of principle. It's interesting, even when folk don't agree with the principle, folk can have a certain admiration for those who are willing to sacrifice on a point of principle. As I say, even if they don't share the principle in question, that is admirable. We find that admirable. We are moved by people who act in that way. But let me just make a couple of observations about that second part of the slogan.

[8 : 56] I wonder how many of us, and I guess here we just need to be honest, how many of us are great at admiring others but less willing to be the ones doing the sacrificing? Well, that's just a thought.

But more significantly, is it wise to sacrifice everything? What does that actually look like? In the case of the poster boy for Nike, is that something he has done? I ask the question. Sacrifice everything? Let me show you another image. Let's call it an alternative to Nike's offering, and let's hope that no copyright lawyers will get on my case. So, here's an alternative to what Nike are offering us this past week. I wonder if you can you read the text there.

Believe in someone, even in the one who sacrificed everything for you. Believe in someone, even in the one who sacrificed everything for you. We can take that image down. But let's just think about it. Believe in someone. It's more personal than believe in something, but it does still beg the question, who? Who is worthy of my faith? Who is trustworthy? Who can deliver on my needs and expectations? What I want to do is to propose somebody. Now, his identity won't be a surprise, given where we've gathered this morning, given what we've already sung about this morning. But what I want to propose as someone in whom you can believe is Jesus of Nazareth. Believe in Jesus.

Believe in someone, but very specifically, I would commend to you Jesus. Believe in Jesus. And in order to make my case, I need to provide a couple of pieces of information, who he is and what he has done.

In a very brief manner, who he is and what he has done. Now, my source for what I have to say is the Bible. You may have questions about the reliability of the Bible, but bear with me as I identify Jesus using the Bible as my source. First of all, who is he? And in answering that question, I just want to focus in on the passage that we read or part of the passage that we read there in John's gospel.

[11 : 09] Listen to what is said about Jesus at the beginning of John's gospel. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made. Without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of man. But who is John talking about in these quite remarkable terms? Who is he talking about?

Well, a few verses down, he identifies who he is talking about because he identifies the Word as the one who became flesh and made his dwelling among us. So, Jesus is identified by John as being both with God and being God. And this seeming logical difficulty of one who is both with God and is God can be understood in the language or the reality of the Trinity, of one God and three persons.

So, Jesus was with God the Father as God the Son. He was with God, but he was God or is God. Or listen to the Apostle Paul as he identifies Jesus as the creator of all that exists. So, Paul was one of the most prominent early disciples of Jesus, traveling the ancient world, preaching about him. Many of the letters in the New Testament written by Paul. Listen to what he has to say about Jesus as the creator. For by him, by Jesus, all things were created, things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible. And then he goes on, all things were created by him and for him.

And so, who is Jesus? The one who I am commending to you is one in whom you can believe. Who is Jesus? Well, the Bible says that he is God. He is the creator of all that exists. He is the one who became flesh, who became a human being, became one of us. The carpenter from Nazareth is the one who created every star and galaxy, who designed your DNA. Now, it's nothing if not an outrageous claim that is being made. But what if it's true? I acknowledge it's an outrageous thing to say about anybody.

And you know, your natural reaction might be, well, depending, of course, on your background, it might be, well, how can that possibly be true? But what if it is true? Who he is? This one who I am commending to you. But then also what he has done. Now, we've already read the claim that he became flesh or became a man. But why? Why did the eternal Son of God become a man? Why would he do that?

[14:00] And that really takes us to the second element of our alternative slogan. Believe in someone, even in the one who sacrificed everything for you. Why did he come into the world? What did he come to do? Well, he came into the world to sacrifice, if you wish, everything. His coming into the world was a sacrifice. His life was a life of sacrifice. But then very particularly, his death was a sacrifice.

He died in the place of others. He came to die. I think I've mentioned on previous occasions, the Save the Children advertisement that has as a slogan, no child born to die. And that's certainly a noble sentiment that we would say we warm to. That all should be done so that every child born can live and not die of hunger or starvation or unavoidable causes of death. No child born to die.

But of course, this child, Jesus, he was born to die. That's why he came. That was his principle and central mission, to live a life of perfect obedience in our place. And having lived that life of perfect obedience, to hand over his life as a sacrifice in our place. Why? Why would he do that? Why did Jesus offer his life as a sacrifice for you? Well, the sacrifice of Jesus can only be understood in the context of what we could call the human predicament or the human problem. And what is that human problem, my problem and your problem? Well, that problem is that we are sinners.

We sin against God. We disobey God. We go our own way. We do our own thing. We're selfish. And that selfishness finds expression in a multiplicity of ways. We are sinners. And the wages of sin is death.

The fair and just punishment for sin is death. We deserve to die for our sins. But what does the Bible tell us about God's love? Well, it tells us in that verse that is so familiar, certainly to many of us, for God so loved the world. He so loved us in our predicament, in our wretchedness, in our rebellion. He so loved the world that he sent his one and only son. He sent Jesus to die in our place, to take on his shoulders what we deserve, to bear the punishment that we were due to stand in our place. He took the punishment for our sins. He died in our place. In the words of the apostle Peter, another of the close associates of Jesus, in speaking about Christ's death, he speaks in these terms, for Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to

[17:10] God. So we were alienated from God by our sin, far from God, unable to approach him. And Jesus bridged that gap by his death. He opened the door for us. He provided us the forgiveness that would enable us to be close to God and be part of God's family, to be received by God. Believe in someone, even in the one who sacrificed everything for you. Let me show you a third image, just very quickly. Believe in me.

Now, what's the significance of this image, really? It's three words. This little discussion that we've been having, admittedly somewhat one-directional, but this discussion can't remain an intellectual discussion. You know, I propose to you certain propositions about Jesus, and you listen to them, you consider them, you take a view on them, and you move on, and life goes on, much as it was going on before. We can't really deal with Jesus in that way. There's one very important truth about Jesus that we haven't mentioned, though we did sing about it early in the service. And that crucial truth about Jesus that we haven't mentioned is that he rose again. He died on the cross in our place, but then he rose again on the third day. He was raised from the grave by his Father, vindicating what he had done, in that way giving the seal of approval on the mission that he had conducted successfully, to provide a way back for sinners such as we are. So, he rose from the grave. He was raised from the grave by his Father, and he is alive today. So, this Jesus who I'm talking about isn't simply the object of interesting speculation or study. You know, we don't go into a, you know, look at him under a microscope and say, well, what's he like, and try and measure him and take a view about him. He's alive.

He's alive today. And that's why I pose the words in this way, because this is Jesus speaking. Jesus, who is alive, has a word for you. Three words for you this morning, and they're these words on the screen. Believe in me. I'm relaying the words, but it's Jesus who directs these words to you. This morning he says to you, believe in me. Don't just believe in something. Don't believe in anything.

He says to you, believe in me. But what does that involve? What does that look like? I want to just mention three elements to belief in Jesus that we can take from the very mouth of Jesus as he called his first disciples. So, Jesus, when he reached the point in his life when his, what we call his public ministry began, he began to call others to join with him, those we call his disciples. But it's significant the manner in which he called them to follow him or to be with him. And there are three elements, and these, as I say, are taken directly from the words that Jesus addressed to those he was speaking to. And I think together they give a good picture of what is involved in believing in Jesus. And what you need to do if you're going to respond to Jesus addressing to you this morning, these words, believe in me. One of the first things that we have recorded that Jesus said to those who would gather to listen to him were these words, repent and believe the good news. So, there you have two things that Jesus was indicating needed to be done by his hearers. First of all, they needed to repent. Well, what's that about? Well, principally, it's about acknowledging your predicament, acknowledging the reality, the problem of your sin. You have sin that you are guilty of that you need to repent of. We've already spoken about that. And Jesus is saying, yes, if you're going to believe in me, one of the first things you need to do is acknowledge this reality. Indeed, if you don't think it's a problem, then why would you look to me? So, first of all, belief in Jesus involves an acknowledgement of your predicament. But then immediately, of course, there's the second element, repent and believe the good news. The good news concerning Jesus who has come to provide a solution, to provide an answer, to secure forgiveness for your sins. So, you see there's a problem, and then you see that Jesus has done what is needful for that problem to be addressed. And this is good news, who he is and what he has done.

And believing in Jesus involves believing the good news to be true. So, repent and believe the good news. But then Jesus immediately went on to say something else to those first followers. He said, come, follow me. Come, follow me. Put your trust in me as your Savior, as your Lord. Follow me. Come after me.

[22 : 37] Embrace me. Embrace me. So, it's not simply about what you believe in your head, but about the life that you're going to live, the direction in which you're going to go. And that direction is going to be in the direction of following Jesus as your own Savior, as your own Lord.

These three things that Jesus said to His first disciples, capture for us what is involved in believing in Him. Repent, believe the good news, and follow Jesus. The question that we all need to respond to, we all need to have an answer to, is will we do that? Will you believe in Jesus?

I don't promise that to be a follower of Jesus is all sweetness and light. It's not always. Indeed, it's seldom an easy life. Indeed, to pick up on one of the themes that we've been thinking about, it does involve sacrifice. But any sacrifice that you make is as nothing in comparison to all that you are given by your gracious God. As one modern-day martyr, a guy called Jim Elliot, who died taking the good news concerning Jesus to one of the Amazonian tribes back in the, when was it, in the 60s maybe? And he is remembered for one memorable statement that he made, no doubt, among others. He said this, He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose. So is there sacrifice involved in following Jesus, in being obedient to Jesus, in going against the current often in our society, in believing in things that others will reject and perhaps mock and scoff at? Yes, there is a price to be paid. But he is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.

And so Jesus addresses you this morning, believe in me. I've got just one final image that may be helpful as a final prod for some of you. And with acknowledgement to the marketers at Nike, this is the final image. Just do it. Don't delay, don't postpone, just do it. Believe in Jesus.

Put your trust in Jesus. Repent of your sins. Believe the good news and follow him. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for the good news of the gospel concerning Jesus, concerning who he is, concerning what he has done. We thank you for the tremendous privilege that it is that the creator of the universe should address us this morning, should be interested in us, should be interested in us believing in him. The very fact that this is something we are invited to do is wonderfully dignifying. We will get no better invitation. And indeed, we acknowledge that not only an invitation, but a command that directed to us to believe in your Son. Help us to do so. Help us to repent of our sins and to do so time and time again, for we continue to fall short and to sin against you.

[26 : 05] Help us to believe the good news, to understand with ever greater clarity and depth how good that news is. And help us day by day to follow Jesus and to live lives that are like him and that are for him and that reflects something of his love to those around us. And we pray all of these things in Jesus' name. Amen.