

SHARP FAITH

SUNDAY THEOLOGY TALKS AT SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE, NYC

SHARP FAITH FAITH IN GOD HOLDS EVEN WHEN RELIGION DOESN'T

1. This 5-week course explores the emotional, intellectual, and deeply human dimensions of Christian belief, inspired by Francis Spufford's bold and unconventional book *Unapologetic: Why, Despite Everything, Christianity Can Still Make Surprising Emotional Sense*.
 - 1.1. Rather than offering a traditional defense of doctrine, Spufford focuses on the felt experience of faith—its emotional weight, moral complexity, and the honest recognition of human failure.
 - 1.2. Through guided readings and discussions, we'll examine themes like belief as emotional truth, the raw demands of love and grace, the role of power and failure in the Church, and why Jesus remains the theological and emotional center of the Christian story.
2. The Author
 - 2.1. Francis Spufford is a British writer and former atheist who returned to Christian faith as an adult. Known for his work across genres—from history to fiction—Spufford brings a literary, humorous, and deeply honest voice to the conversation around belief in the modern world. *Unapologetic* is both personal and provocative, offering a fresh way to talk about Christianity for those who are skeptical of traditional religious language but still hungry for meaning

DATE	SERIES	SPEAKER	TITLE
May 4 2025	SHARP FAITH: "FAITH IN GOD HOLDS EVEN WHEN RELIGION DOESN'T"	The Rev. Dr. Luigi Gioia <i>Theologian In Residence, Saint Thomas Church</i>	"FAITH AND EMOTIONS: WHY BELIEVING IN GOD FEELS SO RIGHT"
May 11 2025	CONFIRMATION SUNDAY		NO CLASS
May 18 2025	SHARP FAITH: "FAITH IN GOD HOLDS EVEN WHEN RELIGION DOESN'T"	The Rev. Dr. Luigi Gioia <i>Theologian In Residence, Saint Thomas Church</i>	"A FAITH THAT DOES NOT GIVE ALL THE ANSWERS AND MAKES IMPOSSIBLE DEMANDS".
May 25 2025	MEMORIAL DAY WEEKEND		NO CLASS
June 1 2025	SHARP FAITH: "FAITH IN GOD HOLDS EVEN WHEN RELIGION DOESN'T"	The Rev. Dr. Luigi Gioia <i>Theologian In Residence, Saint Thomas Church</i>	"THE PUZZLE OF JESUS"
June 8 2025	SHARP FAITH: "FAITH IN GOD HOLDS EVEN WHEN RELIGION DOESN'T"	The Rev. Dr. Luigi Gioia <i>Theologian In Residence, Saint Thomas Church</i>	"POWER, SIN, AND THE CHURCH WE GET"
June 15 2025	GUEST SPEAKER HISTORY AND THEOLOGY OF THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER	The Rev. Dr. Andrew McGowan <i>Dean of Berkeley Divinity School and McFaddin Professor of Anglican Studies</i>	THE BEGINNINGS OF AN AMERICAN PRAYER BOOK (3)
June 22 2025	GUEST SPEAKER HISTORY AND THEOLOGY OF THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER	The Rev. Dr. Andrew McGowan <i>Dean of Berkeley Divinity School and McFaddin Professor of Anglican Studies</i>	THE NEW PRAYER BOOK: FROM 1928 TO 1979 (4)
June 29 2025	SHARP FAITH: "FAITH IN GOD HOLDS EVEN WHEN RELIGION DOESN'T"	The Rev. Dr. Luigi Gioia <i>Theologian In Residence, Saint Thomas Church</i>	"LOVE, HOPE, AND THE DEFIANT STORY OF GRACE"

THE PUZZLE OF JESUS (3)

1. Chapter 5, “Yeshua”, cannot be summarized – as Spufford himself says:

“I have simplified and selected and heightened the story, in the telling of it, to make the emotional outline of it as clear as I can. I have rephrased and rewritten, I have anachronized and estranged, to try to peel away the lingering familiarity which might prevent you from hearing it fresh”. (149)

 - 1.1. One of the problems caused by our familiarity with the Gospels is that we have become somehow immune to their emotional power.
 - 1.2. Preaching should be one of the ways in which we recapture – or, rather, we are re-captured by the novelty and the appeal of Jesus’ person and message.
2. Chapter 5, “Et Cetera”, make Spufford’s premises explicit – especially concerning Jesus’ identity and the significance of his message.
 - 2.1. Is the claim that Jesus is God something added later?
 - 2.2. Is Jesus’ story a myth?
 - 2.3. Is Jesus’ story a tragedy?

Quotations

3. In the air now, there’s a general feeling that somebody or other in the early church, probably St Paul, retrospectively glued Godhood onto poor Jesus. (150)
4. The trouble is that the historical sequence by which we get the story is exactly the other way round.
 - 4.1. The interpretation came first, before the narratives about him wandering around preachin’ and teachin’.
 - 4.2. Of all the documents in the New Testament, the oldest are St Paul’s letters (“Epistles”) to the various early churches.
 - 4.3. They were written in the fifties AD, fifteen to twenty years after the crucifixion, and they are metaphor-heavy discourses about what Jesus was and what he meant. (150f)
 - 4.4. The letters, do have an absolutely definite set of convictions about him that they are casting around for adequate words to express.
 - i. That Jesus’s actions in the world were God’s own actions in the world;
 - ii. that where Jesus was present, God was directly present too;
 - iii. that his death and return from death were an initiative by God to take from humanity the weight of guilt and shame and disgust, and to show us a life larger than law. (151)
5. We have the biographies (“Gospels”) because early Christians—i.e. early believers in the God/man mixture in Jesus—wanted to illustrate it in story, to bring home (as only story can for human beings) its emotional force. (151f)

6. Note the language: the trade tongue of the whole eastern end of the Roman empire, not the Semitic dialect Yeshua actually spoke. (152)
7. When the Gospel stories started to be written, Jerusalem was already a ruin and the temple was rubble; the province's countryside was beginning to be ethnically cleansed. The landscape of small towns and small-town synagogues, populated by yearning, fearful, angry people, was ceasing to exist. The Gospel writers were recreating a lost place and time when they described Jesus's journeys fifty, sixty, seventy years earlier. The interpretation was always fused with the events. (152f)
8. Moreover, even if you try to discard everything in the biographies which is explicitly devoted to storytelling Jesus's divinity, and just concentrate on the bits which must have come most uncontentionally from the lost sayings-collection, you still don't get back to a layer in which he's just a wise person dispensing wisdom. (153)
9. "Great moral teachers" tend to be concerned with respecting your parents (Confucius), defining duty and justice (Socrates), detaching yourself from desire (the Buddha), discovering law (Moses), and getting people to see themselves as accountable individuals rather than fractions of a tribe (Muhammad). "If someone asks for your coat, give them your shirt too" is not "great moral teaching" in this sense. It is either foolishness, or something else. (153)
10. Claiming that a provincial rabbi somehow embodies the impulse behind billions of years of history and unthinkable expanses of space does not have much philosophical dignity to it as a position. (156)
11. We disagree because the God/man mixture in Jesus brings us something more precious than conceptual purity: hope in trouble, consolation in suffering, help in anguish. It brings us a way out of the far worse and more destructive paradoxes of theodicy. (158)
12. Two possible options about how to interpret Jesus' claims:
 - 12.1. That Jesus really thought his burning, urgent, lover's perception of humanity belonged in some way to the God of everything, but was just plain wrong. You can imagine any number of ways in which, in a charged and desperate and theologically expectant environment, an intense young man might persuade himself that it was up to him to reconcile God and humanity. Making him not the messiah, but just a very silly boy.
 - 12.2. The mistake may after all have been the early church's, and a Judaic Jesus with something completely different on his mind may simply have been lost in the translation from memory to words. (154)

Is it a Myth?

13. The New Testament's story of Jesus is not, to put it mildly, the only one humanity has ever come up with about a dying god.
 - 13.1. The ancient Greeks had Adonis bleeding out onto the springtime earth, and coming back to life three days later having renewed the world.
 - 13.2. The Egyptians had Osiris, ripped into shreds and scattered like holy flesh-confetti into all the nooks and crannies of matter.
 - 13.3. The Vikings had Odin getting wisdom by hanging nailed to a tree.

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- 13.4. It's a common mythological move, a cultural basic, an anthropological golden oldie.
 - 13.5. Transcendent power goes down into the dark and allows itself to be extinguished, but then returns all the stronger, having incorporated into itself the strength of the opposing principle. (159)
- 14. If so, then the story I've just told is a myth. We can categorize Jesus's adventures as forming an imaginative pattern like the pattern of the story of Odin, one whose function is to embody a deep piece of human meaning-discovery. (159f)
- 15. But though Jesus's story certainly has some mythic parallels, and acquired some mythic resonances as it became a whole culture's founding artifact, it does not read like a myth.
 - 15.1. It's the wrong shape, in a number of different ways.
 - 15.2. For a start, it doesn't happen in the special time set aside for myths, the dream-time, the long-ago zone off to the side of calendar history where gods and heroes strutted their stuff. What year was it when Odin hung on the tree? The question does not compute.
 - 15.3. It's firmly within the documented, busy, event-stuffed course of human history, the zone of prose and politics, in which people like ourselves worked and worried as we do.
 - 15.4. The story is about God coming into what's ordinary, and changing it. (160)

It is a tragedy

- 16. If it isn't a myth, then perhaps it is a tragedy. (161)
- 17. The happy end of Jesus's story is not a daydream of escape.
- 18. Yeshua's story has its happy ending because of its tragic one: happiness after tragedy, on top of it, through it, achievable only by going to the very end of the tragic road. (162)
- 19. Here it's important that Jesus's death was an obscure one, when it happened.
 - 19.1. He's not an Oedipus or a Prince Hamlet, someone falling from greatness.
 - 19.2. His death belongs beside the early cutting-short of the millions of lives of people too poor or too unimportant ever to have been recorded in the misleading story we call history; people only mourned by others as brief as themselves, and therefore gone from human memory as if they had never been. (162f)
- 20. It is not an accident that Christianity began as a religion "for slaves and women."* It is not an accident that, wherever it travels, it appeals first to untouchables. The last shall be first and the first shall be last, said Jesus. You'd have to turn the world upside down to do justice to God's sense of the tragedy of it. (163)
- 21. Some people ask nowadays what kind of a religion it is that chooses an instrument of torture for its symbol, as if the cross on churches must represent some kind of endorsement. The answer is: one that takes the existence of suffering seriously. (164)
- 22. Mended is not the same thing as never broken. We are not being promised that it will

be as if the bad stuff never happened. It's amnesty that's being offered, not amnesia; hope, not pretense. (166)

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- 23. To what Spufford says in the book we can add that part of the confusion about whether Jesus did claim to be God comes from the fact that he seems to make this claim always in a cryptic way – cf. for example the fact that he talks about himself not as the “Son of God” but as the “Son of Man”.
- 24. Most of the time, rather than saying about himself “I am God”, Jesus prefers to let other people infer this
 - 24.1. from his actions,
 - 24.2. from the prerogatives he advocates (forgiveness of sins and power over the Sabbath),
 - 24.3. from the way he talks about God as his Father,
 - 24.4. from the use of ambiguous titles like “Son of Man”,
 - 24.5. and using for himself the name “I am”.
- 25. This leaves us with the question as to *why* he does this, why he seems to entertain ambiguity about this crucial aspect of his identity.
- 26. We can look for an answer to this question to another assertion by Jesus, in Matthew 11-25-30

At that time Jesus declared, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth,

 - that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will.
 - All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and
 - no one knows the Son except the Father, and
 - no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.
 - Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”
 - 26.1. We have a confirmation that Jesus spoke in riddles, that is in ways which hide and reveal at the same time, intentionally
 - 26.2. Those to whom revelation is granted are called “little children”
 - 26.3. There is a sense in which we can recognize the Father only by becoming his children – that is becoming one with his own Son.
 - 26.4. That is, understanding requires transformation or conversion.

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27. We constantly use the title “God” as if we knew what it means, and “one” God as if it was similar to other things which are ‘unique’ in our experience.

28. The ways Scripture and Jesus talk about God forces us to take another approach.

29. Jesus’ reluctance to call himself “God” can be seen in parallel to God’s reluctance to give his name in Exodus 3:14

“And God said to Moses, “Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh,” sent me to you.”

29.1. Hebrew does not have past, present or future tense. The possible translations could be

- i. "I was who I was" (past tense),
- ii. "I will be who I will be" (future tense) or
- iii. "I am who I am" (present tense).

30. Karl Barth

There is no objective definition that we can discover for ourselves. We might say of this revelation of His name that it consists in the refusal of a name, but even in the form of this substantial refusal it is still really revelation, communication and illumination. For *Yahweh* means the Lord, the I who gives Himself to be known in that He exists as the I of the Lord and therefore acts only as a He and can be called upon only as a Thou in His action, without making Himself known in His I-ness as if He were a creature.¹

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¹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, trans. G. W. Bromiley, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance vol. 2/1 (London: T&T Clark, 2009), §61. 6