

JOHN'S
FIRST
EPISTLE

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John's first epistle

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Lesson one

The word of life

1 John 1: 1-4

The age to come

In John's letter we see a glimpse into the future, a display of the new world waiting to be born. The ancient Jews believed that world history was divided into two periods, or 'ages'. There was the 'present age', which was full of misery and suffering, injustice and oppressions; and there was 'the age to come', the time when God would sort it all out, would put everything right, and would in particular rescue his people from the evil they had suffered.

Unfortunately, the word for 'age' has often been translated as 'eternal' or 'eternity' which has given modern readers the idea that John, and other early Christian writers who refer to God's new age, were thinking of something 'eternal'. Something that had nothing to do with the world of space, time and matter. But this is a mistake, 'eternal life' is not something 'purely spiritual' it is the age to come, which God has promised. It is the future.

The word of life

Through Jesus God provided an advance display of the future. God has kept the age to come under wraps, as it were, waiting to reveal it at the right time. But the secret at the heart of the early Christian movement was that the age to come had already been revealed. The future had burst into the present, even though the present time wasn't ready for it. The word for the future was 'life', life as it was meant to be, life in its full, a life which had overcome death itself and was now on offer to anyone who wanted to come and take it. Life itself had come to life, had taken the form of a human being, coming into the present from God's future, coming to display God's coming age. And the name of that life-in-person is of course Jesus. That is the very heart of what John wants to say.

Of course, the very idea of God's new life becoming a person and stepping forward out of the future into the present is so enormous, so breathtaking, that a tone of wonder, of hushed awe and reverence, becomes appropriate. That is what we find in these opening verses. "That which was from the beginning". pause and think about that for a moment "which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have gazed at"pause again: your own eyes? You didn't just glimpse it, you gazed at it? Yes, says John, and what's more "our hands have handled"you touched it, this life. We knew him. We were his friends.

The light of the world

And we still are his friends. Once the future has come into the present, the present is transformed forever. The life has been ‘displayed’, has been put on show for all to see (though some prefer not to look). And we who saw it, who knew it, who knew ‘him’, are his witnesses. We have seen the future, and it is full of light and life and joy and hope.

Those who have seen this life, and have been captured by its beauty and promise, find that they have come to belong to a new kind of family, a ‘fellowship’ as we sometimes say. This word fellowship refers to the ‘sharing’ of particular goods or benefits between people; that comes into it, as we shall see, John seems to mean, that there is a kind of life, a quality of life, which is God’s very own life, and which God himself is now sharing with the people who have heard and seen the life-come-to-life called Jesus.

Fellowship with God

As his life, death and resurrection demonstrated, Jesus was clearly the life-in-person of God’s coming age. He was in fact, God’s own new life, both the life of God himself and the gift of life from God to the world. The earliest Christians quickly seized upon the words ‘father’ and ‘son’ as the simplest and clearest way of saying the unsayable at this point; that there was a common life, a deep sharing of inner reality, between God and Jesus, enough to take your breath away at the thought of such a human being. And, indeed, of such a God.

But it doesn’t stop there. This deep sharing of inner reality, this ‘fellowship’ between Father and Son has been extended. It extends to all of those who come to know, love and trust Jesus while he is alive, while he was, so to speak, on display as God’s public unveiling of the coming life. And now (this, it seems, is the point of the letter) this sharing, this ‘fellowship’, is open to others too, to others who didn’t have the chance to meet Jesus during his period of public display. This ‘sharing’ can be, and is being, extended to anyone and everyone who hears the announcement about Jesus. They can come into ‘fellowship’ with those who did see, hear and handle him. And they, in turn, are in ‘fellowship’ with the Father and the Son, with the two who are themselves the very bedrock and model of what ‘fellowship’ in this fullest sense, really means.

Announcing it to others

It may seem strange that simply telling people about Jesus is the appointed means by which such a momentous thing as this ‘fellowship’ can be extended to include new members. But John is very much aware that the opening move in the whole game was made by God himself as an act not of silent display but of verbal communication. Jesus was not only life-in-person: he was ‘the Word of life’, Life-turned-into speech, God’s speech, God’s self-communication to his people and, through them, to the wider world. In John’s gospel, of course, he refers to Jesus simply as ‘the Word’, the Word who became flesh. The point is this. God has spoken in Jesus; and God now speaks, through the words which Jesus’ friends speak and write about him, to others also, in the intention and hope that they will come to share this same ‘fellowship’. That is the point of the letter.

Lesson two

Walking in the light

1 John 1:5-2:2

We have already spoiled things

It is all very well for him to say, in his wonderful opening paragraph, that we have 'fellowship' with God himself, with the Father and the Son. But what if we have already spoiled the wonderful gift that we've been given? What if we have already ruined our lives by carelessness, stupidity or downright wickedness?

If we don't have something of that reaction, it may be because we haven't really appreciated what the word 'God' means. Think back to some of the famous God-moments in the Bible. Moses sees God in the burning bush, and does all he can to escape to avoid being caught up in God's great new project. Isaiah sees God in the Temple, and is scared for his life. Peter meets Jesus on the boat and tells him to go away because he, Peter, is a sinner. John sees the risen Jesus in glory and falls at his feet as though dead. That is the proper reaction to being told that we are being welcomed into fellowship with the Father and the Son. We have messed it up. We have already spoiled things. We are, or ought to be-ashamed. If only God would put it off until we'd had a chance to clean up!

But that's not how it works. Yes, God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. The darkness which encroaches upon our messy, rebellious, unbelieving lives cannot survive in his sight. One glance and he'll know. There's no point hiding; if we pretend to be in fellowship with him while 'walking in the dark' (in other words behaving in the less than human way we often choose) we are telling lies. If we say we have no sin, we are simply deceiving ourselves. We certainly won't deceive God. In fact, if we tried to say that we were not sinners we would be making matters worse. We would be making God out to be a liar, since he has said, in scripture and in person, that he has come to rescue us, knowing us to be sinners.

Christ's atoning sacrifice

The key is that God's future had been displayed, as we saw, in and as his Son, Jesus. But, Jesus is, of course, the one who died on the cross; and from the very earliest days of Christian faith, his followers believed that his death had been the very thing the world had been waiting for. It was the ultimate sacrifice. No more would pagans have to offer sacrifices to their gods. No more would even the Jews have to bring sacrifices to the Temple.

And that blood, that sacrificial death, God-life given on our behalf and in our place, is available for all who 'walk in the light'. That doesn't mean we have to get our act together morally speaking, before God can do anything. What it means is that when we consciously turn to the light - when we face up to what's gone wrong in the past and don't try to hide it, and when we are determined to live that way from now on, two things happen. First, we find ourselves sharing that intimate God-life, not only with God

himself but with one another. Second we find that Jesus' blood somehow makes us clean, pure and fresh inside. It deals with the nasty stain, the residual dirtiness, the ugly feeling that something went badly wrong and we can't get rid of it. All that is gone when we turn to the light and start to walk in it. All because of Jesus.

That's why John encourages us to face up to the past. No point hiding; he's going to see, he's going to know what's happened. In fact, he'll see and know more than we allow ourselves to remember. But if we make a clear breast of it, then he will forgive us and cleanse us. Why does John say at this point God is 'faithful and just'? Because God is faithful to his promises, the promise to forgive. And because, in the death of Jesus, he has shown himself to be 'just', to be in the right. This is the way he is putting the whole world to right, and us with it.

We can go on sinning then

Now it would be easy for someone to say - someone who hadn't grasped just how serious the whole situation really was - that if God was going to forgive people like that, one might as well go on sinning. You can tell when the true message of the gospel has got across, because someone will always draw that wrong conclusion from it. So John says, 'I'm writing these things so that you may not sin'! It's a delicate balance. Sinners need to know that Jesus has died for them, and that they can be fully and freely forgiven. Forgiven sinners need to know that this is not a reason to go on sinning. Both are true and are at the very heart of what it means to be a Christian.

It is for the whole world

It seems that John is writing to Jewish Christians who might have been tempted to suppose that Jesus, as Israel's Messiah, was the remedy for their problem, for their sins, and for them alone. Not a bit of it, says John. Jesus' sacrifice atones for our sins, 'and not ours only' but those of the whole world! Just as God didn't remain content to be in fellowship only with his own son, but wanted to extend that fellowship to all those who met and followed Jesus; and just as John is writing this letter so that its readers may come to share in that same divine fellowship; so now all who know themselves to be forgiven through Jesus' death must look, not at their own privilege, but at the wider task. God intends to call more and more people into this 'fellowship'.

Lesson three

God's new commandment

1 John 2: 3-14

Deliberate repetition

Sometimes when we sing hymns, the hymns tell a story. They move from one idea to another, in a linear fashion. There is something satisfying about this. We all like stories, and even when the 'story' is a sequence of ideas, it makes sense to us. We feel we have been on a journey. We have arrived somewhere where we were not before.

But sometimes, in some traditions at least, the things we sing in church are deliberately repetitive. We sing them quite differently: as a way of meditation, of stopping on one point and mulling it over, or allowing something which is very deep and important to make more of an impact on us than if we just said or sung it once and passed on. Repetition can touch, deep down inside us, parts that other, 'safer' kinds of hymns cannot reach, or do not very often.

If someone has spent a long time studying Paul, and then suddenly moves across to John, and particularly to this letter, the effect is a bit like someone moving suddenly from old-fashioned narrative hymns to the repetitive sort. One is tempted to be a bit frustrated. Surely, we think, he should get on with it, say what he means, and move on to the next point? But this isn't John's style, and perhaps the analogy of the hymn may help to explain why. He is mulling over it all, and wants his hearers to do so too. And sometimes as in verses 12-14, he seems as it were to break into song himself, into a sing-song, repetitive formula, which we should perhaps try to analyse in strict terms (why does he say this to the children the first time, and that to them the second time? and so on) but should rather appreciate it as what it is: a meditation, a long lingering gaze at his audience and what they need, at the way God works in peoples lives. He seems to be saying. Children, your sins are forgiven. Fathers, you have known the one who is from the beginning. Young people, you have conquered the evil one. Now let's say it again. And so on. Perhaps it's only as we give ourselves to the strange, haunting repetition that the meaning will begin to sink down into us.

But it isn't just in these verses that John writes in a different way from people like Paul. His whole letter is repetitive - and yet it is also on the move. He keeps coming back to very nearly the same point, but at the same time he is moving forward. So we shouldn't be surprised if we think we have heard it before. We probably have. The question is, what is the particular point John is making at this time.

A new commandment

The new major theme in this passage is that of God's commandments. We may think of 'commandments' in terms of the Ten Commandments, which for some will send us back in imagination to Moses. And we might wonder what a Christian writer is doing referring to the commandments, and to the duty to keep them. Haven't we just been told that we are forgiven? Isn't part of the point of the New Testament that we are free from the law?

Yes and no. The commandments were a kind of advance signpost, a sketching out at long range of what a genuine, lovely, fruitful human life would look like. They became a terror too many because people realised they couldn't and didn't keep them. But they remained, looking forward to God's coming day, when the life of his New Age, has come rushing forward to meet us in the present time, in the person of Jesus himself! So we should expect that, in him, we will discover the reality to which the commandments were an advance signpost.

And we do - but it doesn't look, perhaps, like everyone would have imagined. For John, as for Paul, and above all as for Jesus, the commandments are all summed up in one word: Love. The life of God's New Age is revealed as the Love of God's New Age. All other commandments - the detail of what to do and not to do - are the overflowing of this love, the love which has been newly revealed in Jesus, the love which God now intends should be revealed in and through all those who follow Jesus.

Linking the old with the new

Much of the rest of the letter will be devoted to exploring and explaining what this means. But for the moment let's look at the way John links this commandment with what has gone before - both what has gone before in the long story of Israel, and what has gone before in the letter.

In Israel: this, he says, is actually the 'old command' which they had from the beginning. It isn't in that sense 'new'. If Moses had heard Jesus talk above love, he would have said, 'That it! That's the heart of what these commandments were all about.' But, as John has already said in the letter, this command is also 'new' in a particular sense, as a gift from God's future. Love is the word that best describes the life of God's New Age, and we get to taste it and practice it in the present time.

That's why, of course, it's difficult. It's so much easier to collapse back into living the old way, the way of suspicion and hatred. But that means going back into the darkness, whereas the life of love means going forward into the light. That is both the command and the promise of these verses.

It is, of course, costly and difficult. Perhaps that's why the other new element in these verses, which occurs in the two addresses to 'young people' in verses 13 and 14, is that 'you have conquered the evil one'. We note this element, just in case everything should sound cosy and easy. Love - God's kind of love - isn't like that at all. It demands a victory, a victory over the old enemy who does his best work through human hatred. Love shines the more bright against a dark backcloth which is just as well, because that's what is there.

Lesson four

Warning against antichrists

1 John 2: 15-29

People of the lie

John is putting his finger on one great lie above all, and warning that those who accept this lie and live by it are a corrupting and dangerous influence. Those who do not believe the lie must trust God's work in them, the work of which they believe is the truth. They must hold onto it firmly.

The 'anti-power' in question we will call the 'Antimesiah'. We perhaps know this word better in its Greek form, 'Antichrist'; but since that word has been tossed around, sadly by many people over many centuries, and has been used to refer to various different people and organisations, it may help us to get behind that and into John's mind if we keep the Hebrew form, 'Antimesiah'.

But what is an 'Antimesiah'? Jesus had warned that 'false Messiah's' would rise after him and deceive many people, perhaps even some from among his own followers. At this point it's easy for us to make a mistake. We might think Jesus (and John) were referring to what we would call a 'religious' phenomenon. But at that time Palestine was full of men and movements claiming that God was acting in this way, in that way, through this movement, through that man. This was as much what we would call 'political' as what we would call 'religious'. It must have been bewildering for first-century Christians.

Many of the early Christians must have wondered, as they heard about a new movement in a neighbouring town: can this be Jesus, back again? Should I go and see? Or even: perhaps this is the real thing, and all that extraordinary business about Jesus was just a preliminary, a warm-up act? After all, since he left us nothing much seems to have happened. Just a few people being healed.

They went out from among us

It seems, some of those who had been with Jesus' followers did indeed go off after these new movements. That is what is causing the problem which John is now addressing. He is in no doubt, these movements are Antimesianic movements! They may have started out within our fellowship, but they left, because the heart of the matter was not in them.

This could look dangerously like a self-justifying position (anyone who leaves us is by definition 'not one of us'), but John has something much more important in mind. The true follower of Jesus the Messiah has been 'anointed' by his Holy Spirit, so that a real change of heart and character has happened. One of the key symptoms of that change is precisely the recognition that Jesus is indeed the Messiah. He truly is the Son of God.

The 'Antimessianic' movements are bound to deny this. If they don't, they have no reason to set up a new movement in the first place! And this is what ties them into the idea of 'people of the lie'. The greatest lie is 'to deny the Father and the Son'.

As John insists, to do this - to deny that Jesus really is God's Son - is to cut off access to the Father as well, since we only knew the Father through the Son. But the Antimessianic folk are saying of course, that this is a lie - that the basic Christian confession itself is a mistake! Jesus wasn't really God's last word to his people. There is something new. Give it all up and come with us!

You have the anointing

Don't do it, says John. These people are deceiving you. And, actually, you know this deep down, because that 'anointing' remains within you, so that without anyone teaching you from the outside, as it were, you know the truth deep within. And be assured despite what they are saying: it isn't a lie. It's the truth.

There is another level to what John is saying at this point. The word for 'anointing' is, in the Greek the same root word as 'Messiah'. 'The Messiah' after all, is 'the anointed one', God's anointed king, his one and only 'Son'. We would, therefore perhaps think of it like this. Here are the 'Antimessiah' people (the 'anti-anointed-one' people); but you have been 'Mesiah-ed', you have been anointed, so you must not be deceived by their denials. They are not only denying that Jesus is the Messiah; they are denying everything that makes you, now, who you truly are. This is the lie that will, if given its head, eat its way like rust into the imagination and heart of a Christian, or a church.

The whole passage, with these stark warnings, is framed within two short paragraphs which set the discussion in its proper context. This is the expectation of Jesus' return, his 'royal appearing'. When he 'appears' (think of it as his 'coming' if you like, but don't be misled by that into imagining that he at present is far away from you; rather, he is very near but hidden), then he will utterly transform the whole creation. And when that happens, the way of the present world will disappear. That is why we are commanded 'not to love the world'.

Renouncing the world

Generations of Western Christians have supposed that Christians are meant to renounce 'the world' in any and every sense: natural enjoyments, the pleasures of food and drink, the created order itself. Perhaps, they think, 'the world' - this world of space, time and matter - is actually evil! Perhaps we should try to live as though we were pure spirits?

No: that's not what John has in mind. As in other early Christian writings, 'the world' here, like the word 'flesh' when Paul used it, means 'the world as it places itself over against God'. The world remains God's good creation, and as such is to be enjoyed with thanksgiving. Do not collapse into what we sometimes call 'dualism', the idea that God is good and creation is bad! That way lies catastrophe. Indeed, that is part of the problem with the people who are denying that Jesus can truly be God's Son. How can he have come, they think, in human flesh? So demeaning. So degrading. Not at all, replies John. This is at the heart of it all.

So the command 'not to love the world' refers not to the physical stuff of this world, but to 'the world' as it is in rebellion against God" 'the world' as the combination of things that draw us away from God. The flesh, the eyes, life itself - all can become idols and like all idols they demand more and more from those who worship them. And all idolatry draws us into the lie, or if we are not careful into 'The Lie'. We must celebrate all the goodness of the world, all God's goodness to us within his creation. But we must not worship it. We must thank God for it - and pray and watch for the day when it will be transformed by the royal appearing of his Son.

Lesson five

Born of God

John 3: 1-10

We shall be like him

There are many stories about people who are born blind who then receive the gift of sight. One I heard not long ago concerned a man who had gone blind in early adult life. He had then, subsequently, got married and had children. They could all see him, but he had never set his eyes on them. Then, one day, the medical breakthrough came, the operation was a success, and he could see at last. What an amazing moment! To come face to face, eye to eye, with the people he had loved but never seen. There is something transformative about eye contact. People who spend a lot of time looking at one another sometimes come to resemble each other. Perhaps this is because they are instinctively copying one another's facial expressions until their muscles and tissue begin to be reshaped in that way. Imagine beginning that process at last after years of love which had been expressed through word and touch but never before through sight.

If we have any love for Jesus right now, our deepest longing ought to be that we would come face to face with him at last, to see his smile, to catch his facial expression, to begin to know him in a whole new way. And that, of course, is what's promised here in verse 2, with a mysterious twist to it. 'It hasn't yet been revealed', says John, 'what we are going to be, but we know that when he is revealed we shall be like him. Because we shall see him as he is'. Everything John says, throughout the letter, hinges on this promise.

Our future state

So what don't we know about our future state? Well, thinking about the resurrection, or about God's whole new world in which our resurrection will take place, is very difficult. We can say it's not quite like this, or it's more like that. We know that, because the present world is God's good creation, it will be like this only more so: without corruption, decay, death, injustice, illness, sorrow and shame. There will be no tears. There will be no barbed wire. Butwhat will we be like?

Perhaps we should say: like we are, only much more so. More gloriously physical, not less. Embodied but not subject to sickness or death. Able to celebrate the joys of God's world but no longer lured or seduced into abusing them, into lusting after them, into worshipping them as though they were divine.

All that is, I believe, true. But far more important is to say: we will be like Jesus. Think of the risen Jesus: the same, yet strangely different (or why did his disciples at breakfast on the sea shore after his resurrection want to ask, 'who are you?' John 21:12). He had gone through death, and still bore the marks of the nails, yet he was never going to die again. He seemed to belong to both worlds, heaven and earth, at once - and that, of course, will be appropriate for the new world, since then heaven and earth will have come together completely and forever. But I suspect this is just the start of it.

I reckon that when it happens the reality will stand in relation to these pointing-ahead-into-the-fog kind of statement. The real risen Jesus, when he meets us, will far outshine any picture we might have formed of him in advance. When our blindness is cured, we will gaze and gaze on the face through which God has loved us so much. And perhaps - maybe this is the point of what John is saying - perhaps his look will transform our faces. Perhaps we will begin to copy his expressions

Why the speculation

So what's the point of all the speculation? Quite simply this: that we constantly need to be reminded that there is a glorious future ahead. Of course, we also need reminding that the present, too, is glorious, since it is into this present world that Jesus has come to display God and the Life of the New Age. That already is enough to tell us how much God loves us (verse 1); if Jesus is the Son of God, God's love in Jesus has made us, too, his children, his sons and daughters. And if that's just the start, who knows what the ultimate end will be.

We need to be reminded of all this for a number of reasons, which will grow to a crescendo over the next two chapters. But before we get to the positive impact of this future hope, we need to come face to face with the negative one. Actually, it's not a 'negative one' it is enormously positive. What do I mean?

If we have a hope like that up ahead of us, we should make every effort in the present time to be pure in the same way as he is pure. That is quite a challenge, but it makes all the sense in the world. If you are going to meet a very important colleague in another country, you might think it worth making the effort to learn at least some of their language in advance. If you are going to meet a future employer, you want to make sure you have learned enough about the business to make the right impression. And if you are going to meet Jesus himself

Make yourself pure

You would want to make yourself 'pure'. But how? In verses 4-10 John issues what feels to us a very worrying challenge. 'Everyone who abides in him does not go on sinning.' What does this mean?

John is quite clear, and we can't get away from it. Following Jesus, 'abiding in him' (one of John's regular ways of saying 'belonging to him', implying that kind of life sharing we saw earlier), means a transformed character. John knows, of course, that Christians do still sin from time to time; there is a remedy for that. 'If anyone does sin, we have one who pleads our cause before the Father - namely, the Righteous One, Jesus the Messiah!' What he is talking about here is the whole habit of life, 'going on sinning', sinning as the regular mode in which we live. We should be doing our best to avoid all kinds of sin, all the time, though we will surely fail; but the failures must take place within a settled habit of life in which sin is no longer setting the tone. We are playing a different piece of music now, and even if our fingers slip sometimes and play some wrong notes. Notes that belong to the music we used to play, that doesn't mean we are going back to play that old music for real once more.

It's not surprising that John says 'don't let anyone deceive you', because there have been many, and there are many today, who teach that sinning is perfectly all right. It isn't. To carry on as though no change of life was required is to show whose side you are on, and it isn't God's. God, as he says in verses 1 and 2, has made us his children in a whole new way, and being fathered by God means that our new selves, our new real selves, cannot and will not sin habitually, as our way of life.

And the greatest sin, it seems. Is the failure to love. That points ahead too much of the rest of the letter.

Lesson six

The challenge of love

1 John 3:11 - 4:6

Seeing with eyes of faith

In 2 Kings, chapter 6 we read the story of Israel's deliverance from the Arameans. The context is one of continual skirmishing, and sometimes open warfare, between Israel, the northern half of the people of God, and Syria, their northern neighbours. The Syrian king has discovered that all his plans and deliberations are being revealed to the king of Israel because Elisha, the prophet in Israel, is being granted secret knowledge of them. So the king of Syria sends his army to track down Elisha and take him captive.

The next day, Elisha's servant discovers that there, all around their city, is an army with horses and chariots. He runs back to Elisha in a panic. What are they going to do? Elisha's answer is rightly famous: 'Don't be afraid,' he says 'There are more with us than there are with them.' What does he mean? Then he prays that God would open the young man's eyes. He does so and Elisha's servant sees the reality: the mountain is full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha. From then on things naturally take a very different turn.

Greater is he who is in you

This sense of discovering that the forces with us are greater than the forces on the other side, despite initial appearances, comes again and again in Scripture, and what John says here is one more instance. It always takes faith to see and know the reality, of course. Like Peter trying to walk on the water, it's all too easy to begin to doubt, and then we are in trouble. But as John says here (verse 4), 'the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world'. He has already warned us against loving 'the world', and how it goes to work. But we also see, more powerfully the reality of God's presence with us, giving us the strength to overcome.

What is this battle and why do we need this encouragement? Clearly the people to whom John is writing are in danger of being at best thoroughly confused, and at worst blown right off course, by all the different ideas, different claims, different would-be prophets with their various oracles, and so on, that are swirling all around them. We knew so little of the first century, comparatively speaking, and can hardly begin to tell what precisely was going on. But from the hints in the passage and elsewhere we can figure out enough to see what John's readers might see as they, like Elisha's servant, came out of the house in the morning and stared in dismay at the forces ranged against them.

Sorting the truth from the lies

In particular, they are once again confronted with 'false prophets'. As we noted before, the problem about false prophets is that you can't tell them apart from the true ones-at first sight. They seem devout; they seem reasonable; they claim to have a word from God; and so who are we to disagree? But John knows, as indeed Jesus himself had

warned, and as we in our day need to learn all over again, that not everyone who claims to be a prophet is a prophet in fact. So how can you tell? How can you 'test the spirits', as he says?

The answer is that you need to listen carefully, and sift and weigh what you hear. Such people are unlikely to come out directly with curses or absurd teaching that is obviously absurd. That would give the game away. But gradually, as you listen, you may discern a fatal flaw. They don't really believe that Jesus the Messiah has come in the flesh. That is the criterion John offers in verse 2.

We can't be sure, because there were so many 'religious' movements, as well as political ones, in the first century that it's quite possible the 'false prophets' John has in mind didn't belong to any particular group that we know of from elsewhere. But to reject that Jesus has come in the flesh looks suspicious like one branch at least of what came to be known as 'gnosticism' - a kind of religion that specialised in secret 'knowledge' (gnosis), and thought that by gaining this knowledge one might escape entirely from the physical world, and enter a realm of pure spirit.

The gnostics and other false teachings

For people who embraced this teaching - and it can be made to sound, for a while at least, quite like some bits of the genuine Christian message - it was out of the question that Jesus, the Messiah, should really have 'come in the flesh'. He was surely, they thought, a spiritual being. He couldn't have compromised that spiritual identity by having anything to do with 'flesh', the sordid, dirty, physical stuff, that needed to eat and drink, to urinate and defecate, to sleep and even - horror of all horrors - to die.

And so, when they talked about 'Jesus', it wasn't the real Jesus they were referring to. It was someone who only 'seemed' to be a human like the rest of us. They made up stories about how he hadn't really died, because he hadn't really been a genuine, fleshly human all along. He was a spiritual being who came to reveal to others, to people who had a spark of the same 'spirit' already in them, that they were 'spiritual' too, and that by following his way they could escape the world altogether. There are many religious movements today, including some major ones, that similarly deny that Jesus could have actually have been an ordinary 'fleshly' human being, and died a cruel death.

Agreeing that Jesus the Messiah has come in the flesh is the crucial test, because that is not, actually, an extra bit added on to the Christian message; as John saw in writing his gospel, it was the vital, central point. 'The word became flesh and lived among us.' Take that away, and true Christian faith crashes to the ground. That's why any spirit that is making someone deny that Jesus has come in the flesh is the spirit of the 'Antimesiah'. Stop people believing, at all costs, in the incarnation of the Word! That spirit has been alive and active in our day, as many people have poured scorn on the very idea of the incarnation, of God actually becoming a human. It remains a huge claim, as it always was. But it is central. It's non-negotiable.

Preaching to be popular

At the moment, then, for John and perhaps for us, there is a conflict. People who speak 'from the world' going with the grain of popular opinion, will always find it easy to poke fun at the genuine beliefs of Christian faith. They will gain a hearing (verse 5). Sometimes all a Christian can do, faced with that, is cling on to the bold and basic

statement that, so far as we can tell, the meaning of the word 'God' is actually defined in relation to the Jesus, who, we believe, came from this God and became flesh in our midst. Take that away, and we simply don't know who God is anymore. That's why we are bound to claim, stark though it sounds, that 'people who know God listen to us, but people who are not from God do not listen to us'.

No doubt, in our day, such a statement sounds impossibly arrogant. But John doesn't mean it like that. He is putting it sharply, almost telegraphically. His whole letter as we see right at the end, is about holding on to the true God and rejecting the claims of idols. And the way we know the true God is through Jesus. You can't get round that.

That's why he needs to assure his hearers, like Elisha with his servant. If the true God is indeed the source of our life, then you have already won the victory! The one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world. It may not look or feel like that. But that's where faith comes in. Faith that the living God did indeed take flesh, our flesh, in Jesus. When that message is coming across, the spirit of faith is at work.

Lesson seven

God's love

1 John 4: 7-21

Jesus' love incarnate

Statistics aren't everything, but some times they are quite revealing. The word 'love', or some form of it, occurs no fewer than twenty-seven times in these fifteen verses. No need to ask, that what the subject-matter is here. In fact, we seem to be at the very heart of the letter. This is what John must want to say. Everything that has gone before leads up to this; everything that follows, in the final chapter, solidifies it and rounds it off. 'Love' is what John has on his mind.

The vital connection of thought here goes like this. John has just stressed that Jesus, the Messiah, has indeed come in the flesh, and that to deny that is to reveal oneself as a false prophet. But this is not a meaningless formula which people have to learn in order to pass some arbitrary doctrinal test. It is a symptom of what Christianity is all about. The Christian faith grows directly out of, and most directly express, the belief that in Jesus the Messiah the one true God has revealed himself to be - love incarnate. And those who hold this faith, and embrace it as the means of their own hope and life, must themselves reveal the self-same fact before the watching world. Love incarnate must be the badge that the Christian community wears, the sign not only of who they are but of who their God is.

Love the very essence of what we are

How easy to write, how hard to achieve. Unfortunately various experiences of actual church life, suggest that churches should have a 'danger' sign outside, warning the people to expect nasty, gossipy, snide conversations and behaviour if they came in. That sadly, has always been a reality in church life. That is why, from St Paul onwards, Christian writers have been at pains to insist that it should not be like that with us. The rule of love, I say it again, is not an optional extra. It is the very essence of what we are about. If this means we need some new reformations, so be it.

Follow the argument through. Basic to it all, in verses 7-10, is the fact that God's love is revealed precisely in sending Jesus, his son, into the world to be the sacrifice that would atone for our sin. Standing at the foot of the cross, gazing on the length to which God's love has gone for us, it's impossible (unless we are particularly hard-hearted; unless as he says, we simply haven't known God at all) not to sense the power and possibilities within that love. This is the force that has changed the world, and could still change the world if only the followers of Jesus would really come on board with it.

God must be seen in us

Therefore, 'if that's how God loved us, we ought to love one another in the same way' (verse 11). This is, if anything, an even stronger statement that many might imagine. You could hear it as simply saying, 'There: God has set us an example; we should copy it.' That is true. But the next verse shows a greater depth. 'Nobody

has ever seen God. If we love one another, God abides in us and his love is completed in us.'

In John's gospel chapter 1 and verse 18 he says this, 'No-one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known.' The meaning of that statement is striking: we don't really know who 'God' is - until we look at Jesus. Now we see the meaning of our present statement in 1 John 4:12: people don't really know who "God" is until they see it revealed in the life of Christians. Until, that is, 'his love is completed in us.' What God launched decisively in Jesus, he wants to complete in and through us. As Jesus unveiled God before a surprised and unready world, so must we. Love is that important.

We must love in word and deed

All this can and must come about because of the gift of God's spirit. The spirit enables us to bear witness to what the father has done in sending the son. Again, the witness must of course come not in the word but in the deed, as John says in 3:18. Our love must 'come in the flesh', just as God's love did.

That's why, at the end of the passage, John comes back to the same point. If you say you love God, but don't love your brother or sister (he meant a fellow member of the Christian community), you are quite simply telling lies. The same door that opens to let out your love to God is the door that opens to let out love to your neighbour. If you're not doing the latter, you're not doing the former.. It's as simple - and as devastating - as that.

Our lives are God's love living through us

We may well find this daunting. Who can live up to it? But in verse 17 and 18 John moves almost into lyrical mode as he talks not only about the fear that we should have of being found out, of failing to come up to the mark, but of the boldness and confidence that we shall have on the day of judgement. He does not say, as we might expect, that we have this boldness and confidence because we look away from ourselves and simply trust in God's all-powerful, all-conquering love. No. He says that 'just as he is, so are we within this world'. What does he mean? He means, it seems, that if God revealed himself in the world by turning his love into flesh and blood, when we do the same we should realise that we are 'completing' God's love. What will be operating through us will be the true love of the true God.

When that happens, there is no need to fear any longer. Love that has been made complete in this way leaves no room for fear. Once you learn to give yourself to others as God gave himself to us, there is nothing to be afraid of anymore, just a complete circle of love. No doubt this, like some other things John says, leaves us breathless, wondering if we will ever attain to the simplicity of faith and life. But did we expect that having the true, living God come to make his dwelling with us, inviting us to make our dwelling with him (verse 16), would be a kind of easy-going, half-hearted, hobby-religion? God has taken us utterly seriously. How can we not do the same with him?

A mutual indwelling

At the heart of this passage we find, repeated, a little word which means a whole world to John, as in his gospel it means so much to Jesus himself. 'Those who live in love live in God and God lives in them (verse 16). This comes in various other places, including the previous verse, but this is its fullest expression. The word is a simple one, meaning 'dwell' or 'remain' or 'make one's home'; but the reality is profound going to the heart of what Christian faith is all about. This is the meaning of fellowship, the sharing of a common life, between the Father, the Son and all those who belong to the Son, who confess 'that Jesus is God's Son' (verse 15). It is a mutual indwelling: we in God and God in us. Once more, this is easy to say, but huge and hard to take in. Harder still to keep your balance to maintain this life, day by day and year by year, with the dangerous winds of false prophecy blowing around our heads and the pull and drag of 'the world' at our feet. Only powerful love can keep us upright. And that powerful love is to be found as always, as we gaze at the cross (verses 9-11).

Lesson eight

Faith wins the victory

1 John 5: 1-21

Overcoming the world

At the start of chapter 5 John introduces a new element: everything fathered by God conquers the world (verse 4). What is this about? Why should we want not just to resist the persuading temptations of the world but to 'overcome' it? What does it mean, and how does it happen?

Why, to begin with, does he say 'everything' (best translation) rather than 'everyone'? We can only guess, but it may be that he is referring not only to human beings who, as in verse 1, have been fathered by God', but to that which results from their life and works: the things they do, as well as the people they are.

So what is this 'conquest', and how does it come about? John seems, here, to be very close to a stream of thought we find in the gospel of John where Jesus speaks of 'the world rulers' being 'thrown out'. John 12:31; where he declares that 'the ruler of this world' has 'nothing to do with me' John 14:30; and where, after warning the disciples that they will face persecution in the world, concludes, 'but cheer up; I have conquered the world!'

In the gospel, all this is meant so it seems, to draw our attention to the unbalanced conversation that takes place between Jesus, Pontius Pilate and the chief priests. Jesus and Pilate argue about the great themes of kingdom, truth and power, with the chief priests accusing Jesus and finally persuading Pilate to have him crucified. Somehow we are meant to understand these events and their aftermath, more particularly Jesus' death as 'King of the Jews', are in fact the moment when, and the means by which, 'the world ruler' is being 'thrown out'. They are the means by which Jesus is in fact conquering the world, even though it looks for the moment as though the world is conquering him. There is a deep mystery here, and this is not the place to explore it further.

He who came by water and blood

In John's gospel, the writer emphasises that, at Jesus' death, water and blood came out of his side when the centurion pierced it with his spear. This, John says, is something he can personally vouch for. His 'witness' is true. And suddenly we realise that the same thought is expressed in this passage 1 John 5: 4-9 'The victory that conquers the world is the saving death of Jesus'. And those who by faith cling on to the God who is made known personally in and as the Jesus who died on the cross - they share that victory, that conquest of 'the world'.

'The world', it seems, is not just the source of temptation and distraction. It is a positive power of evil, presenting the arrival of its own creator to claim his rightful lordship over it ('He was in the world', said John in the gospel, 'and the world was made through him, and the world did not know him'). It will fight back - a fight which, in the

Gospel comes to its head when Jesus, representing God's kingdom, faces Pilate, representing Caesar's kingdom, the supreme power in the world. And the death of Jesus, with the water and the blood already separated, showing beyond doubt that his death had been real, gives the lie to any who might say that he didn't really die, or that he wasn't really fully human, 'come in the flesh'.

Possible persecution

It is quite possible - though we can't be sure of this - that John expects his hearers themselves to face actual persecution. If so the 'witness' or 'testimony' that they are to bear, welling up within themselves by the work of the spirit, might well turn into that other kind of 'witness', namely martyrdom. The word is the same in the Greek. If so, this will be seen by John as further confirmation of the whole point. But his summary in verses 11 and 12 draws the whole thing together so well that it is hard to do other than repeat it. This is the witness - the witness that God has borne to his Son, and that the spirit bears within us: God has given us the life of the age to come, and this life is in his Son. This is what we saw right at the start of the letter. Therefore, dramatically and categorically: anyone who has the Son has life. Anyone who does not have the Son of God does not have life. Whether or not we like stark and plain conclusions, there are times when they matter, and this is one of those times.

Keep yourself from idols

We might imagine that John was warning against idol - worship, which of course flourished right across the ancient world. But I think he means something more subtle than that, more in keeping with what he has been saying all through.

The point of insisting on God's love, on the vital importance of loving one another, and above all on Jesus the Messiah having come in the flesh, is that this isn't just one necessary truth among many, part of the coherent structure of Christian belief. It is the sign that we are actually worshipping the true God rather than some man-made idol.

The idol in question, however, would not be the one that was actually carved and placed in a temple. The idol in question would be one that would be called 'God', and might well be worshipped by some people who called themselves 'Christians'. But it would be a different god, not the true one at all. The true God is known, as far as John is concerned, by the fact that he sent his Son to come into the world in human flesh and to die a genuine human death. Deny that, and you're not just denying something about Jesus. You're denying something about God.

This, then, is 'the true God', and this life which we have in him is indeed 'the life of the age to come'. The creator has brought his future purposes up into our present. That is why something radically new has been launched upon the world, even at the drastic cost of God's own Son. This is why sharp conflict has come into being, between those who represent this new life and those who are desperately trying to contain the new wine in old bottles, to insist that nothing quite so drastic has happened.

Praying with confidence

What then for those who find themselves caught up in this extraordinary and unprecedented overlap of the two pages? Those who believe in Jesus, who abide in God,

can pray with a new, bold confidence. They stand at the place where heaven and earth meet, and are encouraged to draw down the blessings of heaven into the life of earth, and to know as they make their requests that they have already been granted -even though, as scripture itself and Christian experience both teach they have been granted in ways one had not expected. Perhaps, Christians should just start praying a bit more thoroughly for more specific things, quoting the promise back at the God who does not want us to make him a liar (4:10).

Sin that leads to death

One of the things we are to pray for is for those who are wandering from the path. It's hard to know exactly where John draws the line between deadly and non-deadly sin. Perhaps he means that those who have denied that Jesus is come in the flesh have committed a sin which puts them beyond the reach of redemption, since they have cut off the only means by which man can be saved. But one of the comforting things about this passage is the light it sheds on verse 18. Without this, we might suppose that John thinks all Christians have stopped sinning altogether; with it, it is clear that he does not indeed mean, as it is translated, 'everyone fathered by God does not go on sinning'. It is the continuous habit of life that here concerns him. Clearly he would rather one did not sin at all, but occasional sins, a blip on the chart as it were, can be prayed for, can be confessed and forgiven. They are quite different from the hard-hearted sin which carries on regardless, and which even comes to be seen as not sin at all.

Keep safe

Believers are 'everyone fathered by God', but Jesus is 'The One par excellence who is Fathered by God'; and he, Jesus, will keep believers under his protection so that the evil one, who for the moment retains power over the world, cannot do them harm. It may not always feel like that. But part of the victory which consists of faith (5:4) is believing that Jesus has in fact defeated all the powers that might endanger us, and that we are 'in him' and so 'in the truth' as opposed to being 'in the lie', the lie of which the world has done its best to persuade us.

The true God. The one Jesus. The life of the age to come. Love given, love passed on. This is where we stand. This is the witness of John.

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