

Reflecting on the Resurrection – St. John ***‘Breakfast and the Bible’*** **1 John 3:11-24**

We're in the Easter season, when we make a point of celebrating the Resurrection of Jesus. Admittedly we're doing so in a rather different way this year! It's good to be reminded that those first believers in Jesus were not meeting in grand purpose-built buildings but usually in their homes, in small groups. They were often in fear for their lives and well-being. Neither did they have the New Testament as we know it to help them understand what was going on. As the Church grew, however, key apostles started to write to the fledgling churches to help them become more familiar with the teachings of Jesus and how to apply them. Key amongst these were Peter, James, John and Paul. Indeed, their writings make up most of the New Testament. So let's see what each of them has to say as they reflected back on the momentous events of that first Easter.

We continue our mini-series with John. Although there are several references to 'John' in the New Testament, traditionally the author of the letters of John was regarded as John the Apostle, and the author of the fourth Gospel. Today, we will look at 1 John 3:11-24.

John – the loving pastor

John's epistles show us his true qualities as a loving pastor of the congregations over which he has oversight. He often refers to them as 'My little children' – a term of endearment and one used by Jesus of his followers (John 13:33). Like the letter to the Hebrews, there is no opening greeting which reveals to us the name of the author(s) of the letter we know as 1 John. In 2 and 3 John, the author only identifies himself (we'll assume a 'he' for sake of argument) as 'the elder' – a term for a church leader. Yet the earliest extant Greek codices (manuscripts) of what came to be the New Testament contain the Johannine epistles. There are allusions to themes and phrases from 1 John in early writings from the church Fathers (such as Polycarp from the early 2nd century AD) but the first quotations attributed to the 'Epistle of John' are from around the mid-2nd century AD. Irenaeus of Lyons (c.130-200AD) connects 1 and 2 John with the author of the Fourth Gospel and describes him as 'a disciple of the Lord'. For most of the history of the Church that has been the default position. If that is the case, then we know that John the Apostle was the last surviving of the eye-witnesses of Jesus, living to the end of the 1st century AD and, for a period, was a leader of the church in Ephesus. It is believed that he died there as an old man – which makes a refreshing change from being martyred – the lot of most of the apostles! The opening verses of 1 John are those of an eye-witness, reprised in 4:14.

Background to John

John's care for his 'little children' is set against the backdrop of the serious challenge of heretical teachings of false teachers that were starting to pervade the churches and cause serious harm to the true message of Jesus, his once-for-all saving death and resurrection. John does not write polemically, as a head-on challenge to the teachers, but pastorally to strengthen and firmly establish his readers in the faith as they have received it and, notably, reminding them of the command to love and its outworking in our actions. If someone claims to love God but does not show love in action for their brothers and sisters in Christ, then their love for God is bogus (1 John 4:20-21). He wants them to be joyful in their faith, without fear ("perfect love casts out fear" (1 John 4:18)), to be assured about their eternal life in Christ and to live holy lives. He does warn them, however, not to listen to the false teachers and to look out for those who are opposed to Christ – literally 'the antichrist' (1 John 2:18). He is mainly emphasising the positive, however: that "God is light and in him there is no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5b) and "...if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin" (1 John 1:7).

1 John 3:11-24

Verses 11-17

- John takes his 'little children' back to the Gospel that they first received; the '*kerygma*' – the heart-wood of the Christian message as proclaimed by the first Christian apostles. This centres around the salvific work of Jesus for all humanity and all time by his death and resurrection.
- He reminds them of the command to 'love one another' (11) which came from the lips of Jesus himself on the eve of his crucifixion (John 13:34). True love shapes our actions.
- He recalls the unloving actions of Cain (12), in Genesis 4, whose envy of his brother resulted in him committing murder. The message that hating our brothers and sisters is tantamount to murdering them (15) recalls Jesus' words in Matthew 5:21-22. He uses the illustration to explain to his readers why it may be that they themselves are hated by a world which is so often out of kilter with God and his loving purposes.
- Hatred put Christ on the cross. By his willing laying down of his innocent life for us, he showed us that true and self-sacrificial (*agape*) love overcomes hatred (16). When we become Christians and are baptised into Christ's death and resurrection it is God's love that enables us to pass from death to life (14). In the old parlance, we are 'quickened'.
- **Questions for us: in what ways might we be distracted from the original message of the Gospel? How might John's teaching about Cain help us deal with adverse reactions from those around us to our loving acts in the name of Jesus?**

Verses 18-24

- John exhorts his readers to show that this *agape* love is real through the truthfulness of our actions (18)-(19). It is something tangible that no one can gainsay. One of the most powerful ways of reaching out to non-Christians is through the testimony of Christians who have seen the evidence of Christ's love at work in their lives and who also show forth that love in actions towards others, thus making a positive difference. Our lives are a 'shop-window for Jesus'; others can see evidence of God on the move in them – hopefully! That is especially true in our families, communities and places of work, paid or otherwise. (Don't be like the double-glazing showroom I once saw in North Hull which had a cracked window in its frontage. Not a great advertisement for its products!)
- The condemning heart (20) is something that so many of us have. Something in our past is niggling away at us, or perhaps something that was said to us that has left a scar. Perhaps we feel a sense of unworthiness? I have seen it so often. And it can be so crippling to our growth as Christians. John's teaching is that Jesus wants us to have uncondemning hearts and a freedom, even boldness, as we approach God in the name of Jesus (21). The false teachers who were causing such issues for his readers included the 'Gnostics' who claimed to have special 'inner knowledge' and were trying to enslave the church members to believe that, unless they behaved in a certain way and jumped through certain hoops, they could not draw close to God. Thus they were taking away from the work of Christ on the cross by claiming that it was not enough to have faith in Jesus and to love one another (23).
- John reminds them that, as we come into fellowship with Jesus ('abide in Christ') that, beautifully, God comes to abide in us through the Spirit. This takes us firmly into the words of Jesus on the night before he died in John 14:26, 15:26 and 16:13-14.
- **Questions for us? Are we ready to share something of our testimony if someone were to ask us what makes a difference in the way we behave and act? Do we suffer from a 'condemning heart' – to ourselves or towards others?**

The words of a well-known hymn seem an appropriate prayer in response:

*Love Divine, all loves excelling, joy of heaven to earth come down;
Fix in us thy humble dwelling, all thy faithful mercies crown.
Jesus, thou art all compassion, pure unbounded love thou art;
Visit us with thy salvation, enter every trembling heart.*