**Sunday 11th April 2021**

Psalm 133

1 John 1:1 – 2:2

When I was choosing the reading for today, I once again used the textweek lectionary for suggestions – it gives a choice of 4 readings. An obvious choice would have been from John 20 when Jesus appeared, but Thomas did not believe until he himself saw Jesus. This would have been more in the timeline of Easter, shortly after the resurrection which we celebrated last week.

However, this reading from 1 John does not immediately follow on from the resurrection – in fact it is believed to have been written towards the end of the first century, so a good 50 years afterwards – but it highlighted to me that despite Easter when Jesus was crucified, became the atoning sacrifice for all of us, and was resurrected, that there were still doubts and misunderstandings.

And these misunderstandings were not simply those who did not have any knowledge of Jesus – John was writing this letter to believers, to Christians who had accepted the gospel of Jesus. As the letter does not include details of the recipient it is likely to have been circulated to many churches. But what was the purpose of writing this letter?

At the time of writing a new wave of Christianity was emerging: Gnosticism. Those who promoted this religion believed that the Spirit is entirely good and that all matter, mainly the body, is entirely evil. This religion also then had other factions – some saying that Jesus only had a body, and some saying that the divine Christ joined the body of Jesus at baptism and then departed from him before He died. Both views denied Christ’s humanity – denied that the man Jesus was entirely the Son of God.

John’s opening sentences now hold even more significance than if we read it without background knowledge. “That which was from the beginning”. John is re-iterating that what he is saying is not a new doctrine, that God has not changed. He then continues “which we have heard, which we have seen with our own eyes, which we have looked at and touched”.

The fact that John has included all three senses again is an emphasis of his witness – his first hand experience. Hearing God was not a new thing – we read about God communicating with Israel through prophets in the OT. Even writing that Jesus had been seen was not enough for John, but also to state that they had looked at him (so not a fleeting apparition) and touched him signified that Jesus was a real man. As it is the same sentence that begins with “That which was from the beginning” leaves readers in no doubt that John is stating that Jesus, the divine Son of God was fully man who could be touched.

John in his first paragraph has stated that he is proclaiming the Word of life – the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ – so that the readers could have fellowship with them and each other. Ultimately though they would also have fellowship with the Father and with His Son, Jesus Christ. You may notice that there is the absence of the Holy Spirit being mentioned. This should not by any means lead us to believe that John did not think the Holy Spirit unimportant, the lesser of the trinity. It simply emphasizes the reason that he is writing – to directly counter the Gnostics damaging theology denying the incarnate Jesus as the Son of God.

To understand the importance of fellowship we need to again look at what the Gnostics believed. As the Spirit was entirely good, the evil body was imprisoning the Spirit and could only be released by knowledge – special knowledge alone would bring complete enlightenment. Complete enlightenment came from this certain lofty knowledge. Not everyone would be able to attain, so created cliques – exclusivity.

John is explicit that the purpose that he shares his experience in knowing Jesus is to bring about fellowship – this goes beyond friendship and camaraderie: it is a deep union of the believer with each other and with Christ. In John 4:36 Jesus said “Even now the reaper draws his wages, even now he harvests the crop for eternal life, so that the sower and the reaper may be glad together”. It is a blessing and a consecrating, as we read in Psalm 133. God’s anointing oil that flows in abundance.

And John states that proclaiming the truth of Jesus to others, to increase those in fellowship, for more people to know that salvation is brought about by reconciliation to God, through Christ, will make his joy complete. We cannot be satisfied with just knowing the truth ourselves. It is something to be celebrated, but we should constantly want to be sharing that Word of life with others.

John then proceeds to declare that God is light. In Him there is no darkness.

The Gnostics were saying that evil could not harm the enlightened spirit, hence they were righteous despite any immoral behavior. They believed that salvation was escape from the body. Faith in Jesus had no part it in – just that special knowledge. So the breaking of God’s law was of no moral consequence – the actions of the body were separate from the knowledge that they carried within, so they could have spiritual communion with God independent of physical morality.

John says that God is light. The purpose of light is to shine, that it is not hidden, that it brings revelation and implies holiness and purity – absolute moral perfection.

As we continue in the passage, John uses the words “if we say” before stating the false teaching that the Gnostics were spreading at that time. But he then continues with “but if we” before countering it with the positive and true statement.

“If we claim” (Gnostics) to have fellowship with him yet walk in darkness, we lie. As God is light the opposite must be darkness, where there are secrets, shadows in which to hide and with light there is no place for that – secrets will always cause a barrier to authentic fellowship. Indifference to morality must therefore be nonsense – God is interested in the whole of us. John continues “But if we” (truth to follow) walk in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son, purifies us from all sin.

If we walk in the light, we should be without deceit or dishonesty, nothing should be hidden from God. We should be sincere. A French word used by sculptures: If you used one piece of stone. Some would have cracks that would be carefully filled and concealed, but sin-cere would be without any blemish.

John again leads us to Jesus, that His blood that was shed for us is what cleanses and purifies us. John has not used the past tense either, purified – he says purifies us – a continuous and present process.

If the Gnostics claim there is no sin they are not estranged from God, there is no need of the cleansing blood of Jesus. A denial of God’s plan and love. John continues to bring the truth to counter these claims.

John continues “if we claim” to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. “If we confess” he is faithful and just and will forgive us. God’s faithfulness is all through the bible – and in Jeremiah 31:34 it says “For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more”. Again, John is not preaching anything new.

But what about “he is just”? That implies judgement and punishment is usually at the forefront of people’s minds when they consider judgement. But Christ died, once for all. Punishment has already been administered on the cross.

John finally states “if we claim” we have not sinned we make Him out to be a liar. Now, the way this may be perceived is that I am implying that all Gnostics were inherently immoral – doing anything that they wanted all the time. But what about those who may believe this doctrine, but still lived a good life – not finding pleasure in whatever we immediately think when considering immorality? Are we claiming then that sin is only physical, or psychological, or to do with social causes? What about our Spirituality? What about denying God himself, is that a sin?

John does not directly counter the last point as he has in the other two examples. He begins the sentence “My dear children”. This phrase firstly points to the fact that he was advanced in age. Even though he was getting on in years his enthusiasm and conviction to share the truth of Jesus in any way he was able had not wained. Secondly, it showed his tenderness and pastoral care for those he was addressing.

John often explains the purpose of his writing in the letter; on this occasion it was to prevent anyone from committing sin. John has been clear that he would not and could not condone sin. The Gnostics were promoting a new religion that excused sin and offered fellowship with God on easy terms. But this was, and still is, false teaching. It would bring about separation from God for those who followed these ideas, when the truth was being plainly presented to them by those who had witnessed Jesus first-hand.

How do we feel about people today being led astray? If people are not hearing the truth of Jesus then they will be led astray without any hope. It is not for us to convert everyone, or anyone, but it is for us to share the truth of Jesus with them. Jesus is the one who will convict them of the truth of His name – and we may have a bigger part to play in the lives of some people – but we can only be ourselves and trust that God will be using us in His strength and for His plan.

There is always a tension when speaking about sin. You can be either too lenient or too harsh, neither is helpful.

If you are too lenient you convey that it is OK to continue for your sinful ways to become habit and no consequences. If you are too harsh you take away the truth of forgiveness and restoration. John has explained it rather well in the last passage – if we just expand it a little. He writes “we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense – Jesus Christ the Righteous One”.

When he writes using the word “defense” it depicts an advocate. Someone who is called alongside, anyone who is summoned to the assistance of another. It is particularly used in law courts in the form of a barrister.

Jesus spoke of the Holy Spirit as an advocate in John 15:26 “When the Counselor comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father, he will testify about me”.

The Holy Spirit is Christ’s advocate on earth, pleading Christ’s cause before a lost world.

Jesus is our advocate in heaven, pleading our cause with the Father. Do not get confused, Christ is not pleading our innocence, rather pleading His death on the cross as grounds for our acquittal – His atoning sacrifice (At one) to bring us back into fellowship with our Father, because of His love for us.

The purpose of John’s letter was to write the truth of Jesus so that they would recognize false teachings and not succumb to them. He re-iterated to the believers the assurance of salvation. It also emphasizes the truth that Paul wrote in Romans 12:1 “To offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God”. Spirit and body could not be separated.

The final sentence in this passage is “not only for ours (sins) but also for the sins of the whole world”. This does not mean that all sin is automatically pardoned, but it does mean that there is a universal pardon offered to anyone who embraces it.

John shared his first-hand experience of Jesus as his witness. Just because we were not alive when Jesus walked the earth as a man, does not mean that we do not have first-hand experiences of Him.

Take some time to remember some of those times when you heard, saw, touched Jesus. These are your examples to share with others – your testimony. And have that ready to use so that you, like John may grasp opportunities to proclaim the gospel, so that others may have fellowship, with us, with each other and with Father, Son and Holy Spirit, in the full meaning of the word.