**Sunday 9th May 2021**

1 John 5: 1-6

This week we return to a reading from 1 John. Part of the final chapter of the letter.

Throughout the letter, John had been emphasizing the three tests of true Christian believers – these are obedience (obeying God’s commands), love (for God and each other) and belief (that Jesus is the divine, incarnate Son of God).

Previously each test had been expanded individually, but John now brings us back to show the essential unity of all three. John has not just plucked these themes from a long list and prioritized them, but in fact show that they are so intricately interwoven, become one fabric, that to try and unpick each thread is near enough impossible.

The letter concentrates on God and Jesus Christ as His Son, because of the culture at the time; the new Gnostic religion that was infiltrating the church whereby they did not accept Jesus as the Son of God. They believed that Jesus was a man into which the divine Christ entered at His baptism and then left his body at the cross. John has taken great lengths to re-iterate the truth that Jesus Christ was the Son of God from his human birth and through death on the cross. There was no division between the flesh and the divine.

But John has made it clear that the Holy Spirit is an integral part of the relationship. It is the receiving of the Holy Spirit that gives us new birth – that reveals and cements who Jesus is, rather than just hearing a lot of historical facts; and a consequence of receiving Him, is to be able to believe in Christ. It is not a case of believing in Jesus Christ and then receiving the Holy Spirit.

John says, “everyone who believes in Christ is born of God”. This means that anyone who believes in Christ must have received the Holy Spirit. Although every person has been created by God, only those who receive the Holy Spirit are *born* of God (or begotten). Not every person can truly say that they love God or accept His fatherhood. So only those with the Holy Spirit dwelling within them are able to call themselves “children of God”.

If we have that belief in Jesus Christ, then it will result in a loving relationship with God together with all His children.

Can we try to use the analogy of a human family? I am sure that we all love our parents. Although this assumption should not always be made to begin with; some parents have abused their children in so many ways, that the earthly analogy can often fall short. Or the child can be so absorbed in the earthly pleasures that they build a barrier.

But for now, let us imagine a parent who is loving, righteous and kind, and a child who loves them. If we love our parent then surely, we should love our siblings equally? As we are part of our mother and father, so are our siblings. They have been taught the same ethics, morals and what is right and wrong in the same way to us. Again, I am certain that those of us here that have earthly siblings also know that at times we do not live completely in unity with one another – squabbles, not wanting to play the same games, having other interests. But very few of us would ever say that through all of that we had lost love for each other. Again, the analogy can fall short, because we are trying to compare the imperfect with the perfect. We need to be sensitive to this whenever we talk about our beliefs – that other people will have different foundations of life than us. We have to discover the foundations before being able to build.

But on the assumption that love abounds in family, is it always an emotional feeling? Are we constantly engulfed by some fuzzy kind of sensation when with parents and siblings? For many of us, most of the time, although the emotion of love is always present, it manifests more as moral obedience to each other – helping each other, building each other up, explaining things, listening.

Our love for God and His children is exactly the same. Yes, there will be an emotional experience, but the majority of the times our love will be shown by moral obedience. Love is practical and active, sacrificial. We show love by helping each other when we are in need, by listening to each other when hardship strikes, by sacrificing our opinions to hear the thoughts of others so that unity may be sought – choosing to play monopoly instead of scrabble!

We are called to be sacrificial – but we should never sacrifice our Christian belief and the commands that God has given to us.

John continues to state that God’s laws are not burdensome. Sometimes when we read the OT the number of laws given can seem onerous. And at the time that John was writing the scribes and Pharisees had added so many pernickety clauses that they were hard to bear. In Luke 11: 46 Jesus said to the experts of the law “woe to you, because you load people down with burdens they can hardly carry”. Jesus acknowledged that the law of the time was not as God intended.

We must look at the spirit in which God gave His laws: To ensure the health of His people, to keep them from harm and to promote a loving and just community for everyone, even those who were weaker or humbler in their positions in society. The commands given by God reflect the will of an all-wise, all-loving Father who seeks the highest welfare for every one of us.

In the world view many of the commands can be seen as oppressive, but with the Holy Spirit, the children of God will overcome and overwrite that view. In God’s family we should lose fascination in what the world has to offer, the temptations will lose their appeal. With the help of the Holy Spirit, we will be able to turn away from short term satisfaction of the flesh and look to the wonder of a relationship with God.

Turning our back on temptations is not easy though, and only through the Holy Spirit will we be victorious in His power, not in our person. It is our faith that will help us overcome the world, that will convict us to make the decision to reject the falsities and lies that surround us. And the victories will be continuous. The world is always going to tempt us, and with new things. When John was writing it was the Gnostics who were encouraging false belief. Although the Gnostics no longer have a following, there are other things that surround us that sound like good things, but at the heart will lead us from knowing fully Jesus Christ, and therefore our relationship with God.

In Matthew 11: 29-30 Jesus said “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light”.

Jesus will continue to teach us, with the Holy Spirit. We need to continue to trust in our God, the trinity in unison.

The pattern John is presenting is – Christian believers are God’s children, born from above. God’s children are loved by all who love God. Those who love God keep His commands. They keep His commands because they overcame the world, and they overcame the world because they are Christian believers, born from above. So a circle!

It is these three things together, obedience, love and belief, that mark us out as Christians.

John continues that Jesus came by water and blood. It would possibly have had a deeper and more circulated meaning when John wrote his letter, an expression known by the early church.

But today the full meaning is not so readily understood, and the words appear slightly strange. There have been a few interpretations on the meaning by theologians over the years. In the context of the letter, the water and blood bear witness to Christ’s divine-human Person. In this light, a likely interpretation would be that the water refers to the baptism of Christ – when He was declared the Son and empowered by the Holy Spirit for His ministry. The blood would symbolize his crucifixion, where His work on earth was finished.

We must remember that John was emphasizing that Jesus was the divine Son of God throughout the whole of His life on earth, and in His death on the cross. Hence, John states “not only water” as a direct counter of the Gnostics’ belief. They also believed in the water, that Christ the divine entered the body of the man Jesus at the baptism. But they would not have accepted the witness through the blood as they believed that the Christ departed from the body of the man Jesus before he died.

The Holy Spirit bears witness to Jesus being the Son of God. He is competent and qualified to do so as He has been there from the beginning. The Holy Spirit provides first-hand evidence as He dwells within us. He witnessed the ministry of Jesus on earth and His death on the cross. He witnessed that the divine, incarnate Son of God, Jesus took on Himself our nature in His birth, and our sins in His death. He will help us to weigh up and test the things that we see and hear within the remit of this truth.

The Holy Spirit will help us and reveal the character of Jesus. He is the one who assures us that Jesus willingly allowed His trial and crucifixion to reconcile us to God and to cleanse us from our sins. Jesus has assured our salvation.