

Lent course 2016 - Week 4

Reading from 1 John 4

Introduction

We should perhaps remind ourselves again of the context of John's letter. He is writing to a dispersed group of fledgling house churches that existed in different locations and communities. During this period St Paul was beginning his missionary journeys - visiting young churches and also writing letters of encouragement and challenge. However John had been an original disciple of Jesus so he had first-hand knowledge of the life and teaching of the Messiah. He could say with authority to those who questioned whether Jesus was ever a human-being. Look, I knew Jesus well because I lived and worked with him.

Verses 1 - 6. 'Test the spirits'.

Verse 1. The sense of fatherly concern expressed by John for these young churches is palpable. He felt that they were so vulnerable and could so easily be led astray. So John begins this part of his first letter with his now familiar greeting to his brothers and sisters. The term *Dear friends, dear children* at the beginning of the chapter reveals that he was writing directly to the Christian communities; he might have headed this part of the letter with the word---- Beware! The reason is that at the time of writing some members of the fledgling church communities had rejected the faith of Jesus and they had left the church. They not only left the church but they had become false prophets- spreading misinformation about the Incarnation of Christ. These false prophets provoked a threat to the confidence and stability of the church because they spread error and even worse they were claiming that they were inspired by the Spirit of God. In the book of Jude which in the bible comes immediately after the 3 letters of John - Jude is raising the tempo of concern about the influence of the false prophets. Listen to this translation of Jude verses 3 and 4 from The Message in which Jude sums up the situation with the false prophets really well.

Dear Friends. I've dropped everything to write to you about this life of salvation that we have in common. I have to write insisting - begging- that you fight with everything you have in you for this faith entrusted to us as a gift to guard and cherish. What has happened is that some people have infiltrated our ranks (our scriptures warned us this would happen) who beneath their pious skin are shameless scoundrels. Their design is to replace the sheer grace of our God with sheer licence - which means doing away with Jesus Christ our one and only Master.

Regrettably there is in our day an increasing amount of material written about Jesus in books and on the internet that is simply not true. An example is a recently published book which was brought to my attention that had troubled a member of our church. Sub-titled '*The evolution of Science and Christianity*' the author discusses some scientific advances and how they are changing our perspectives. He argues that Christianity should evolve to meet changes in our culture for example the view that Jesus died on the cross should be rejected because '*to imagine a more barbaric view would be hard*'.

False teachers and writers are popular because they tell people what they want to hear - or to foster a spirit of error through sensationalism. In doing so they are well received ---- and also sell more books!

Earlier in John's letter we read that he reminds the believers that they will know that Christ abides in them and they abide in Him, because it has been revealed by the Holy Spirit. Now he encourages the believers to "test all the spirits to see whether they are from God or not."

So what are these tests? Verses 5 to 7

The first test has to do with the confession of the believers. The believers inspired by the Spirit of truth - the Holy Spirit - confess that Jesus Christ is both divine and human. The false teachers - the "spirit of antichrist" or the "spirit of error" are either against Christ or they do not recognize Him as being real or confess Him.

The second test is that the false prophets either minimize or oppose the idea that Christ came in human flesh. This was especially true of the Greek false teachers because they interpreted this as meaning that if Jesus was never a human being, that he never had a physical body. Consequently for us it does not matter how much we allow our bodies to sin in this life because it is only when we are born again in our spiritual life that sin matters. In other words do what you like in this life because you will be born again in the next spiritual life. This is of course totally false because Jesus died to save us from our sins in this life. We can now see why John worked so hard to highlight this error. Other false prophets claimed that Jesus was only a spirit who appeared to have a body and yet others held that all physical matter is evil and only spiritual matter is good.

Another third test has to do with who is listening to the messages being proclaimed. In verse 5, John shows that the false prophets and the world are in perfect agreement. Those who celebrate the teachings of the false prophets are of the world. In contrast to them, the true teachers are from God. They have overcome the false teachers because God abides in them, and He is greater than "the prince of this world". Jesus is our advocate with the Father and he will take our weaknesses and transform our lives in the image of God. We must not be afraid because those who are for us are greater than those who are against us.

So to sum up the first part of chapter 4

The church was confronted by false prophets - false spirits. John exhorted the church to test the spirits to discern who was teaching error concerning the Incarnation of Christ. John was able to say..... I knew Jesus and worked with him so I can testify first hand that he is both human and divine. However the principle test for the modern day Christian is to compare what the bible says about the Incarnate Christ with what the false prophets were claiming.

It is important for us to take note of the many forces which are arrayed against Christ's church and to speak out against errors proclaimed by many different false prophets. One of the most serious modern day errors is that there are many roads to salvation. Additionally the denial about the uniqueness of Christ as the Son of God. Present day tests for false teachers could include their commitment to the body of believers, the fruits of their ministry and of course the accuracy of their teaching when set against the word of God.

So let us be like the Bereans mentioned by Paul in Acts Acts 17 v11 says 'Now the Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true'.

We now move on to the second part of the chapter verses 7 to 21.

Here we find the recurring theme that threads through John's letter --- the theme of love. You will have noted by now that there is more than a degree of repetition in John's letter. It set me wondering how many years it will be before our digitally fixated young people will be asking why John did not simply send the equivalent of a short e-mail or a Facebook or Twitter- style message. This would have resulted in short, sharp commands such as Believers - do not be fooled and Believers - know that God is love. Such concise messages would have cut down on the number of words and the repetition. However the letter we read is carefully crafted guidance from John inspired by the Holy Spirit and as such it is a message that cannot be misunderstood. We should be glad that his words did not disappear into the digital ether because they are as much a challenge to us 21st century Christians as they were to the 1st century Christians.

As was noted last week, John keeps on writing about love but that is because that is what Christianity is all about. Many today think that love is simply a feeling or human emotion - a feeling that can be on one hand deepened or on the other simply snuffed out often by the actions of others. However Christian love is totally different because it has God as its source and the Holy Spirit as its power. All Christian love is not simply a feeling rather it is based on choice and action. It is through our choice to follow Jesus and through our faithful actions - that the love of God finds its fulfilment on earth.

The first part of verse 11 *Since God loved us.....*

The Bible is full of amazing and startling declarations such as the God of infinite wisdom, infinite power who created all that we see and all the uncharted solar systems that we can't see, is a personal being who knows you, who understands and best of all who loves you.

J I Packer summarizes God's love this way. *"God knows me as a friend, one who loves me and there is no moment when his eye is off me or his attention is distracted from me. And no moment, therefore, when his care falters." This is momentous knowledge. This is unspeakable comfort. the sort of comfort that energizes me in knowing that God is constantly taking knowledge of me in love and watching over me for my good'.*

God does not just say *I love you*, He showed it by sending his one and only Son into the world to die that we might live through him (John 3 v 16).

So acknowledging that God is the source of all love let us read the whole of verse 11*Dear friends since God loved us we should love one another*

So what are the requirements for fellowship with God who is love and fellowship with each other? Well we need to remind ourselves that Christianity is not a religion, it is a relationship- a relationship with God who is love and equally importantly a relationship of fellowship with others. We previously looked at 1 John Chapter 2 10..... *Whoever loves his brother lives in the light and that light is God.*

And Chapter 3 16.... *This is how we know what love is, Jesus Christ laid down his life for us and we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers,*

Now we focus on chapter 4 v11.....*Dear friends, since God loved us we should love one another*

So when a Pharisee asked Jesus in Matthew 22:36, "Teacher which is the greatest commandment in the law?" Jesus replied, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." Had Jesus stopped there, the lawyer would have been happy to follow Jesus, and we would have had a less demanding creed to live by. But Jesus went on to say, "And a second is like it, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.'"

So Jesus's second commandment earthed the first commandment . Someone once said - the second commandment brings a concrete foundation to our faith. Therefore it is important to underline that it is through our work for the Lord - through us- through our actions -that the love of God finds its fulfilment on earth. In other words by loving God we will also love the homeless, the rough sleeper, the hungry, the illegal immigrant, the poor - in fact anyone in any kind of need.

Jesus is our example because he did not just mix with his own circle of disciples and followers - to the exclusion of all others, rather he always sought to love his neighbour - The true nature of love is unselfish and sacrificial and this is a challenge for us church folk to take Gods love out to those in need.

If we consider the neighbours that Jesus helped - those that we know about -we see that the list is very long. Jesus ministered to each neighbour according to their need..... for example :The woman at the well..... *Can we suggest other examples of neighbours that Jesus helped ?*

Jesus turned the lives of those he helped around because he met their individual needs. For Jesus love was not an abstract noun but an active verb and He set us the example that we should follow, to love our neighbour. Sometimes this love is just being there when someone is hurting. Sometimes it is to tell a friend the truth, even when it hurts. Sometimes, it is to be a good and willing listener. Sometimes it is sharing the good news of the gospel.

Will you love your neighbour as yourself? A good friend of ours told us last week about the groups of Christians who have spread out across various countries in Europe. They are providing food and shelter to the desperate displaced immigrants. When asked by the refugees why they are so generous they reply We are Christians and we are bringing the God who is love to you. Many are becoming Christians and that there has been and increased demand for Bibles.

Our role as Christians is to faithfully love the people that God has given us to love; the Holy Spirit will give us the strength and power to convey that love. We need not be afraid of the present or the future if we abide in God's love.

It is easy to say we love God when that love does not cost us anything. The real test of our love for God is how we treat the people around us - especially those we do not get on with. Remember Gods command --Whoever loves God must love his brother.

1 John 4 vs 19 - 21 sums up the meaning of love.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Albert Schweitzer wrote: Christianity can only become a living truth for successive generations if thinkers constantly arise within it who, in the spirit of Jesus, make belief in him capable of intellectual apprehension in the thought-forms of the worldview proper to their time. Discuss!

We heard the quote about the barbaric view of how God demanded the killing of his own son. What other ways could God have dealt with the presence of the sin in the world?

How does the knowledge that God loves us make a difference in our lives?

What difference should our knowledge of the God of love make as we speak to people about our faith?

What do we understand by the spirit of truth and the spirit of error. How does this affect our lives?