

SUNDAY 7 APRIL 2024:

READINGS :

ACTS 4 32-35

All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. **With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them.** For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need.

1 JOHN 1 1 - 2.2

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. **2** The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. **3** We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. **4** We write this to make our[a] joy complete.

Light and Darkness, Sin and Forgiveness

5 This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. **6** If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth. **7** But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all[b] sin.

8 If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. **9** If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. **10** If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word is not in us.

2 My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. **2** He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.

SERMON

The church is often criticised today for no longer being very dynamic. It's been suggested that old hymns might benefit from new words that more match the present uncertainties found in many church congregations:

- Take my life and let it be becomes Take my life and let it be
- Just as I am becomes Just as I a Pretend to be
- Its no secret what God can do becomes Its my secret what God can do
- Rock of ages cleft for me becomes Pillow of ages, fluffed for me
- Be Thou my vision becomes Be thou my hobby

We tend to look back and think things were much better years ago. And that particularly applies when we think of the early Church. According to St Luke the church when it was first set up had one big advantage : the presence of the apostles who continued to testify to what they had seen with great power. As a consequence he says the first Christians shared their wealth and all the believers were one in heart and mind. Sadly the later sections of the Book of Acts and the letters section of our New Testament show that very quickly there were disputes, there were factions, there were schisms. The early church was no more ideal than the church today.

In 1 John we have an apostle testifying with great power 60 years after the crucifixion to challenge all the wrong thinking that had emerged. John was an old man who had been one of the first followers of Jesus of Nazareth, and who had witnessed the resurrection. He'd somehow survived the persecutions that had erupted in the early years of the church and he was ending his life as pastor to a network of house churches scattered around the region of Ephesus. Most of the other apostles had died, and a new generation of leaders had appeared. To John's eyes some of the new breed had got it badly wrong in what they were saying.

Some people were saying that Jesus never existed and he was just a fable, made up to encourage people to behave in a particular way. Some people were saying it was impossible for God to become human flesh and so Jesus was just a good, inspired man. Others - a group called the Docetists - were saying that in order for Jesus to be God he must not have had a human body. Tales of him eating and drinking were therefore just a figment of the disciple's imagination. You couldn't actually have touched Jesus. He was a disembodied spirit.

John starts from the simple premise that if you want to know the truth you are better to look at first-hand evidence. And he speaks as one of the few eyewitnesses still alive. From his perspective the idea that Jesus did not exist at all is drivel, and so too are the ideas that he was just a good man or that he was not truly human:

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us.

This is John's personal testimony, witnessing to what he and others had experienced. It's a powerful reminder that Christianity is rooted in the dust and dirt of history. John and others actually heard, saw, and touched Jesus and witnessed not only his crucifixion but his resurrection. We may not be

able to offer explanations about how Jesus was both God and man or about how a crucified man could be resurrected but it happened.

What is equally striking in this passage are the words John uses to summarise the message he gained from all his first-hand experience: **God is light; in him there is no darkness at all.** We often often say God is Love (and John says that later in his letter) but here he says the most important thing is that God is Light. Why is describing God as light more important than anything else? I'd like to suggest 4 reasons. r

First, because **Light is what allows and sustains life.** In the Genesis story of creation light is the very first thing God creates. All the life forms that we see around us either directly or indirectly rely on light for their existence. Even chemotrophic life forms that appear not to need light are dependent on substances that do. **Second, how much light we have in our lives is critical to our well-being.** We all know that it is the pupils in our eyes that let in light and so we can see shapes, movement, colour, and so on. What science has now shown is that the brain has five light sensitive receptors that work like a kind of super-advanced junction box and this box affects not just what we are able to see but our hormone levels, especially melatonin, which affects how we sleep, and cortisol, which handles how well we cope with life. That's why too many dark nights and grey skies can lead to what the medics now call Seasonally Adjusted Disorder. Light is therefore not just vital to our existence. It's critical to our well-being. It lifts our spirits.

Third, Light dispels darkness. We are used to regarding bad events in our lives as times of darkness. Darkness is an absence of light. The times when our spirits are at their lowest, the times when we're sick or those we love are sick, or when we've lost someone we love, or when we've got financial worries or employment worries or relationship worries, or when we are facing persecution or any danger, whether man-made or natural. At all those times we cry out for light to help dispel the darkness. Just as we cannot experience total darkness if there is even the tiniest light visible so God's light can bring comfort, love, peace, and hope to change even the darkest of events. We need God's light to dispel the darkness In John's gospel we read 'The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.'

Fourth, **light enables us to see the way forward.** It helps us to step forward with confidence and optimism to our destination, which is to live life in all its fullness. Living in the light is the opposite of living in darkness. When we are in the light, we see things for what they are, we see God for who he is, we learn to love others for who they are. And that kind of light can be a bit like a traffic light, telling us when to stop, when to prepare, and when to move.

Having said GOD IS LIGHT John makes a number of 'if we' statements.

1. **If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth.** This is not about making occasional mistakes and sometimes saying or doing the wrong thing - we are all guilty of that. It's about letting the bad things - greed, pride, anger, hatred, prejudice, etc take control of what we say and do. It's when we say we believe that Jesus is Lord, but then we don't let that shape our lives. This is not only bad for us - it brings Christianity into disrepute. Brennan Manning, put it like this: "The greatest single cause of atheism in the world today

is Christians: who acknowledge Jesus with their lips, walk out the door, and deny Him by their lifestyle. That is what an unbelieving world simply finds unbelievable.

2. If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.

Some of you may have heard the story of the man who went to buy a hot dog from a street seller. He began was talking about the importance of spirituality. 'I'm not religious' said the street seller. 'O that doesn't matter. You don't have to be religious to be spiritual. My aim in life is just to one made one with everything. The street seller handed the man his hot dog and the man paid for it with a £20 note. The street seller put the note into his cash box and moved to serve another customer. 'Hey where's my change?' said the man. The street seller replied. 'As you're wanting to be so spiritual, you must know that change must come from within'. There are an increasing number of people who now speak of the importance of being spiritual but do not want to belong to any organised religion. They think some form of meditation is good for you, changes you from within, makes you calmer, less stressed. I'm not saying that's wrong - after all, prayer is an important part of our lives as Christians, BUT - and its a big but - Look at what John is saying here. The really important word in this passage is **WALK**. We have to walk the path shown us by Jesus. **WALK IN JESUS' FOOTSTEPS**.

At the time John was writing a group were emerging who were later called the Gnostics. Their focus was entirely on promoting their spirituality. They were not interested in changing their daily lifestyle. They did not think it mattered what you said or did to other people. All that mattered was the pursuit of your own spiritual holiness. Such spirituality is ultimately selfish. What John is saying here is that true spirituality is to be found in how we live every aspect of our lives, especially in how we relate to other people. True spirituality is found in the normal, the ordinary, the everyday. It's about getting involved in meeting the needs of others not ourselves. It's about encouraging those who are discouraged. It's about giving the gift of love, peace, patience, grace, kindness, hope. Jesus called on his followers not just to pray but to be **the light in the world** - and central to that was serving your neighbour. It was how you best showed your love of God. When I was small one of the songs we used to sing at my junior school was:

This little light of mine
I'm going to let it shine
Oh, this little light of mine
I'm going to let it shine
This little light of mine
I'm going to let it shine
Let it shine, all the time, let it shine

If you seek to follow Jesus' example, if you walk in his footsteps, then the light of God shines through us. And the light shines even brighter when we work in fellowship with other Christians. The Olympic torch passed from country to country is not a bad symbol for the Church. One of my favourite John Wesley quotes is: 'There is no such thing as solitary religion.' We're in this together. For 2,000 years, followers of Jesus have been passing his light down from generation to generation. They've been passing his love, they've been passing his beauty, they've been passing this goodness, they've been passing this conviction that Jesus really does change the way that we live on an everyday basis, and you can experience Him as you walk in fellowship. John was not just writing from

his experience of walking alongside Jesus sixty years earlier. He was writing also from all that had happened in his life subsequently and of the Christian fellowship he had enjoyed throughout his life.

3. If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

John ends on a reminder that we are all in need of God's forgiveness and love but we can rely on the promises of Christ. His sacrifice enables us to be at one with God. Forgiven and loved, the path we follow will lead us to the place of eternal light that we call heaven.

Prayer:

God, we thank you for giving us life, for helping us to see things properly, for helping us not to be overcome by the darkness in our lives, for leading and guiding us on the path through life. We thank you too for Jesus who was the Light of the World, bringing joy and hope, opening the way through his sacrifice to our salvation. Keep us humble and aware of our own sins, reliant on his forgiving love. And we pray that we may both individually and in fellowship with each other, reflect your light in our everyday lives until that day when we are called to your eternal light.

G.M.B