

Walking in the Light - 1 John 1:1-2:11

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Location: St George's, Battery Point

Series: All You Need is Love 1 John

Texts: John 1:1-14; 1 John 1:1-2:11

Back in 2011, Claire and I had the great privilege of visiting Turkey. We visited the ancient city of Ephesus. We saw the famous library of Celsus, the amphitheatre where the apostle Paul was dragged before the mob, which you can read about in Acts 19. And, we also visited the ruins of the basilica of St John, at the centre of which is this - the



apostle John's tomb. This is John, the son of Zebedee, the disciple whom Jesus loved, who wrote the Gospel of John, and the letters of 1, 2 and 3 John. Irenaeus and Eusebius both say John spent his final years in Ephesus, having moved from Jerusalem after the Jewish revolt in AD66. Papias, Polycarp, and Ignatius, all writing at the end of the first century, quote or allude to John's first letter. Irenaeus and Clement of Rome in the 2nd century, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Origen, and Cyprian in the 3rd century all quote 1 John.

We're beginning a 5 week series on 1 John, this letter by the apostle John. Why share these historic tidbits? I trained as a historian so I love these sorts of details. But I share these because of how John starts his letter.

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.

John wants to make clear that what he's talking about, the message that he proclaims, isn't some metaphysical speculation or mythological treatise, rather it's about things that really happened. He was there with Jesus. He ate and drank with him. He saw him die on the cross. He saw the empty tomb. He met the risen Jesus. When we read John's Gospel we get eyewitness testimony to Jesus. And his letter is the fruit of a lifetime of meditating on who Jesus is and on what he taught.

John's first letter isn't so much a letter as a sermon. I was tempted to simply just read it today! He's writing to the churches in and around Ephesus that he has pastored for decades. He talks about some people who he calls false prophets and anti-Christ's who have left the church and are spreading false teaching about Jesus. The letter is designed to strengthen Christians in their faith and stop these false prophets leading people astray. Rather than building a step by step argument like Paul, John circles

around several key interrelated themes which he sees are at the heart of the Christian faith - both what we believe and how we live. Indeed you can see them all in his Gospel.

So where are we going today? We'll look at 3 points. 1 - Fellowship with God (1:1-4); 2 - Walking in the Light (1:5-2:2); 3 - Love one another (2:3-11).

1. Fellowship with God (1:1-4)

John's first point is that through Jesus we can have fellowship with God. This is the goal of his preaching and ministry. In verse 3 he says,

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.

Who is it that they have seen and heard, that he and the other apostle proclaim? In verse 1 John names him, "the Word of life", "which was from the beginning". You can see the echoes of John 1. "In the beginning was the Word. And the Word was with God, and the Word was God ... in him was life." In verse 2, John names this one as "the life" and "eternal life", and we recall John 11 where Jesus says, "I am the resurrection and the life". In verse 3, John finally names him as the Son of the Father, Jesus Christ. He is the one they have seen and heard, and touched, surely a reference to Thomas in John 21 touching the risen Jesus.

So these verses speak of the Incarnation, what we're celebrating in this Christmas season, that this one, the eternal Word, the eternal Son of God, who is the Life, who is with God and indeed is God himself; He is the one who has come into history as the man Jesus of Nazareth. Why did he come? Fellowship. So that through him we might have fellowship with God the Father. What is fellowship? It's the Greek word, *koinonia*, and it means communion, participation, sharing in. God the Father sent the Son so that through him we might come into communion with him, that we might share in the very relationship of the eternal Son with the Father. This is what the Christian faith is all about. And isn't this what we all want? To see God and know him? This is the goal of John's preaching - that those who hear might be drawn into fellowship with Christ. And notice that for John this fellowship with Christ is not an individual affair. It's also corporate. Communion with Christ means being part of his body, the church. As we share in Christ, so we are brought into fellowship with other believers and with his Father.

For John to see others brought into fellowship with Christ and so also with him is a source of great joy. This is why he proclaims Christ. Jesus has come to bring people into communion with the Father. He is the Way, the Truth and the Life. No one can come to the Father, except through him. But through him all can come. And so we as the church and as individuals proclaim Christ, so that others may share in our joy. And what a message of joy this communion is, in an age of loneliness. The rest of the letter explores how to live out this spiritual reality.

2. Walking in the Light 1:5-2:2

From verse 5 John turns to the picture of light and darkness. He follows the same train of thought as the opening of his Gospel. “In [the Word] was life, and that life was the light of all humanity. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”¹ And so John writes,

This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all.

John loves using these kinds of vivid contrasts. What does the contrast between light and darkness mean? Light can mean Knowledge as opposed to ignorance. Truth as opposed to falsehood. Wisdom as opposed to folly. We move from the intellectual to the moral dimension. Righteousness as opposed to wickedness. Good as opposed to evil. And in the end Life as opposed to Death. For God to be light means that he is the source of all these things, knowledge, truth, wisdom, goodness, life. John will circle back to these themes through the letter.

If the reason for the coming of the eternal Son is to bring us into fellowship with the God who is light, that has implications for how we live. So John continues, verse 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.

It’s so straightforward isn’t it. If we belong to the God who is light, then we have to walk in the light. This is the standard by which we’re to live. We can’t walk in darkness. When we walk in darkness, as individuals or as the church, we betray the God we claim to worship. It’s not how things should be. This verse is such a comfort for those who have suffered at the hands of people in the church. Their actions are a falsehood, a betrayal, a walking in darkness when they should have been walking in the light.

But John the pastor turns to the next question he knows we will be asking. What happens when I fail to walk in the light? Is it all over? We increasingly have a problem with this as a society. We have moral standards that we expect we all can and should live by. But what happens when people break them? Are they condemned as irredeemable, cast out forever? Worse, those who fail can be seen as part of what’s wrong with society, who are getting in the way of progress. Historian Tom Holland comments on the platform formerly known as Twitter,

Purity spirals are what happen when societies saturated in Christian assumptions abandon that most democratic of Christian doctrines: original sin. If perfection on earth is possible, then boo to those who are less than perfect.²

In response to a question from a fan, Australian singer Nick Cave writes on his blog,

As far as I can see, cancel culture is mercy’s antithesis. Political correctness has grown to become the unhappiest religion in the world. Its once honourable attempt to reimagine our society in a more equitable way now embodies all the worst aspects that religion has to offer

¹ John 1.4-5

² https://twitter.com/holland_tom/status/1222898839549427713?s=20

(and none of the beauty) — moral certainty and self-righteousness shorn even of the capacity for redemption. It has become quite literally, bad religion run amuck.³

The question is, how can you maintain a high moral ideal, and still allow people to fail while at the same time holding them to account and providing a way for them to change their behaviour? Holland and Cave are writing about how this question plays out on the social and political level. But they point to the two key Christian beliefs that make all the difference: that we all sin; and we are all offered forgiveness. John shows how the answer begins with the personal and spiritual. Read with me verse 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.

What a balm these words are for a culture stripped of mercy! But let's move from the social level to the personal. What a balm for you and for me. We do not come into fellowship with God through our moral performance. We come to him only through the forgiveness that Christ offers us. The great power of sin comes from keeping us hiding in the dark. We can feel so ashamed that we want nothing more than to run and hide, for the earth to swallow us. But that is to run towards death. Sin's power is broken when we come into God's light with full honesty. God knows in any case, and he is the only one who can free us from the burden of sin. We cannot forgive ourselves. Only God can forgive us. And when we confess, he is faithful and just and will forgive us.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer perceptively explores this issue in his book *Life Together*.

“Sin demands to have a man by himself. It withdraws him from the community. The more isolated a person is, the more destructive will be the power of sin over him, and the more deeply he becomes involved in it, the more disastrous his isolation. Sin wants to remain unknown. It shuns the light. In the darkness of the unexpressed it poisons the whole being of the person. This can happen even in the midst of the pious community. In confession the light of the gospel breaks into the darkness and seclusion of the heart. The sin must be brought into the light. The unexpressed must be openly spoken and acknowledged. ... Since the confession of sin is made in the presence of a Christian brother, the last stronghold of self-justification is abandoned. The sinner surrenders; he gives up all his evil. He gives his heart to God, and he finds the forgiveness of all his sin in the fellowship of Jesus Christ and his brother. The expressed, acknowledged sin has lost all its power. It has been revealed

³ <https://www.theredhandfiles.com/what-is-mercy-for-you/>

and judged as sin. It can no longer tear the fellowship asunder. Now the fellowship bears the sin of the brother. He is no longer alone with his evil for he has cast off his sin in confession and handed it over to God. It has been taken away from him. Now he stands in the fellowship of sinners who live by the grace of God and the cross of Jesus Christ...”⁴

Concretely, this is why we say a confession in every Anglican service. Because we all sin, and we all need God’s forgiveness. Let me encourage you to fully enter into this today, maybe even for the first time. But we would also do well to make confession a daily practice. A great way to do this is to take a few moments at the end of the day to reflect on the day that has been, confessing where you’ve failed, and asking for forgiveness and grace to change. But as Bonhoeffer points out, confession to another brother or sister in Christ who you trust can be of immense benefit, as we expose our sin to the light, and hear God’s word of forgiveness spoken to us. If you’re not sure who to speak to in that circumstance or if there is something which is particularly troubling you, then please come and chat to me.

How can God forgive us? Because, John writes, Jesus is the atoning sacrifice for sin. The word John uses here translated as “atoning sacrifice” is very specific. In Greek it is *hilasmos*, and refers to a sacrifice that turns away wrath. God is justly angry at our sin. It is an offence against him and the creation he has made. His anger is not opposed to his love, it is precisely because he loves that he is angry at sin. But it is also because he loves us that he does something about sin. He is both *faithful* and *just*. He steps in, in the person of his Son, who offers himself, willingly, as a sacrifice, bearing our sin in his own body, receiving the just punishment for sin, so that instead of condemnation we might receive God’s forgiveness. And so Jesus now stands as our Advocate John says. Because he has died for us, he now speaks in our defence, pointing to the accomplishment of his own death for our sin. He says, “I’ve paid for this, so this one is now forgiven and free”.

Christ has come to bring us into fellowship with the Father and each other. He calls us to walk not in darkness but in his light. When we fail, as we all will, he offers us full and free forgiveness. We receive this through confession and repentance, bringing our sin into the light and renewing our commitment to walk in the light. John now turns to what walking in the light looks like, and it’s summed up in this one command - Love one another. That is the theme of the remaining verses from our reading. We’ve run out of time to explore them. As you can see, John’s letter is simple and yet a deep well! But fear not, John circles back to his main themes, so we’ll explore this in coming weeks. For the moment, let me just say this. John reiterates Jesus’ words from John 14 - “anyone who loves me will obey my teaching ... anyone does not love me will not obey my teaching”⁵. It’s a great test to help us discern if someone is walking in Christ’s light or teaching his truth. But more on that next week.

⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York: Harper & Row, 1954), 112-113

⁵ John 14.23-24