

# St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

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1 JOHN 5

22<sup>nd</sup> October 2017

John 19:31-37

1 John 5:6-21

If this final extract of John's letter which we have read were shaped like a mountain, then its peak would come at verse 13. There John says, "*I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life.*" One of the delightful things about John, both in his Gospel and in his letters, is that from time to time he remembers that you may be straining to see what his point is, why he is talking at such length about certain things, and he tells you why he is writing. He is writing so that we may know, if we believe in the Son of God, that we have eternal life.

This is a statement of truth for the whole of his letter, which he was now drawing to its conclusion. But he put his statement where he did, because perhaps, looking back on what he had just written, he realised that it might be thought to be a bit obscure. He has spent the previous paragraph talking about witness and water and blood, and really, what is that about?

Remember John never just says a thing once, if he thinks it is important. In some ways he creatively embodies the old preacher's advice on sermon writing: "Say what you are going to say, say it, then say it again." (Not advice I am good at sticking to!) So here John is talking again, in a different way, about the humanity of the Son of God. He came through water – the water of baptism, but also by blood – he was really human. And then when he died, as John bears witness in his gospel, that he was truly dead was shown because when a spear was thrust into his side, watery fluid came out separate from the blood. This wouldn't have happened if he were in any way still alive.

John is again taking up arms against those who maintained that Jesus wasn't really human, or else not really God. He was, he insists, and it matters, because if you think that he wasn't human, you are saying something about God. You are saying something about the extent of God's love and the way that God uses his power, and what you are saying is that God's love is less than Jesus showed it to be. You are saying that God's love is not great enough for him to become one of us. You are saying that God's power, his very godliness is not truthful, if Jesus only pretended to be human and only pretended to die. So it matters that the Son of God who we believe in is Jesus, the one who came by water and the blood and died – and rose again. John tells us that the eternal life that he is writing about is the life that Jesus had and has, so that whoever has the Son, whoever is one of Jesus' followers, has this life. And those who deny Jesus as who he was and is, cannot say that they have God's life.

Yes, it is complicated, especially for we who live many generations later, but the reason that John wants us to grasp the full importance of God becoming incarnate – God becoming fully human in Jesus - is because this is the way that God brings us

eternal life. For us, who are neither ancient Jews nor ancient Greeks, some of what John writes may be a little obscure, but his purpose remains the same.

And it is a great purpose! We have the eternal life of God in us! Isn't that amazing? We have God's eternal life in us, so that in us, in us, the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of the world are brought together. We have God's eternal life in us, so that when we stand – or sit – or kneel in prayer we are calling the life of heaven itself into the situations and the lives of the people for whom we pray. The consequences of the wonderful truth about God found in Jesus are immense and go on and on, the more we think about them.

John draws no limits to what we can pray about – and maybe we should ask ourselves if we sometimes make limits in our own minds, and if so, why. But one example of prayer that he does give us is that we have the ability, and the responsibility to pray for those who are also believers but who have for a moment stepped off the path of following in Jesus' way.

He reminds us that those who are born of God will not go on and on doing wrong, but we do all have our times of being less than perfect – just a little! (Or maybe quite a lot without realising it.) One of the things we should do in such circumstances is not to condemn – which of us could ever cast the first stone? – but to pray. Pray for the fellow-Christian and believe that God will lead them back into his way. Pray, says John, with confidence, because you are standing in the courts of heaven, and asking for God's will to be done on earth. Pray.

There are some people who say that prayer doesn't work, or that they have never seen a prayer answered. I would be the first to say that prayers are not always answered in the way the we imagine they will be. After all, when we ask for God's will to be done, we can't really assume we know the fullness of God's mind and will. But it is a truism to say that the more that you pray, the more you will see your prayers answered. If you never or rarely pray, then you will have far less chance of seeing God answer your prayers. If you pray a lot, then not only have you much to look for God doing, but you yourself will be changed. Prayer brings us into the presence of God, and the more time that we spend there the more time God can spend working on us, revealing himself and his love to us, changing our minds subtly or radically, so that we begin to see life with his eyes. We are God's children and we should pray, for one another and for the world.

As we come down the far side of this hill which is crowned with the assurance of our eternal life, John has some things to remind us about the world we live in – how it lies under the power of evil, and how we who belong to God are protected from that evil, how we are beacons of Godliness in the darkness. And then there is a strange ending. Maybe John 's parchment was all used up and these last verses from verse 13 were just him reiterating what he had said before to use up the space, on the principle that you can't say a true thing too often (a good principle!). Or maybe not.

“Little children” John concludes, “Keep yourself from idols.” One commentator I read said that this statement could have the same effect as when you read a story which ends with a twist in the tale. Maybe a detective story, when the person you had thought the hero turns out to be the malefactor. Some sort of a twist that shows that you have been led to read the story in the wrong way. When you read a story like that, if you are not just disgusted with either the author or yourself, then the chances are that you will immediately want to think again about the tale, about how you were

led to think one thing and not another. You will want to re-evaluate what was important, what various details should really have pointed you to think about.

Little children keep yourselves from idols. Yes, the Greek and Roman world was full of idols, of gods of all kinds including the recent deified emperors. But does John really just mean that? With this little sentence, maybe put there so as not to waste the space, John sends us scampering back over his letter to see what has led him to this concluding word. And it is there, isn't it? It is there in all that he has to say about really understanding about who Jesus is. It is there is what he has to say about not making God out to be a liar, by denying our own sin and need of forgiveness, or by denying that Jesus is really God and fully human, and that he showed the way God is, in love most of all, by dying for us. Oh well, if you are going to call these things *idolatry*, the worship of a false god, then maybe we will see how serious John is about them.

It matters that we believe that God sent Jesus to us because we have sinned and need forgiveness. It matters that we see that Jesus is really God and fully human. It matters that he showed God to us, not in power but in humility and love, because that is the essence of God, and those who believe the essence of God to be something else – wrath or power or even holiness – have got it wrong. It matters, because Jesus is the one who brings us eternal life, so that we can stand in the courts of heaven and plead with God for the people and affairs of the earth. It matters because with Jesus' life in us, we can be those whose lives and whose deeds in the world overcome evil and shed light in the darkness.

In a world where we see evil happen every day, locally and nationally and internationally; a world predicated on power and greed; a world where some people can be seen as valueless, as less than others, and treated accordingly, it matters that we bring the life of God to bear. It matters that we live in the love of God. It matters that we pray with all the confidence of the children of our heavenly Father. What we believe affects what we do and how we live and it is not pride that says that it matters, but humility, which says that it is important that we live in such a way that God can shine through us to redeem a fallen world, that Jesus' saving work can be shown in practical ways for people to understand.

Children, keep yourselves from idols so that you may follow God who is love itself. Amen.

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