

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

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1 JOHN 4

8th October 2017

Hosea 11:1-4
1 John 4:1-15

I wonder how many hats you wear? I don't mean how many pieces of head-gear are in your wardrobe – only a seldom-used cycle helmet in mine as I don't like hats – but in the more colloquial sense. When we hold more than one role in life, we sometimes say “Speaking with my committee hat on...” or maybe with my expert's hat on, or my gardeners hat on, or my cook's hat on, or my teacher's hat on, and we could go on and on. How many hats do you have? I have a mother's hat and a wife's hat and a minister's hat. I wear the hat of the convener of the Presbytery Business committee and its Mission and Ministry committee. I have a school chaplain's hat, and an ex-teacher's hat and a keen cyclist's hat. And that's just without thinking. I wonder how many you have?

The thing about these virtual hats is that they are hats that you wear all the time. You wear them simultaneously – which presents a very funny picture, if you have a literal mind! You may not be functioning in all these roles at the same time, but they are all concurrently present in your life, and at any time you may switch from one role to another. It can be very useful, and it is good not to compartmentalize your thinking, so that you are able to see when your experience in one area of life can be of use in another, and you are able to switch hats like a quick-change artist.

And what, you may be wondering, has this to do with what John was saying in the part of his letter which we read today? John is not talking about hats. Or is he? The first part of what we read is about the problem that the early Christian Church had in keeping the good news of Jesus rooted in the real world. This wasn't a problem when they were speaking to the Jews, who had a wholistic view# of the world, with physical and spiritual mixed well together. But when, as they soon did, the Christian missionaries started speaking to the Roman world, which in the parts of the Mediterranean nearest to them was still the Greek world in outlook, if no longer in political reality, a different world view kicked in. The Greek world, following various of their ancient philosophers, tended to separate the physical from the spiritual. The physical was seen as mundane, and worthless and even dirty, while the spiritual was higher and ethereal, and aspirational. The Jewish world could mix physical with spiritual, and it was from that world that Christianity arose, but the Greek world drew a sharp line between the two.

And then here came these Christians talking about Jesus, this Christ figure, who was God's Son. They talked about this Christ figure who did wonders in the world, and who taught with divine wisdom, but they insisted that he was human, with a body and bodily functions, with the limitations and indignities that all bodily people – which is all of us – know. And the Greek world found that hard to swallow. They liked the idea of this Christ figure and what he taught and how he brought forgiveness and redemption and made us children of God, but they couldn't believe that he was really, truly human. How could a spiritual being be weighed down with a solid body? God,

they felt, would not be God if he were to be a real flesh-and-blood person. If this Jesus figure were real, he must have been a spiritual illusion, that looked like a person, but had all these higher powers. If he were more than a metaphor for spirituality and purity.

John is having nothing to do with such ideas, and he says so. In fact he brands those who hold this view as being anti-Christ. Remember by that phrase he doesn't mean that they are the embodiment of evil, but he does mean that they are detracting from the glorious Christian message that God's love was expressed most fully when the spiritual did become physical, and as fully, limitedly human as we are. If we think of it in terms of hats, Jesus is able to wear both the God hat and the man hat at the same time. But while he was here on earth, the God hat was pretty much on the shelf. He didn't come with advantages. The fact that he was able to heal and make miraculous things happen was not him trying to show that he was God, but was him showing us what anyone who walks fully and completely with God may be able to do. He meant it when he said, "*Very truly I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father.*" (John 14:12)

It wasn't just the ancient Greeks who had a hard time accepting that. John wanted the Church to have nothing to do with those who did not really believe in the incarnation, in God becoming man, in what we celebrate each Christmas. And yet, over the centuries, very often that teaching, that Jesus was different, that Jesus was more spiritual, that Jesus on earth had a connection to God that we can never have, that belief has very often been found in the Church and taught by the Church.

As, in more recent years, has its opposite. The opposite is that Jesus was just a man, he had no other hats, no other reality. By the end of the nineteenth century and all through the twentieth it was popular in some circles to claim that Jesus was a good man and a good teacher, but that all this talk of miracles was mythic material added later and not to be taken at face value. With this view of Jesus there was a tendency to discount the value of the crucifixion and to take any idea of Jesus' resurrection metaphorically. I am quite sure that had John come up against that distortion, he would have been equally against it. You can't disentangle the physical from the spiritual, and if you try you undermine the gospel.

After all the gospel message, the good news, is that God is love and that God shows his love for us by sending Jesus, his word, his thought, his self made flesh, and that he lived among us. "*God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him.*" (V:9) If Jesus was only human, then God did not come. If Jesus was really only spiritual, then he did not become one of us. It is, of course, easier to believe one of these two polar extremes, but why on earth – literally on earth, because that is where we are – should we think it would be easy to understand God and who God is and how God works?

And yet, when it comes down to the basics, it's not so hard. John now swoops down on his favourite subject again – how we should love one another. But this time he sets it in a very wide context, the widest there is. God, he tells us, is love. That is what God is when it comes down to it. He is power and might and holiness and majesty and many other things, but within all the other things that we can say about God, all the other superlatives and absolutes, the essence of God is love. Take away the love and there is nothing there. You can take away the power and glory and majesty and so on – and all of these were stripped away when Jesus came to be one of us – but you cannot take away the love. If you do there is nothing there.

God is love. He showed it by sending Jesus to live and to die as one of us, so that we might live in him and as his children.

God is love and that is why we must love one another. If there is no love in us, then God is not with us, not in us. But when we do love one another, then God himself lives in us – not in a scary “possession” way, but in the comforting, empowering, loving way that his children long for. When you do the loving thing – whether you feel loving or not – you are showing that God lives in you. You don’t need to underline it – see what a loving thing I am doing, don’t you see God’s hand in this? – because the presence of God will make itself known in your actions without you doing anything extra to highlight it.

Indeed, John goes further. He says that God’s love is perfected in us. How can that be, when God is perfect already? Astoundingly it seems to mean that the love God showed through Jesus is only completed when Jesus’ followers, his brothers and sisters show love to one another and to the world. It is in our love that the world sees God. Love, therefore, is not an optional extra, but an essential part of living as God’s children.

This, I think is what lies behind the popular saying, attributed to Theresa of Avila, which reads:

“Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours.”

God can, of course, do his work in the world without us, he is powerful and he can do things that we cannot imagine. He can show power and might and holiness, he can intervene in the course of world history. But he could not show his love to the world until Jesus came as one of us, and he cannot show his love to our generation without it being done through people, his people, his children. In the end it matters what we believe about Jesus, because what we believe can undermine the wonder of God’s love. In the end it matters how we live in the world, because what we do can show or hide God’s love. And if God’s love is shown, God is seen; while if it is hidden, God is concealed.

God grant that we be those who live in his love at all times. Amen.

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