

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

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CHILDREN OF GOD

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John 1:1-13
1 John 3:1-10

This passage from John's letter contains the most profound and wonderful things anyone could ever say to you. "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called the children of God; *and that is what we are.*" Isn't that great? Isn't it fantastic? God loves us, he loves us so much that he doesn't just *call* us children. It is not just a way of thinking about things, it is not just a metaphor, picturesque language. It is not that God is saying "The way I feel about you, well, it's a bit like you are my children – that sort of thing." No, we are called children of God because *that is what we are.* It is a reality.

If you stop listening now and want to spend the next while thinking about the wonder of that, feel free. There is nothing better for us to think about than this truth. God loves us, and we are his children. We are his. We have been born anew of water and the Spirit and we are children of God. Nothing can change that. No one can take it away from you. You have a belonging place, and that place where you belong, which you have a right to, is with God and with his children. The old you has gone, the one which was unsure about who you were, about whether you mattered, about if anyone cared and saw you and valued you. "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God."

John's community knew well the feeling that no one knew them or understood them, no one cared about their message or saw the wonder of it. And John tells them that they shouldn't be surprised by this – people who are outside the family never do really know or understand the family dynamic. Think about your own family. Think of the silly in jokes you have or had, that no one else would think funny. Think of the names you have for everyday things that sound daft to others – in our family we don't do the vacuuming or the hoovering, we Henry the place. We know why, and no one else needs to – though you might be able to work that one out. No one understands you in the same way that your brothers and sisters, that your parents do. Sometimes you don't want the world to know you in that way, because families rarely leave anyone on a pedestal, but when the world seems to be against you, when you are upset, when life is hard, there is no comfort like that of the unthinking acceptance of your family. No one else can offer that.

John tells us in his Gospel that Jesus "Came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him." (John 1:10) He tells us that "He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him." (John 1:9). Jesus came among us, you see, and though he looked as though he belonged, he was not understood. And ever since his own people put him to death for trying to show them the face of their God and Father, ever since then, people have not really understood those who have followed him and been born anew into his family. This is why it is a struggle to get people to listen to the Gospel, even though the very word Gospel means good news. This is why for centuries people have tried to take the

most amazing stuff out of the Christian message – the stuff about Jesus being God, the stuff about us being anointed, Messiah-ed as we saw a couple of weeks ago, the stuff about being born into God’s family – people have tried to take this stuff out and make the Christian message one of simple morality.

The world does not understand, does not understand Jesus or we his followers, his brothers and sisters. But never mind, says John, we are God’s children now, now, not just when we die, not just in the future, but now. And then he says, in fact although we can’t see into the next life one thing we do know, we shall see, God and seeing him, we shall be like him! Really!! Like God himself.

If you wonder how John can say this, think of family again. Think of family likenesses. Of course, many likenesses are genetic – we inherit our ears or our noses our long or short fingers and so on. We look like one parent or another. That is stuff we are born with. But sometimes family likenesses come out in other ways. Members of a family are likely to think in similar ways – not always draw the same conclusions, but pattern their thinking in similar ways. Members of a family may make similar gestures. Sometimes I can feel my face shaping itself into an expression that I know only too well from my sister’s face, but that might be genetic. But there are times when you can see husband and wife making similar gestures, pulling similar faces, going about tasks in similar ways, and that is not genetic, that is learned behaviour from spending time together, from watching each other.

John says that when we are with God we shall see him as he is – amazing thought – and so we will be like him. We will learn his way of doing things by seeing him, watching him, delighting in copying him.

But we don’t have to wait until then. Indeed, we shouldn’t. The idea that we will be with Jesus himself one day should make us want to prepare for that now. If you are going to have a job interview, meet a future employer, you will prepare beforehand, finding out about the business, doing what you can to show that you share the ethos and ideals and way of working that your employer will ask of you. If you are going to meet an important colleague in another country, you might think it worth making the effort to learn at least some of their language. And if you are going to meet Jesus himself – then you might want to make yourself “pure.”

If you don’t think carefully about what John is saying here, it can seem as though he is going from the sublime – God loves us! We are his children! To the everyday, very quickly. The everyday in this case being how we live now. John has brought us back to what he has talked of before: that we should not live in sinfulness. We have been born of God, and those who are born of God do not sin.

At this point you may be losing all the joy from being called a child of God, because you know about you, as I know about me, and we know that without meaning to, sometimes we do sin, we do or say or think wrongly. We don’t do the best thing, the right thing. We don’t always do the loving thing. So maybe we are not children of God after all? That would be a very sad thing.

But as in the earlier part of his letter, what John is talking about here is intentional wrongdoing, habitual wrongdoing which we have no intention of changing. Sometimes we can do or say wrong and only know its wrongness afterwards – sometimes immediately afterwards, when we see the results of what we have done, sometimes long afterwards. Sometimes we do not ever know some of the wrong that we have done. This is not what John is talking about. He is talking about deciding to do or

say a thing even though you know it is wrong, deciding to leave the path of love for others deliberately. There is a moral code for the children of God, but it is not something enforced upon us from outside, by a wrathful God. As children of God, we should want to live in his way, in his purity, the purity which Jesus gives us, purchased for us at Calvary. If we are children of God, since we are children of God, we want to live in the family way.

Living in the family way shows what we are, shows that we are children of God. It doesn't make us part of the family – no one becomes part of the family because of the way that they live, they only become part of the family because they are reborn into it. But our lives should show where we belong, even if people don't understand it.

And so, John comes back to what he will always come back to – we who are children of God should love one another – this is *the* defining characteristic. I may have told you before the story that when John was an old man – and he may have been that old man when he wrote this letter – he was renowned for one phrase. Whatever question or problem the Christians brought to him for his apostolic wisdom, he would say “Little children, love one another.” In the end someone asked him, “Master, why do you always tell us to love one another?” And John replied, “Because it is enough.”

It is enough. It is enough that we, who are children of God should love one another. It is not enough in the sense that any other commandment does not matter. It is enough because Jesus said that our whole moral code, our whole way of purity was summed up by the command to love the Lord our God with all that we have and to love our neighbour as ourselves. This family of God, of which we are part, is one which should not be riven by dispute, torn apart by disagreements. We don't all have to think the same things, there is room for varying opinions on many matters, but we should love one another. We may not choose to worship in the same style or pattern, we may find even those who do worship like us and with us very strange at times, even hard to understand, but we should love each other.

God loves us, God loves you, and being his child you want to be like him: so love the people he has made and loves and has redeemed by the gift of his Son, and even though you may not see it yourself, you will become like him. Amen