

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

Rev. Catherine Buchan

1 JOHN 1

13th Aug 2017

Psalm 24:1-10

1 John 1:1-10

You have heard this before, but let me tell you again: everyone is different. You know that. You are not the same as the person sitting next to you. Even if you were to sit next to your identical twin you would not be the same, not in looks, and not in character. We are all different and we all like different things and we learn in different ways and we express our faith in the One God with different emphases. We are all different because God made us that way.

And having made us that way, God gave us Scriptures which would work in different ways so that everyone could find a way in to God's Word. There are the stories of Old and New Testament. There are rules and laws, not only in the Old Testament, but also in the New. There is poetry and song. All different, as we are. In Western society, we have over the years given more weight to the letters of Paul than the other letters in the New Testament. The reason for this is not hard to find: Paul was educated in Greek thought and rhetoric, and western civilisation is built on a firm foundation of Greek and Latin writing. Until within the life-time of some of us, Greek and Latin was the most important subject taught in our schools and you could not proceed to higher education unless you could prove yourself in these disciplines. Paul's writings fit in well with that way of thinking. They are logical and linear, though not lacking in emotion and wonder. If you read one of Paul's letters you find that he proceeds from a to b to c, which is the way that most of us were educated.

But it is not the way that all of us think. Some of us are linear thinkers, but others of us think in pictures, or learn by meditating over one idea in various ways. And that is where Peter and John come in. They did not think in Greek ways, but in Jewish ways, so they write differently. We are going to spend some weeks looking at John's letters, and as we do so we will find that John swoops around a subject, like a seagull following a trawler. He homes in on his subject, then he swirls away, then returns from a different angle, then off again, and then he dives deep into the water, then soars off to the sky before coming back to consider his subject from yet another angle.

As we read John's first letter we will come up against some themes several times. Sin and love and light and fellowship among them. And he begins several of his thoughts here as he sets the tone for the whole letter.

He begins with wonder. "We declare to you what was from the beginning," so we know that we are dealing with God; "What we have heard," John is speaking of his personal experience, "What we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched, concerning the word of life." The wonder in this opening is not just the wonder that is God himself, from the beginning, for all time. The wonder is that John can speak of the eternal God and say that he has experience of him: he has heard him – directly. And more, he has seen, not just glimpsed but gazed on him, looked

at him, and yes, even touched him. The wow factor here is at stratospheric levels. The word of life, life itself, has come to life and has brought to this age the life of the age to come (that's what the Greek of verse 2 literally says). John knows it, it was revealed to him and he will never get over the wonder of it.

But the wonder does not end there. John is not writing for his own pleasure, or to boast about his own experience. He is writing so that his readers may know about what Jesus means and so be in fellowship with John and the other witnesses. "Fellowship" is a bit of a jargon word in churches, not one which you hear very often in the wider world. The word John uses has to do with business partnerships, but in reading what he has to say about this partnership, it is obvious that he has something more than just business in mind. It has a lot more to do with family ties. John wants to invite his readers into this fellowship, this relationship, with him and his friends, initially. But there is more. The essence of this fellowship is not just with one another, but it is with God the Father and his Son Jesus Christ. That is a big claim!

And yet, if it were not true, what would be the point in John's reflections? If the word of life came into the world only so that those who saw him could be touched and amazed, that would be a wonderful but not a life-changing thing. But John tells us that in Jesus the life of the age to come came to this age, and that changes everything. It means that God the Father himself is coming to his world, "coming, ready or not," as we used to say when we played hide and seek; and that he is not just paying a flying visit, but is coming to stay, coming to be with us for ever, until this age becomes the age to come. And the more people who understand this and embrace it and come into fellowship with each other and with God himself, the happier we all will be – indeed the more the joy of the world itself will increase.

While we are in the stratosphere of amazement, John wants us to understand that he is talking about God, the one and only, the pure and holy. "God is light and in him there is no darkness at all." And, being human himself, John knows that when he reminds us of this truth about God, when he mentions the lack of darkness in God's being, the place most of our minds will travel is to the darkness that we know in ourselves.

A few weeks ago, in the service, Brooklyn claimed that he had never done anything wrong, and we all smiled, because he is a child and we knew that it was simply a childish boast and not true. We all know that we have all done wrong. We may try to avoid using the word, but we all know that we have sinned.

A friend told me this week that she was following the Slimming World way of losing some weight. Having just made her a sandwich I apologised for having used butter, but she said that was all right because she was allowed a certain number of sins. Grrr. That terminology does make my blood boil (and my friend agreed). To call eating the non-diet food a sin is to trivialise the concept of sin like nothing else. It tells you that sin is a pleasure. It tells you that sin is a small thing. It tells you that a certain amount of sin is fine. None of which is true. John's definition of sin is far better: he calls it darkness. Darkness is the antithesis of light, and sin is walking in darkness, living in the opposite of God's light. Even one act, one word, one thought that is not filled with God's light is dark and sinful. And we all know that we have been in the dark, momentarily or for large parts of our lives.

God is light, and thinking of that shines his light on the darkness in our lives: failures of love, and commitment, failures of patience; failures of honesty; failures of faith and

hope. And John can hear us saying to him “How can we have fellowship with the God of light, how can we have partnership and family with him, if we have darkness in us?”

The answer is two-fold. On the one hand, you can't. You can't be in union with God if you are *walking* in darkness. By this John means if the dark is your chosen and habitual location. If you have turned from God and have no intention of turning towards him, if you are doing wrong and know it and don't care, then yes, there is no way that the fellowship of which John talks can be yours.

But if we walk in the light, if we are seeking to live in God's way and with God's love, just as God himself lives, then we do have this fellowship, and why? Because then, when we are seeking to leave the darkness, the blood of Jesus washes us clean from all our sin. That is the most amazing statement, in a chapter of amazing statements. Jesus doesn't only forgive us – though he does – but he washes us clean, he takes away the stain of the sin, the mark, the bitter reminder of it. When my nieces were small, one of them was left alone in my mother's living room for a while and was very quiet – always a bad sign! When the adults went back into the room, they found that the lovely, fluffy sheepskin rug was adorned with a large spot of red, indelible, felt pen. The niece explained that the sheep in the fields near her home all had red spots, and so...

My mother tried this and that to get the stain out of her rug, she washed and scrubbed and tried various products on it. She wanted to do it for her own sake and also so that her grand-daughter should not always be reminded of her naughtiness. One day she found a remarkable product from the Lakeland company – ask me later if you want to know! – and after all that had gone before, in no time at all the stain was gone and the rug as good as new.

That is the way that Jesus removes our sin. He does not just forgive us but takes the stain away. When God looks at us he does not see the sins of our past plastered all over us, defiling us. He sees us as pure and unsullied, as on the day we were born.

Of course, Jesus' cleansing cannot be given to those who won't acknowledge their need, those who say that they have no stain, or who take pride in the darkness in their lives. People who are like that, people who are older than Brooklyn but make the same assertion that he did, are fooling no one but themselves. We smiled at Brooklyn because we knew it wasn't true. We know that none of us can say with truth that we have no sin. God certainly isn't fooled. But all that is asked of us is that with truth and humility we confess our sin to God.

That is all. We are asked only to acknowledge the wrong we have done, that we still do, that has become a habit in us, and in Jesus God will wipe it away, and draw us into fellowship with the one who has been from the beginning, the life of the coming age, made tangible, the joy of God's being that fills the universe with life.

These are big, big themes that John is bringing to us, and we will return to them as we go through his letter. But the first thing we can perhaps take from this, that we can think on and act on, is that when we confess, the God of all the universe draws close to forgive and restore us and to help us walk in his light. Think on that for a week, and you won't come to an end of your wonder. Amen.