

Sermon for 14th April 2024, Year B, Easter 3

Preached at St Serf's Shettleston

I John 3:1-7

Sermon

The epistles of John were thought for many centuries to have been written by the same person who wrote John's Gospel, which is why they share the same name. But at the start of the 20th century, scholars started to realise that although the message is very similar between the gospel and the letters, the way the letters are written is quite different. It's as if an English person and a Scottish person were to write a sermon on the same subject; even if they are both using the same language, the way they use it is very distinctive.

What scholars now think is that the gospel of John and the epistles of John were probably written by different people but from the same community, with the gospel being written first in 90AD, and the first epistle written between 95 to 110 AD. This would be up to 80 years after Jesus's death and resurrection of course, so it would be like writing a letter today about something important that happened in 1944, such as D-Day, for example - your memory might be fuzzy but it's still not something you're likely to forget if you were there.

In this first epistle, the author is trying to emphasise several convictions about Jesus that were under threat at the time, particularly the ideas that he was a human being that came in the flesh, and that sin was a real problem that Christians should work hard to avoid.

Around the time these letters were written, a group called the Gnostics were arguing that Jesus was in fact a purely divine being who had no need for food or drink and was in every way completely different from us. This group argued that the material world, including our own bodies, our relationships, and everything

in creation, is fundamentally evil and only our disembodied spiritual souls can be pure and perfect before God. This led them to conclude that a body was a hindrance and its needs irrelevant. Some tried to stop eating or drinking, while others decided that since the body was irrelevant, you may as well do whatever you wanted with it and your spiritual soul would remain pure from sin.

Not surprisingly, the elder members of the Christian community fought against this vigorously. They knew that this wasn't what Jesus had taught. And so, John's epistle tries to re-establish what the Christian religion was really about – neither indulging in worldly ambitions of wealth and power, nor becoming isolated pure spiritual souls floating in space, but seeking the closest of close loving relationships with God and with each other.

Quite often, the Christian faith has been like someone driving up and down a motorway, desperately looking for the right exit, but continually missing it and travelling too far in the wrong direction before eventually realising they've got lost and having to turn round again. Someone who gets caught up in a chaotic life might start to find relief in religious rules and structure, but then how long is it before they start resenting and rejecting everyone who doesn't follow the same strict rules? So often, religion has this tendency to draw people towards extremes of intensity or disinterest.

But this first epistle of John insists on a different path entirely. It's like that 'junction 2a' exit off the motorway that I keep missing when I'm trying to drive from Cambuslang to Baillieston. 'Sin is bad,' John says, 'but the solution isn't to disconnect yourselves from each other and the physical world to live an ascetic life without joy or pleasure – the solution is to realise that God loves you as a parent loves a child, for everyone who has experienced this love will find it very hard to hate or be cruel to anyone'.

We all know that we're not really worthy of being loved by God, since we all fail to do the right thing so often in our lives, but that's why the revelation that

God nevertheless unconditionally loves us as his children is so powerful and transformational.

I don't know how many of you have seen *Les Misérables* on stage or as a movie, but near the start of that story, the protagonist Jean Valjean, having been imprisoned for 19 years for stealing a loaf of bread, on his release steals silverware from a kindly bishop who had given him refuge. The bishop, true to his religion, not only forgives Valjean when he is caught, but gives him the silverware as a gift, admonishing him to mend his ways. Overwhelmed by this unexpected and undeserved mercy, Valjean's life is transformed, though of course he is famously pursued by Inspector Javert, the policeman who is not interested in forgiveness or compassion but only in implacable, merciless justice - the strict rules of religion.

This story, for me, is a perfect example of what happens to a person who realises that despite all their failings, God does, in fact, love them, and that love is never going away. The more unworthy that person had felt themselves to be, the more dramatic the impact of experiencing that love. You'll notice that the bishop in *Les Misérables* doesn't just preach to Jean Valjean about love and sin, he demonstrates and lives it. Valjean experiences that undeserved love and as a result he turns aside from his life of stealing – and he naturally begins to protect and support those others who are being abused and exploited by his society. He's not doing good works because the Bible (or anyone else) tells him to, but because he has been transformed by unconditional love.

This is, I think, the absolute heart of the Christian faith, that being loved unconditionally despite our flaws makes us able to love others unconditionally despite theirs. It's what Jesus taught, and demonstrated repeatedly, and why he spent all his time with those who had been rejected and exploited and why he was so critical of the important and wealthy people who kept insisting that God loved only those who followed their rules.

“See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God”. Realising this, experiencing this, is the beginning of eternal life, the life of love.