

## 1 John 1:1-4

*Sermon preached on Sunday 3<sup>rd</sup> January 2010 at BHAC, North Turramurra.*

The early Christian writer Jerome wrote a commentary in the 4<sup>th</sup> century about Paul's letter to the Galatians; but at one point in that commentary, he recounted a story about the Apostle *John* set in the closing days of the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD. By this time, John was the last remaining disciple of Jesus alive...the last one who actually *knew* Jesus. He and his words were obviously revered.

Of course, by this time John was very old, and indeed so weak and old that he could no longer preach what might be called a normal sermon. But nonetheless, his friends would regularly carry him into the congregation of the church at Ephesus, giving him an opportunity to speak, and each time they did that, he would simply say:

“Little children, love one another.”

The congregation loved John, of course, but eventually they grew a little weary of hearing the same phrase repeated time and again, and so they eventually asked him: “Master, why do you always say this?” He responded: “Because it is the Lord's command, and if that is all that you do, it is enough!”

Now, I don't know if that story is true, but it certainly has a ring of *believability* about it. It is *indeed* true that the Lord Jesus taught his disciples the (new) command “Love one another...” and that this command was repeated by those apostles who later became writers of the NT. They knew (as, of course, did Jesus) that it was vitally important for the fledgling Christians to whom they ministered to grasp this truth, and live it out, lest the credibility of the gospel be destroyed.

But of those writers, including Paul and Peter, *no-one* wrote more about the theme of *love*—ours for one another, and God's for us—than the Apostle **John**.

And there is no book in the New Testament which deals more with this theme of *love* than **1 John**. Again and again in this letter, the apostle John comes back to this theme. Someone has helpfully described this letter as being like a spiral staircase in a multi-storied room full of paintings and artefacts. As you go up the staircase you keep coming around to see same things but from different angles and different perspectives.

That's what John does: he keeps coming back again and again to this (and other) themes: the themes of **light** and **darkness** and **faith** and **godly living** and **the Word** and **knowledge**. But each time he does so he addresses them from a slightly different perspective, a slightly different angle.

Now, over the next four weeks, and God willing (as much as possible) during the other holiday weeks of this year, we're going to be looking at this letter of 1 John. I haven't chosen to look at this letter because I think we at BHAC are particularly *deficient* in our love for each other, or in our understanding of those other themes, by the way. On the contrary. But we always need to be encouraged and exhorted to hear about these things and do them more and more.

Now, let me say one or two things more by way of introduction to the letter as a whole.

I've talked about the fact that *John* wrote it—*by which* I mean the same John as the author of John's Gospel, the disciple whom Jesus loved—though nowhere in the letter does the author actually state his own name. But it's clear from the testimony of **early church writers** like Tertullian and Irenaeus, and from the **style and language and themes** of the letter that it was in fact written by the Apostle John.

The **reason** John wrote this letter? Well, like most (if not *all*) of the letters in the NT, we can discern from within the letter *itself* what its purpose was. In *this* case, there are a couple of very clear statements that leave us in no doubt.

One of the reasons was because the church was struggling with the effects of false teaching. Have you got the Bible open? Look on p. 863 at 1 John 2 verse 26:

I am writing these things to you about those who are trying to lead you astray.

There were a number of false teachers who had started to stir up trouble for the church by this time, threatening to **divide** and **destabilise** the church. Indeed, something of a division had *already* happened. In chapter 2 verse 19, John writes about how some of these teachers “went out from us”. They had originally been part of the church, but had left. They were **secessionists**. A **breakaway faction**.

And so John wrote this letter to **refute** both the false teachers and their teachings (because they were obviously trying to persuade others to join them), and he does so in pretty strong language. At various points he describes the false teachers as “liars” and even as “antichrists”.

The false teaching, by the way, was probably a form of what later became known as “Gnosticism”. It comes from the Greek word “gnosis” which means **knowledge**. It's likely that these false teachers were saying that, whilst the teaching of Jesus and the apostles was good, it wasn't somehow quite enough. There was an extra level of **knowledge**... a deeper level of **understanding** and **spirituality** that *they alone* could provide.

But John wants to say to the Christians to whom he writes: you don't need any extra knowledge! You have it **all** already! So for example, in chapter 2 verse 7, John says, pointedly: “I am not writing you a new command but an old one.” You see, they'd heard it before. They'd believed it before. And then in v. 27 of the same chapter he says:

“the anointing you received from [Jesus] remains in you, and you do not need anyone to teach you.”

It's not that they didn't need teaching “full stop”, but that they didn't need new teachers, or new teachings.

And of course, all this relates to the other reason why John wrote, which he says right at the end of the letter. He says in chapter 5 verse 13:

“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.”

You see, what is the effect of hearing someone say, “The problem with your faith is that it's deficient...you need this extra knowledge or teaching...”? It's to undermine confidence, isn't it? And I know that it does that because it happens today.

It happens when the Mormons come around. They're dressed well, they're articulate, they know the Bible backwards. They say, "Yes, we believe the Bible too, and it's well and good as far as it goes, but what you really need if you are to relate properly to God is the Book of Mormon."

The same is true of the Jehovah's Witnesses. They all say "We are the true church. We have the real truth about God." And what can often spring forth in us when we're confronted by that is **doubt**, and **anxiety** and **apprehension**. We can easily think "What if they're right? What if I am missing out on something? What if I've been wrong all this time?"

But you see, John says "Don't be deceived...don't be unsettled. Be *reassured*. You *have* eternal life and you have intimacy with God when your faith and deeds are in line with the gospel as *originally* handed down by the apostles. What you've *already* received is *still* all you need."

So a letter like this is good for us today. It's relevant to us today. We need its encouragements and warnings.

Well, after that very long introduction, let me come now to the opening four verses, and let me highlight two things. Firstly, **the truth of the incarnation**. John writes:

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched--this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard...

I'm saying: in these first three verses, John declares the truth of the incarnation of Jesus (and we'll see why that's significant in a second). But it takes a little explaining to say that John is talking about Jesus, because nowhere does John actually *mention* Jesus in these verses. He *does* mention "the Word of life"...which could mean the word of the gospel...the message of the gospel which brings life to those who hear it. That was something he had certainly proclaimed.

But surely he is talking about the *incarnate* Word, Jesus, here. Those of us who are familiar with the opening verses of John's *gospel* can hardly avoid seeing here an allusion to what's written there. John's Gospel begins: "In the beginning was the Word..." and John then goes on to state clearly that the Word of God in that context was Jesus himself.

And when John says that he has **heard** and **seen** and **looked at** and **touched** the Word of life...there seems little doubt that he's talking about Jesus Christ. John was there. John's ears heard the sound waves made by Jesus' voicebox. He was a witness to what Jesus did...he saw with his own eyes the wonderful deeds that Jesus performed. And he touched Jesus. The complete phrase "[our] hands have touched" only appears here in the NT, but the verb to touch in the NT always means physical touching. This is not a metaphor for something else.

John is saying that he actually *touched* Jesus. He rubbed shoulders with him. Remember, no-one else (by this time) could say that. Amongst the disciples, only John was, by then, alive. So this was a very powerful and unique testimony that John had. He had been with the word of life, the incarnate Word, the Lord Jesus. And his task, as he saw it, was to proclaim Christ incarnate and to proclaim eternal life that came through him.

But the question is: why did John start his letter this way? I mean there's no introduction...no warm "To the church at such-and-such". No "Grace and peace to you, etc." It's a bit heavy, isn't it?

Well, I think the reason that John launches straight into the letter in this way (apart from being part of his personal style) was probably because the truth of the *incarnation* was a truth which the false teachers were denying. They couldn't (or perhaps wouldn't) believe the incarnation.

And let's face it, it *is* a difficult truth to grasp. That God could (or would) come into this world and become **fully man**...but at the same time stay **fully divine**. And so what has often happened through history is that people have begun to doubt **one** or the **other**. They either say Jesus wasn't fully divine, or he wasn't fully human.

And it may have been the case that these Gnostic false teachers were saying that Jesus wasn't truly human. He only *seemed* to be human. Later on, this line of thinking got its own "ism". It became known as Docetism, from the Greek for "it seems".

So these Gnostics apparently began teaching that Christ only *seemed* to be human, but that he never actually became human. And that makes a twisted sort of sense when you understand that gnostics believed in fact that physical matter was actually evil (only the spirit was good!), so in their thinking it was impossible for Christ to take on flesh. He only *seemed* human.

Indeed, they probably wouldn't have had any problem with what John says in v. 3 when he refers to Jesus as "the eternal life, which was with the Father". Yes, Christ had an eternal, pre-existent life in the heavenly realms. No problem with that. But to admit that he became *truly human*...that was a bridge too far.

But John absolutely refutes this. And so John wants to set out right from the beginning of his letter that Jesus really *was* a man, that *this really* happened. We saw him, we heard him, we touched him. And this becomes the test of whether you have a real faith. That's why he goes on in chapter 4 verse 2 to say:

Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ *has come in the flesh* is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God...

The incarnation is therefore a central doctrine in authentic Christian faith. So much hangs on its truth. Without the incarnation there can be no cross, no atonement, no forgiveness, no resurrection. So John is saying to us today (by the Holy Spirit) "Make sure you believe this. Make sure you acknowledge this truth. You can trust me. I was there."

And if we *do* believe it, secondly, note what John says about what happens as a result, in v. 3. He says:

We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you may also have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.

What's at stake when it comes to believing (or not believing) in the full humanity and full divinity of Jesus is nothing less than fellowship with God.

Do you see the logic of what he's saying? He's saying "If you believe our proclamation about Jesus...if you keep believing it, then you stay in fellowship with 'us'". (And when he says "our" and "us" he probably means himself and the other original apostles of Jesus.)

But it's not just fellowship with John that is at stake. It's fellowship **with God**. Because John says "*our fellowship* is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ." In other words, to have fellowship with John (by believing his testimony) *is* to have fellowship with God.

But the reverse, by implication, is also true. By not keeping fellowship with John... by separating from him and denying his teaching, is to break fellowship with God.

The breakaway teachers from this church were almost certainly saying: "Leave John behind. Leave his crazy teachings and his crusty, outdated theology. It's OK to break fellowship with him. He's just a man, after all. And don't worry, you'll still be in fellowship with God if you do...in fact, it'll be even deeper than before."

But John (I think) is saying: "If you break fellowship with me, then understand this; you break fellowship with God."

And he says, v. 4, "I write this to make our joy complete." It's not out of some sense of duty that he urges his readers to stay in fellowship with him and believe his proclamation about Jesus. It springs from a yearning for joy...and what makes him joyful? The knowledge that the Christians in this church are continuing in their fellowship with him *and with God*. John displays his pastor's heart.

Now, the question is: what does this mean for us today? If fellowship with God hinges in some sense on having fellowship with this man John who has been dead for nearly 2000 years, what then do we do with this?

Well, of course, the way in we have fellowship with John is through **believing** the testimony of *this* word. In one sense, it's not that much different from the original recipients of this letter. John was absent from them in some way (after all, he had to write a letter to them), and all *they* had to go on was his written encouragements.

Well, it's the same with us, isn't it? John is absent, but we still have his written testimony.

And so, if we believe his testimony...if we commit ourselves to *his* teaching, and trust in *his* apostolic witness and word about Jesus, then we **are** in a way in fellowship with him. But more importantly, we're in fellowship with the living God who revealed himself in the person of Jesus *to him*.

So the challenge for us is to **hold fast to our fellowship with God** by staying faithful to Jesus, the true teaching about whom was proclaimed by John and the other apostles. Yes, there'll always be people who say "But that's conservative and boring" or "You're not a true Christian if you don't adopt this new thinking..."

But this is the implication of what John writes. Leave him and his word behind, and you leave God behind. So the outworking of that is that we have got to be committed to growing in our knowledge of and confidence in the Scriptures.

And so I ask you: as I ask myself: What steps will you be taking this year to do that?

What plan do you have to read and study the Scriptures and nurture your fellowship with God?

If you don't plan, it probably won't happen!

We need to be strong and firm as we face the pressures of being Christian this year. May God help us all to believe the Word of life by believing the written word.