

1 John 2:12-14

Preached on Sunday 24th January 2010 at BHAC, North Turramurra.

The Christian pastor and author Eugene Peterson tells the story of how he was once in a bookstore buying a book, when he saw on the counter *a different* book written by a good friend of his.

Many years beforehand the author of *that* book and Peterson had been at theological college together and had talked about the **plot** and the **characters** of just such a potential book. But here, now, was the book...**published!**

He said to the sales assistant: "This book was written by a good friend of mine; I didn't know it had been published." To which she said: "Well, you'd better buy it; you might find yourself in it."

Well, Peterson did buy it, and lo and behold, he *did* find himself in it. But to his great dismay, it was not in the way he expected. At college they had been great friends and the author had given every indication of liking, even admiring Peterson. But in the book he was portrayed at not at all likeable, and certainly not admirable.

As Peterson said: "There was no escaping the fact that it was me, just not the me of my dreams."

Now, I tell you that story because it's a great counterpoint (I think) to the passage that we've come to in 1 John this morning. Because while it's true that we can often have a slightly rosier picture of ourselves that perhaps others do, in *this* passage in 1 John 2 the apostle John paints a very *positive* picture of the Christians to whom he writes. Perhaps a little rosier than we might paint of ourselves?

Put yourself in the shoes of the Christians to whom John writes, and you hear John saying to *you*:

"You have known him who is from the beginning." And,

"You have known the Father." And,

"You have overcome the evil one." And,

"You are strong, and the word of God lives in you."

But as you hear those things you might think to yourself, "Well, if that *is* me...if those statements were applied to me...then at best that would be the 'me' of my dreams."

So, this morning I want to explore why John says those things at this point in his letter; why he makes those (perhaps) aspirational statements, and see how that they can increasingly be true for each one of us.

Now, I say "for each one of us", but there's an immediate issue in saying that, isn't there? It is perfectly obvious as you read these verses that they appear to be directed not towards "each one of us" but towards a very narrow segment of the church family. John writes explicitly (in this passage) to "**dear children**", "**fathers**" and "**young men**".

I mean, on face value, if you took the passage very literally, you would have to presume that John was writing in these verses *only* to the **children** in the church (to the Sunday school, so to speak), and to the **fathers** in the church (as opposed to the mothers), and to the **young men** (to the male teenagers, perhaps?).

That's if you take the passage very literally.

But there's a good reason to think that John's *not* writing to a narrow segment of the church, and that we shouldn't take this in its narrowest sense. The key to that reason is in the fact that at **five** other points in this letter, John addresses the whole church as "dear children". The reason he does that, I presume, is because as an apostle he has a deep, father-like affection for the people to whom he writes. It's his favoured way of reaching out to them in love and encouragement.

So, it would be very odd if John suddenly and without warning shifted from using "children" as a **metaphor** to using it **literally**. I don't suppose any of us really think he does. It's likely, then, that the terms "fathers" and "young men" are also metaphorical in some sense. The former term referring to the **older, maturer members of the congregation**...the "spiritual fathers" of the congregation; and the latter referring to the **enthusiastic younger members**.

But what about the masculine language? Is what John *says* true only of the *male* mature Christians, and the male energetic young Christians? No, I don't think so. The issue of why he uses only *masculine* terms (**fathers**, young **men**) is explained reasonably well by the fact that John wrote in a patriarchal culture and those terms were the ones that immediately sprang to the pen. And so, just as in other parts of the NT, where the word "brothers" can be translated "brothers and sisters" perfectly well, so in this context he is speaking to both men and women in those categories.

The other thing of course is that when John addresses **fathers** and **young men**, he *doesn't* mean that what he says of one group is *not* true of the other, or indeed of the whole church. That's obvious as you read the entire letter and see each of these very positive statements applied to the church *as a whole*.

But maybe John was aware, as he constantly addressed the church with this affectionate term "dear children", that the older Christians might have felt talked down to, and the younger "virile" Christians felt patronised. So he addresses them directly to remind them that he hasn't forgotten the place that they have in the church.

Well, that's enough by way of introduction. Let's have a look at the text. You'll have noticed that John cycles through his "addressees" twice... so let's look at what John says to each group separately.

He writes to his "dear children" in v. 12 and at the end of v. 13:

I write to you, dear children, because your sins have been forgiven on account of his name.

I write to you, dear children, because you have known the Father.

As you know, at the heart of the Christian gospel—the heart of the message that John had learned from Jesus—is the declaration that *God forgives the sins of those who trust in him*.

Such is the **great love** that the true and living God *has* for humanity, that he wipes out the record and effect of their rebellion against him.

Now, John has already reminded us in this letter **how** God did that. In chapter 2 verse 2 John reminds us that our *atonement*—our “at-one-ment” with God—came through the sacrifice of Jesus. God didn’t just declare our sins forgiven. No, there was a **cost**. Just like there’s a cost when you forgive someone for something hurtful they’ve done to you. You have to bear the cost of their forgiveness in some way. Same with God.

By sending his Son Jesus to the cross, God the Father satisfied sin’s just *penalty*, which is a sacrificial death. Through that death, our sins are “paid for” and forgiveness comes freely to us as we repent.

Now, I presume that the church to whom John wrote knew pretty well the “mechanics” of these things, as we do. They *knew* about Christ’s death on the cross. They *knew* about God’s forgiveness.

(Though can I just add at this point... did you notice what John says at the end of v. 12 about **why** God forgives us: it’s “on account of his name”. One of the things about forgiveness that we often don’t understand, or that we forget, is that God forgives us, **not primarily for our sake, but for his name’s sake**. It’s not because we’re fantastic that he forgives us, it’s because *he* is.

It’s to uphold **his** glory, and **his** honour, and **his** praise, that he forgives us. His glory has been **sullied** by our sin. His honour was **trampled** for generations...but through Jesus and the cross he upholds his glory and honour, and redeems us in the process. And that’s a great thing!)

So why did John remind them of these things?

Well, I think it’s because John has just reminded the church of some pretty sobering and *potentially destabilising* things. He has just talked about the fact that **every true believer sins...**and goes on sinning. And he has said that if you claim to know God but you don’t do what he says, then you are a liar and that you *don’t* know God.

So what was the risk? The risk was that some in the church might have questioned whether they *really were* saved, or at least doubted or been discouraged in their Christian walk.

But what John wants them to know straight away in this part of his letter is that they really *have been* forgiven. He wants to dispel their doubts. And so he rightfully takes the declaration of forgiveness that will be made about them on the Day of Judgement and brings it *into the present*, as an ongoing reality.

He reminds them that they *do* know God.

And the effect of doing that is **encouragement and confidence**, isn’t it? The effect of reading these things is to be reassured in the midst of my sinfulness that he **has** forgiven me...that I know the heart of the Father who is the Lord of the universe, that he has done these things to

uphold his own glory, and that he loves me. And *that* knowledge motivates me to press on in the Christian life.

Now, I truly *hope* that's the case for you. I hope you can claim those confident truths for yourself. I'm reminded of the time when Billy Graham came to Sydney in the late 70s. And he appeared on Mike Willesee. Willesee asked him about whether he was sure that he would go to heaven. Graham said, "I am". Willesee questioned whether that was arrogance. But you can see that if this passage is true (not if I think it's true, but if it *is* true, and it's directed towards me), then I *can* have confidence. I *have been* forgiven, I *do* know the Father. And it's not arrogant to say what God tells me.

Well, let me turn very quickly to what John says to the "fathers". Verse 13 and v. 14 (the same):

I write to you fathers, because you have known him who is from the beginning.

(No-one's really sure why John says exactly the same sentence *twice* within two verses. Probably for emphasis.)

The real question, though, is "Who is the one 'who is from the beginning' that the spiritual fathers in the congregation knew?" Well, it's pretty clear from the context that John is referring to Jesus.

In John's writings, the "one who was from the beginning" refers to Jesus Christ. Now, remember that there were wayward, breakaway teachers who were influencing the church, and they were probably saying things like "You people in the church, you don't know Jesus like we know Jesus. We have special information about him, and you should join us if you want to know the truth."

So maybe we should see here a corrective to that thinking. John is declaring that when you believe in the original apostolic gospel, then you **believe in** and you **know** the true Jesus. The real Jesus.

But what, again, is the *effect* of being told I "know him who is from the beginning"? Isn't it, again, **encouragement**? Isn't it *encouraging* (and yes, perhaps *challenging*) to know that the Son of God... who has existed from eternity past...for whom and by whom the entire universe was made... that I *know* him. I don't have to guess what God is like. I don't have to *hope* that God is good. I don't have to *wish* for God to be merciful and kind and to have my future in his hands.

I know God, because I know Christ; because Christ demonstrated in his **words** and **deeds** that he is from the Father...and that he and the Father are one. So do I have to look elsewhere for God? Do I need to listen to people who say "You need this new spiritual technique to find God. No! I read 1 John 2:14 and hear "You know him who is from the beginning. So stand firm!

Now, maybe you need to learn more about Jesus. Maybe this statement is *aspirational* for you! OK...then learn. Don't stay at that point. Take the opportunities presented to us on a platter. Embark on a programme of reading the gospels. Download sermons. Do what it takes. But whatever you do, don't think that you have to go beyond what is written. You know Christ when you know the gospel. So be encouraged.

Well, finally, John addresses the “young men”. Verse 13b and 14b:

I write to you young men, because you have overcome the evil one. I write to you young men, because you are strong, and the Word of God lives in you, and you have overcome the evil one.

The New Testament often describes the Christian life as a **battle**...a spiritual battle *against* (amongst other things) **doubting God’s goodness** and the **temptation to sin**. The evil one—the devil, Satan—is described in the NT as the ultimate source of both of those impulses.

Now, it’s true that Satan is a defeated foe. Christ’s death on the cross was the *means* to that victory. But in his death throes, Satan continues to assault Christians. And Satan’s main weapon are *lies*, and all *his* lies boil down to three, namely: **You’re a failure, You can’t trust God, and Sin is better.**

So, when we’re tempted to **despair** because we hear an accusing voice in our heads that says “You have failed God again, because you’ve sinned” ...

And when we’re tempted (just in the midst of the *ordinary run of life*, or maybe particularly in the midst of *trials*) to **doubt God’s goodness**...

And when we’re tempted to do what we know is wrong and deliberately *sin*, **Satan is at work**. He *wants* us to give in. He wants us to believe his lies; he wants us to lose the battle; he wants to undermine our faith, and our faithfulness.

But see what John says to the church? He says:

“You are strong; the word of God lives in you, and you have *overcome* the evil one.”

“Overcome”. That’s the language of victory. It’s as if the battle to live the Christian life is over and has been completely won. And again, maybe it’s at this point that you think “Does that really describe me? The *real* me?”

And of course, the answer, surely for each one of us is “no”. We haven’t completely “arrived”. This is aspirational for all of us. But the reason that John writes in this way is, again, to **encourage** us and **motivate** us to live *as if it is true*.

And the key to this is the middle phrase. The key to being strong (spiritually of course, not physically) and to overcoming the evil one is to **have the word of God live in us**.

Think about this for a second: how does the word of God give us strength to overcome the devil’s **lies**? It does it (if we read it) by flooding our mind with **the truth**. The beautiful truth about our **forgiveness** if we do sin. The glorious truth about the fact that God is always at work for the good of those who love him. The sobering truth about the fact that sin always damages our intimacy with God and makes us feel worse in the long run.

So, for example, imagine I am tempted to be greedy, or (more likely) imagine I’m tempted to not even question whether I might be greedy *already*. Satan says “**This will make you happy. You need to feather your nest. You’ve earned it.**” But the word of God which lives in me, or which should live in me says “**Greed is idolatry**”, and the Spirit within me recoils at that, and

so I take some steps to address that issue. What's happened at that point? I've overcome the evil one.

And you can think, I'm sure, of a million other examples of how the word of God speaks to our hearts both **encouragement** and **challenge**, but always with grace, to help us do that.

Now, the application of this is clear, isn't it?

We must become (if we're not already) Bible-saturated, Bible-acting-upon(!) Christians. We need to immerse ourselves more and more in it, learning it, memorising it, letting it abide in us so that we can actually experience and enjoy the triumphs which that will bring over the evil one.

Yes, it's true that in many ways what John writes in these verses is aspirational. Maybe they don't describe the true me. But John writes to encourage us. To strengthen us. To say "There are qualities you have that you need to be reminded of."

So let us be encouraged. Let us go into the rest of today and this week and this year buoyed by these truths that John writes to us about.

Let's pray.