

WHAT IT
MEANS TO
'KNOW GOD'

a sermon by Dick Wolff

for

*Temple Cowley
United Reformed Church*

from

1 John 3 : 1 - 10
(3rd Week of Easter, Year B)

You open the Bible and turn to look at what the set readings are for the Sunday with a sense of anticipation. “What is there this week I can get my teeth into? What challenge will God’s Word beam at me this week?”

This week, I opened up this reading from the First Letter of John and my heart sank. I didn’t only not like it, it made me angry. It seemed to represent the worst side of religion.

“the reason why the world doesn’t like us is because it doesn’t know God.” (vs 1). What a cheek! So anyone with a feeling for God would recognise that we’re right and would support us? If they don’t support us it’s because they don’t know God? How pompous!

“No child of God commits sin, because the divine seed remains in him; indeed because he is God’s child he cannot sin.” (vs 9). How self-righteous can you get? “We’re Christians, so we’re morally pure and everyone else isn’t.”

“This is what shows who are God’s children and who are the devil’s : anyone who fails to do what is right not a child of God.” (vs 10).

Reading through the rest of the letter doesn’t give much comfort either, although there are some very beautiful passages, too :

In love there is no room for fear; indeed perfect love banishes fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and anyone who is afraid has not attained to love in its perfection.

1 John 4 : 18

On balance, though, what strikes you is the sense that “if you’re one of us, you’re a child of God, and if you’re not, you’re a child of the Devil”. A highly dangerous idea.

But, wait a moment! All is not quite as it seems!

When you read through the whole letter — it’s not terribly long — you fairly soon realise that it’s written as a condemnation of a particular group of people. They seem to be a group of people who used to belong to the church that John is writing to, but who don’t any more.

*They left our ranks, but never really belonged to us; if they had, they would have stayed with us. They left so that it might be **clear** that none of them belongs to us.*

1 John 2 : 19

I expect we all know of churches that have had one group ‘out of synch’ with the rest, and some of us probably know of churches where a group has actually walked out. It happened up at Marsh Gibbon many years ago. It very nearly happened over the sexuality debate in the URC as a whole.

This church this letter was written to was probably somewhere in what is now Syria, and the letter was written somewhere early in the first century — about the year 110 perhaps. As we read this letter, it is not difficult to learn a lot about this group that has left — about their beliefs and their practices. I’ll look at those in a minute.

But reading the letter as a whole, there’s one more thing we can discover, and it’s very important.

This letter comes over as a “we’re right and they’re wrong” sort of letter, and could leave you with the idea that this other group has been booted out of the church. That the powerful people in the church have kicked these heretics out. In the hands of an authoritarian and powerful church, this 1st Letter of John could be dangerous stuff. But reading a bit more closely, it’s clear that it has *not* been a question of the powerful, religiously arrogant, majority kicking out a few people it didn’t want and then justifying their actions by saying the heretics were children of the devil.

Those who have left may not have been a minority, but a significant chunk of the membership. They have walked out by their own choice. It definitely sounds as if the ones who walked out were people with social status, people respected in the locality — people the church felt it really needed, people it couldn’t do without.

They belong to that world, and so does their teaching; that is why the world listens to them.

1 John 4 : 5

Ah, so the world listens to *them* — the ones who have walked out. It’s *not* listening to those left behind. Maybe the breakaway church is growing, whilst theirs is shrinking.

It’s a very different situation from the one we find ourselves in here at Temple Cowley, but there are points of contact between us. John’s little Christian community is feeling badly hurt, has lost many of its key people. They’ve lost their social respectability and have been left feeling like they are spiritual idiots, holding to unpopular beliefs that no ordinary person in their right mind would hold. They are angry, hurt, feeling betrayed, deserted — by the world and maybe by God, too.

Someone has written this letter to encourage them — we don’t really know who, but it sounds like someone with authority and wisdom who has a wider view of the struggles going on in the Christian mission. This is not an airy-fairy theological essay. This is a very direct and down-to-earth attempt to bolster the spirits of a hurting, and greatly reduced little church that has suffered a major division. The letter-writer says so himself :

You have given your allegiance to the Son of God; this letter is to assure you that you have eternal life.

1 John 5 : 13

Why would he need to assure them that they have eternal life if they weren’t seriously *doubting* it?

So, what has the bust-up been about? Reading the letter, we can get a very clear picture of what issues the division has been over.

- those who have broken away boast that they know God (2:4; 4:8), and love God (4:20)
- they claim to be walking in the light of God (1:6; 2:6, 9)
- they lay claim to unique spiritual experiences of God (4:1ff)

It's difficult to argue with people who are sure they know God so well, and their religious self-confidence has clearly rattled those who are left behind, who feel that maybe *they're* the ones who are missing out on the experience of God; that maybe they don't know God as well as they thought they did. But the letter-writer poo-poo's the religious certainties of those who've walked out, and says it's nothing but their imagination. If they knew God at all, they would act lovingly (because God is love) — and they don't give a damn about anyone except themselves, really.

- the members of the breakaway group think that because of their inner knowledge of God they are above sinning (1:8,10)

So it's not *John's* little church that is self-righteous. It is those who've walked out (probably to form their own church) that are quite sure that because they know God their eternal life is secure. John's quite clear: "if we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." (1 : 8) No self-righteousness *there*.

- the breakaways reckon they are sinless, despite the fact that they make a virtue of being worldly (2:15f, 4:5) — and 'the world' listens to them.
- and they attach no importance to doing righteousness (3:7, 10), or to helping their poor fellow-Christians, even though they themselves are wealthy (3:17)

John says :

anyone who fails to do what is right or love his fellow-Christians is not a child of God. The message you have heard from the beginning is that we should love one another.

1 John 3 : 10 - 11

Those left behind find themselves feeling cut off from society, whose favours the breakaway church still enjoys. John says that it is entirely to be expected that true Christians would be separated from the world. But the acid test of a true spirituality is *love* in action.

In the letter there are some tell-tale signs of what sort of group this breakaway church is.

- they deny that Jesus is the Christ (2:22f)
- they reject the confession that Jesus has come as a real human being (4:2) with a work that began with his baptism and ended with his death (5:6)

This identifies the breakaway group immediately with a huge religious movement that was profoundly influential for several centuries. It went under the general name of the 'Gnostics' ("those who know", "those who have secret knowledge"). I don't have time to get into that except to say that it was a sort of religion that believed very much in a hidden spiritual world utterly separate from the world we live in. Your spiritual life was (as Paul once put it) "hidden with Christ in God" but — and this is the *opposite* of what Paul said — for the Gnostics, it didn't really matter much *what* you said and did in *this* world. Provided you had the hidden, mystical knowledge, your soul was untouchable and pure. There are many people, both within and outside the Church, who have that sort of religious belief today. "We believe in God and the afterlife and all that, but that's got nothing to do with how I live my life."

The acid test was that Gnostics could not accept that a pure God could come in the flesh, let alone be crucified. Jesus was some kind of angelic messenger from the heavenly realm, but not a human like us. John is absolutely clear that this is the acid test. That's why he (assuming he *was* a 'he') says :

The way to recognize the Spirit of God is this : every spirit which acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God

1 John 4 :2

The breakaways think they're spiritual, but actually they've sold out to the world and its values. They're not spiritual at all, for all their fine confident religious talk. Their religion, which is some kind of private personal sense of God, is bogus. A trick of the devil. And you can tell this because it makes absolutely no difference to the way they behave, and they don't *care* because they don't think it *matters*. They *don't think love matters*.

The breakaways have clearly *not* acted lovingly within the fellowship. They have been arrogant, they have hurt people, and they didn't care, thinking it didn't matter. John says : we're better rid of them. They never *did* love their fellow-Christians, so they never really *were* part of us, and now they've gone and proved it.

The message is that love in action *is* faith, since God *is* love in action. Faith is not some mysterious spiritual knowledge but practical love in action. But John is *not* saying that you have to earn your way into God's favour by loving people. In three crucially important verses he says :

This is how we know what love is : Christ gave his life for us. And we in our turn must give our lives for our fellow-Christians.

1 John 3 : 16

*God has never been seen by anyone, but if we love one another, he himself dwells in us; **This** is how we know that we dwell in him.*

1 John 4 : 12 - 13

This is what love really is : not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to atone for our sins.

1 John 4 : 10

Acting with genuine love is not something anyone can do without God being at work in them. The ability to truly Love can't be forced — it's a gift of God. Acts of love done to earn divine 'Brownie points' aren't genuine love, because genuine love isn't self-interested like that.

But he is also saying something more. Many people outside the Christian community are not tricked by the world's ways, but demonstrate true Christian love in their daily lives. That means they are potentially children of God, because it shows that God is at work in them. But there is still, for John, an important question of faith that gives its allegiance to Jesus :

If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is God's Son, God dwells in them and they in God.

1 John 4 : 15

In several places, John also insists that it's not just a question of behaving with love, but also *knowing where that love comes from* — acknowledging God, worshipping God . . . recognising that the reason we are able to know true Love from false at all is because we have in Jesus a concrete image of what this word 'Love' means.

The world is strange. People can do all sorts of strange, even horrible things, in the name of 'love'. 'Love' is not 'common sense', and many people have lost that instinctive sense that enables them to recognise true Love when they see it. Somehow, the world with its systems and ideologies drives it out of people. And not just 'the World' : as the media regularly remind us, the *Church* in the past has abused people in the name of Love. So we must never lose sight of the *person* and the *story* that makes clear what Love *is*. Jesus defines what that word Love means, and we must therefore never lose sight of him.

So, in conclusion : The true children of God are those :

- who model in their own lives the sort of Love which Jesus revealed,
- who acknowledge that their own ability to love in this special way is a miracle wrought in their lives by God
- and who are ever full of wonder and praise for Jesus, the 'Son of God', to whom they give allegiance and who they put at the centre of their lives.

Despite their feelings of inadequacy, despite the world's neglect or ridicule, despite the apparent superiority and success of the 'religious ones' with their supposedly special knowledge of God, these humble ones can be confident that they are living in God, and God in them. They can trust that their life with God is eternal, and so they do not fear.

But the message isn't entirely cosy . . . Looking at *my* life; looking at the life our Christian community here — can we honestly sense that the mysterious power of love is present between us and amongst us here? What if it isn't? What if it fails?

Ah. That's another sermon. Or you can ask me afterwards . . .

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