

“Light in the Darkness”

<u>Occasion</u>	Evening Service at Therfield Chapel
<u>Day, Date & Time</u>	Sunday 5 September 2004 at 18:30
<u>Basis</u>	1 John 1
<u>Reading</u>	1 John 1
<u>Hymns</u>	296, 302, 366 from Mission Praise
<u>Songs</u>	375, 219, 220, 264, 378 from Mission Praise
<u>Author/Speaker</u>	Paul Rydon

I don't know if you have ever picked up a letter,
 written by someone you have never met
 in a culture you haven't experienced
 and tried to deduce the reasons why such a letter was written.

The chances are very high that we would get it wrong.
 Indeed it was C S Lewis who said
 that whenever the critics tried to second-guess why he wrote something,
 they always,
 without fail,
 got it wrong.

So I am very aware that as we approach these letters of John,
 we may also get it totally wrong.

Nevertheless,
 more able minds than mine have tried to get behind these writings
 and to understand what may have been going on in the culture of his time
 and in the church or churches where he was ministering.

By looking at what John is saying
 and by assuming that he was answering or refuting some false teaching in the Church
 or some criticism of his teaching,
 we can better understand what he says
 and in so doing illuminate the letters as a whole.

The Author of these letters was with little doubt the same as the writer of John's Gospel,
 none other than the great apostle John,
 the closest of the twelve disciples to Jesus.

After the dispersion of the Jews
 according to some secular literature I picked in Ephesus when I was there,
 John moved to Ephesus,
 taking Mary the mother of Jesus with him.

After Timothy had left to attend to Paul's needs in Rome,
 John took over the leadership of the Church at Ephesus.

Later, he was exiled to the Greek island of Patmos,
 where he wrote the book of Revelation
 and when he returned to Ephesus, tradition has it
 that he wrote both his gospel and the letters we are looking at today.

If you go to the ruins of Ephesus today and the little town of Seljuk (*pronounced Sel-chuk*) nearby,

you will find the ruins of the Basilica of St John,
believed to be built on the site of his grave;
and also a little chapel/house dedicated to Mary,
on the site where she is thought to have lived.

John doubtless ministered further afield than Ephesus
and all seven churches referred to in John's Revelation
can be identified in this north-eastern corner of modern Turkey.

So why did John write this first letter?

All the evidence suggests that there were serious heresies in the Church at Ephesus
and probably also in the other churches in Asia Minor at the time.

It is clear that there were problems at Ephesus in Paul's day
and Paul's own letter to the church there contains much teaching and theology
in order to ground them in sound doctrine.
Paul's letters to Timothy are to encourage him to continue to teach the church
and refute the rising tide of error,
which was threatening to strangle and divide the Church.

John's letters,
particularly this first one,
seem designed to refute such heresies
in a Church rife with division and false teaching.
His black & white style is striking and uncompromising.
Some Christians today are tempted to think that theology merely gets in the way of Christian
love and unity.
The apostle John would disagree.

John's message is simple,
yet profound.
The centre of his message is Jesus Christ.
There can be no compromise here.
You are either his,
or you are not.
If you are his,
you will behave as though you were his.
If you don't behave as though you were his,
then you must be of the Devil.

You might argue with John, and say
"Come on John, we all fail.
How can you be so harsh?"
But we have to understand the philosophies of his time,
if we are to understand why he is so emphatic.

We have to remember that John lived in a hugely religious and idolatrous culture.
Hence religious ideas that have no basis in Christianity were rife.
Amazingly, in spite of our gross materialism,
we in the 21st century seem to be heading that way too
as in spite of our mass materialism,
people search for spirituality within our post-modern framework
and find anything and everything available within the New Age context.

Inevitably, the ideas of the world infiltrate the church of Christ
and heresy is born.

John, it seems was fighting an early form of gnosticism,

the second person of the Trinity.

He had been there from the Beginning of time
 and indeed it was he through whom the worlds were made.
 He was the Word of Life.
 He was not only the creator of all things,
 but he was also the Word of God.
 He was the revealer of God,
 for he came from the Godhead and became a man
 and walked the dusty roads of Palestine just as the others did.
 As a man he was subject to temptation to sin,
 to human weaknesses of hunger and thirst,
 pain & suffering,
 joy and sorrow,
 love and anger.
 He was both God & man.

None of this fitted with the doctrine of the false teachers.
 To them it was anathema that Jesus
 whom they accepted it seems as God,
 could be a man as well.

But the dual personality of Christ,
 his deity and his manhood
 is crucial to God's plan of salvation.
 For only a man could represent sinful man at the cross,
 yet only the Son of God himself could be the perfect sacrifice,
 which the holiness and justice of God demanded.

So John continues: *Read 1 John 1:5-7 in the NIV*
 John's message may be that of an eyewitness,
 but essentially it is not his own.
 It is the message of the Word himself,
 the message of Jesus.
 And as Jesus revealed his Father to us,
 he said that God is light and him no darkness exists.

Therefore if you claim to fellowship with God;
 if you claim to know him who is pure light,
 how can you walk in the darkness.
 It seems that John's opponents,
 the ones who were dividing the church
 had separated spirituality from every day living.
 So they claimed to dwell in the *light* – to know God spiritually -
 but actually lived in the *darkness* of the evil material world.
 Hence their lives were a lie,
 and the truth of which they claimed to have special knowledge,
 did not affect their daily lives.

But if we walk in the light,
 and here we are talking about lives that reflect the light of Jesus,
 shining into the darkness of evil,
 unbelief
 and untruthfulness,
 then we can fellowship with one another.

It is this common bond which holds the followers of Jesus together.
 That we all walk together in the light,
 and the Light is God himself.

If we go back to verse 3

there John says that our fellowship is with the Father
and with his Son Jesus Christ.

For a fuller treatment of our relationship with each other
and between us and the Father
we need to go to John's Gospel chapters 13 – 17.
Here the twelve are at the last Supper
and Jesus is talking to them as he has never talked before.
It was their last real conversation before he died.
When you get the opportunity, sit down and read these chapters.
They are my favourite scriptures,
and you will learn so much about Jesus
and his relationship with his Father and with us.

But I just want to read a few verses from John 17:20-23.
Jesus is praying to his Father God at the end of the Passover meal. *Read John 17:20-23*

The relationship between believers is inextricably tied in
with our relationship with Jesus
and his relationship with the Father.
The oneness of the Godhead becomes the oneness of the Church with Christ.
Hence because we are in Christ
we have this unique relationship with one another.
But it is rooted in who he is. –
The one and only Son of God,
the second person of the Godhead,
the One who was with the Father and the Spirit,
before the creation of the world.

But there is still the question of sin.
To the Gnostics,
provided you were spiritual enough you were above sin
and it has no hold on you.

But John says “No way!!!!”
Sin is real.
If we claim that we are without sin we deceive ourselves.
But if we confess it,
the blood of Christ purifies us from sin and we will be forgiven.

John's approach to the heresies of his day was not to attack it head-on,
but to preach and teach the true message of Christ.
That message is rooted in the actual life of Christ on earth
as witnessed by John himself,
the truth which Jesus taught while he was here,
and his revelation of who he is and of what God is like.

As we ride down the ages of time to the present day,
we have to understand that the message itself has not changed,
but we are all acutely aware that culture and society have.

It is difficult to pin down the heresies that exist in the Christian Church in Britain,
and we have no time tonight to try to do so.

Nevertheless,
there is in the evangelical church today a great tendency to super-spirituality,
where many Christians claim a spirit-filled condition
which is superior to that of other Christians
who are allegedly not so open to the Spirit's leading.

Only this week,
we elders have been subjected to yet another critical and judgmental e-mail

from a would-be pastoral applicant,
 virtually accusing us of not being open to the Spirit's leading
 in our requirements for a pastor.
 John's letters will certainly help to put that in perspective.

It is perhaps outside the Church where we need to look for the attitudes and mind-set which threaten Christianity today.

In November 2002,

Nick Spencer of the London Institute of Contemporary Christianity
 conducted a survey amongst agnostics
 to explore what the barriers were to belief in Christianity.

The results, published in this booklet entitled

'Beyond Belief? – Barriers and Bridges to Faith Today' –

make fascinating study

and should be compulsory reading for all Christians who are truly interested in
 communicating spiritual truth to those outside the Church.

Indeed I think that this is so valuable that I have invited Nick to come and speak to us on this subject at
 our Spring Lecture,

in the early months of next year.

Two things stand out, and are all we have time to address tonight.

One Nick has termed 'Guerrilla Morality'

and the other 'Totalitolerance'.

Guerrilla Morality:

The agnostic's position is that we Christians are hypocrites,

because we have a moral code that we seek to impose on others,

but consistently fail to keep, ourselves.

Non-religious people are immune from this criticism,

because each has his own private and personal moral code,

which (s)he adheres to,

hence his behaviour is always in keeping with his own code.

No one has a right to impose a moral code,

because what is right for me may be different from what is right for you.

John would argue and so would we

that without moral absolutes imposed by the Creator of the world

and exemplified in Christ

there can be only chaos.

Christianity, rightly understood,

seeks to live up to the righteous demands of a Holy God,

but consistently fails to achieve the high standards required.

This is not hypocrisy on our part,

but endorses the frailty of our fallen human nature.

Totalitolerance:

The agnostic's position here is that the greatest virtue today is tolerance.

On this count the Christian is the greatest sinner,

for we are the intolerant ones.

It is right and proper to be intolerant of intolerance.

You have to be tolerant of my views,

but I do not have to tolerate yours.

This, of course is a highly inconsistent position,

but emphasises the sensitivity which we Christians must exhibit

when we seek to introduce folk outside the Church

to the truths of Christianity.

In both cases, our message is the same.

What was seen and heard by John and the other apostles

has been proclaimed to us.
We have examined the evidence and we have found that there witness is true
and we have found in the Person of Jesus Christ
the answer to the dilemmas of life,
salvation from our sinful selves,
a relationship with God and the other members of his family
and the promise and hope of eternal life with Christ in glory.

This is our message today.
It is consistent and it is essentially undeniable.

As we leave here tonight,
may God help us each one to live out what we have learned from him
and so bring glory and honour to the name of Christ.

May God bless each and every one of us as we seek to be truly the people of God
and to shed the light of his Word
in the darkness of our world today.
May the Lord help us to do so.

Amen.

Paul Rydon
5 September 2004