

THERFIELD CHAPEL

Sunday 12 September 2004 6:30pm

1 JOHN 2 vv1-27

1 John 2:1-27

My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defence--Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. [2] He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.

[3] We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands. [4] The man who says, "I know him," but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him. [5] But if anyone obeys his word, God's love is truly made complete in him. This is how we know we are in him: [6] Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did.

[7] Dear friends, I am not writing you a new command but an old one, which you have had since the beginning. This old command is the message you have heard. [8] Yet I am writing you a new command; its truth is seen in him and you, because the darkness is passing and the true light is already shining.

[9] Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates his brother is still in the darkness. [10] Whoever loves his brother lives in the light, and there is nothing in him to make him stumble. [11] But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks around in the darkness; he does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded him.

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

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

*I write to you, young men,
because you have overcome the evil one.*

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

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

*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.*

[15] Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. [16] For everything in the world--the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does--comes not from the Father but from the world. [17] The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever.

[18] Dear children, this is the last hour; and as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come. This is how we know it is the last hour. [19] They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us.

[20] But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and all of you know the truth. [21] I do not write to you because you do not know the truth, but because you do know it and because no lie comes from the truth. [22] Who is the liar? It is the man who denies that Jesus is the Christ. Such a man is the antichrist--he denies the Father and the Son. [23] No one who denies the Son has the Father; whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also.

[24] See that what you have heard from the beginning remains in you. If it does, you also will remain in the Son and in the Father. [25] And this is what he promised us--even eternal life.

[26] I am writing these things to you about those who are trying to lead you astray. [27] As for you, the anointing you received from him remains in you, and you do not need anyone to teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about all things and as that anointing is real, not counterfeit--just as it has taught you, remain in him.

So, last week with Uncle Paul, you looked at the first chapter of this first epistle of John. You learnt that one of the main reasons why John wrote this letter was to correct some wrong teachings - some bad theology - that had crept into the Church. The people spreading these wrong teachings are people we now refer to as Gnostics - people who claimed to have special insider knowledge of the Christian faith - an elite few who claimed to know spiritual secrets hidden from ordinary Christians - a kind of “super spiritual” sub-group within the Church.

Amongst other things, the Gnostics had developed the idea that anything spiritual was inherently good, and that anything merely physical was inherently bad. And this belief developed had two main consequences:

Firstly, they claimed, as long as you concentrate on spiritual things, you can ignore the physical. In other words as long as your “spiritual” life was set on a path of enlightenment, it didn’t matter how you treated your body, or other people’s bodies - or even other people. People were physical beings and, therefore, inherently evil so you could treat them with as much disrespect as you liked.

The second error that this Gnostic belief resulted in was a denial of the humanity of Jesus. The Gnostics argued that, since Jesus Christ was perfect and was completely devoid of evil, then he must have been a purely spiritual person. They argued that he could not have had a physical body at all - because that would have been evil. He must have been a spiritual being - a ghost - a phantom.

And as we read tonight's passage, we can assume that a third false teaching was also circulating in some parts of the Church. It was a teaching that was, in some way a backlash to the teaching that Jesus was not human ... or, if you like, it's the opposite side of the Gnostic coin: the teaching that Jesus was indeed fully human and therefore could not have been divine, because humans are physical and, therefore, inherently evil.

Sad, isn't it, that heresies like these were prevalent in the Church within such a short time of Jesus' earthly life? Sadder still, and perhaps slightly shocking, is the realisation that heresies - false teachings - come from within the Church rather than from outside it. But it was true then and is true now. Skipping down towards the end of tonight's passage, in verse 19: *They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us.* They [the heretics and antichrists] went out from us in other words they were part of the Church, not outsiders.

How does this happen? How can a church full of believers, living at a time when some of the Apostles were still alive, possibly produce heretics? Here we are, just a few years after Pentecost and the pouring out of the Holy Spirit - the birth of the church, with all the power, zeal and charisma of first-generation believers and yet already some are preaching a twisted and antichristian gospel!

The clue is again in verse 19 *They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us.* In other words, they may have been members of our congregation, but they were not truly fellow believers. In modern language, they were the "nominal Christians" - the folk who go along to church for whatever reason, participating in the hymns and prayers, participating in the activities and functions of the church but - for one reason or another - had not themselves come into their own personal and living relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ.

They existed then just as they exist now. Maybe, in all good conscience, they thought they were helping. Maybe, by denying the humanity of Jesus and proclaiming his spiritual nature, they thought they were helping to exalt Jesus even more than he was exalted already.

Maybe, by denying his divinity, they thought they were helping Jesus appear more real to people who had a problem with understanding that this Jesus was some kind of inhuman freak - half god, half man. Maybe by emphasising his humanity and denying his divinity, they could make him appear more believable and approachable?

Maybe they were more sinister than that. Maybe these heretics wanted power over other people. Maybe by proclaiming that they had powers and insight over and above the ordinary people, they would achieve that position of power and importance that their vanity and pride needed.

I suspect that none of them were consciously in league with the devil .. and yet I do believe that they were tricked and distracted by the devil into doing his work for him. And what better raw material does the devil have to work with than the people from

within the Church of God? Outsiders can be easily dismissed and ignored - but when someone from within the church, who maybe is educated and respected, comes up with heretical ideas and teachings ... what more could the devil wish for?

Looking at some of the modern heresies we have today, we know that they too originated within the mainstream Christian Church. The Jehovah's Witnesses were started by a man who was brought up in a very strict Christian family, with plenty of talk of hell and damnation! He rebelled against that and decided to start a movement which didn't have a Heaven or Hell, and that movement eventually became the JW's we know today. The Mormons, the Christian Scientists, the Christadelphians, the Unitarians and the rest of them all started in much the same way - from within the Church.

Interestingly, these heretical movements all seem to have a few things in common. There is always an attack on the Person of Jesus Christ. Either his full humanity is denied, or his divinity is denied, or he is side-lined and replaced with other figures ... whether it's the Virgin Mary, Mary Baker Eddy for the Christian Scientists, Joseph Smith for the Mormons, one of the saints ... or whoever.

These attacks on the person and nature of Jesus Christ shouldn't surprise us. The devil's task is to keep people away from the Salvation that is only to be found in Jesus Christ. So if you dilute Jesus to something less than he truly is, or if you distract people's attention away from him ... you have achieved your goal.

As Uncle Paul explained last week, for salvation to be possible, Jesus had to be both fully human and fully divine. He had to be God in Human form. And to receive that salvation, we, each one of us, must come to him believing him to be the Incarnate Son of God. Take away his humanity and the crucifixion becomes nothing more than a disappointment. Take away his divinity and Jesus becomes nothing more than a good moral teacher. Take attention away from him altogether - and where are you going to find salvation at all?

Learn to recognise these three signs and you'll spot a heresy a mile away. Is the humanity of Jesus denied? Is his divinity denied? Is he replaced by some other leader-figure? Nearly all heresies will have one or more of those tell-tale signs.

St John, in this epistle, does not instruct his readers about what to do with heretics. That isn't his remit this time. St Paul, on the other hand isn't quite so silent. Writing to Timothy, he says this:

2 Tim. 3:5-6 They have a form of godliness but deny its power. Have nothing to do with them. [6] They are the kind who worm their way into homes and gain control over weak-willed women, who are loaded down with sins and are swayed by all kinds of evil desires,

Have nothing to do with them!

The apostle Peter also has his bit to say about heretics:

2 Peter 2:1-3

But there were also false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them--bringing swift destruction on themselves. [2] Many will follow their shameful ways and will bring the way of truth into disrepute. [3] In their greed these teachers will exploit you with stories they have made up. Their condemnation has long been hanging over them, and their destruction has not been sleeping.

In the Middle Ages, we used to burn heretics at the stake. Maybe a little extreme, but at least everyone knew where they stood! The difficulties arose during the reformation where the reformers fought to restore the Church to a biblical foundation and rescue it from the corrupt Roman system. It was the reformers who were branded the heretics and some of them were burned at the stake!

So these days, we don't tend to burn heretics ... maybe just in case we end up burning the wrong people! But, what do we do with them? We tend, as never before, to tolerate them. By and large we live in an age where the church doesn't really mind what you believe, as long as you still come along on a Sunday and make the numbers up! And just occasionally, we even make them into Bishops!

As we've seen, the best breeding-ground for heretics and heresies is the Church. So does Therfield have any? How do you know I'm not a heretic?

There you are, Mr John Martin, standing in our pulpit, spouting off as if you're some kind of expert ... what right have you got? Do you claim any special spiritual knowledge that the rest of us don't have? Have you reached some level of spirituality that the rest of us can only dream of? And what about the other preachers that stand in that pulpit, Sunday by Sunday, shouting the odds? How do we know you're not all heretics?

It's a fair question. Think back to the days when St John was writing his epistle. How were the ordinary members of the church able to tell the orthodox from the heretic? Who was right - the Gnostics or St John? What yardstick did they have to enable them to distinguish the truth from the lie?

Right at the beginning of this epistle - chapter one, verse one, John says this *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.*

John's credibility and authority is established from the fact that he was personally with Jesus. He walked with Jesus, talked with Jesus, ate and drank with Jesus, laughed and cried with Jesus. John was a first-hand witness of the life of Jesus. That, I think, is enough for his words to carry some considerable weight and blow the arguments of the Gnostics right out of the water.

But what about you, Therfield? How are you to know if I'm a heretic or not? I can't claim to have walked and talked and eaten and drunk and laughed and cried with Jesus. I can claim no special relationship, no insider knowledge, no special revelation, no authority over and above that which we all have as born-again Christians. And neither can anyone who stands in your pulpit.

But we do have a yardstick for discerning truth from heresy. It's the Bible. And here we have an advantage over the Churches to whom John was writing. The New testament hadn't been compiled and distributed in those times - John, and others, were still writing it!

In the New Testament, you and I now have all we need to guide our theology and doctrine. And I, and others who stand in your pulpit, are subject to that and governed by that. No-one who stands in this pulpit should ever attempt to formulate new doctrines or beliefs concerning the Person of Jesus Christ or the means by which he brings salvation to his people. If I do, or if anyone else tries to ... you have the right to tell them and me to shut up and get out!

I don't really need to tell you this. The centrality of the Word in your Church life is abundantly obvious. No more so than in your quest for a new pastor. You are looking for someone who primarily is skilled at preaching and teaching the Word of God. You encourage Bible reading and study. You haven't fallen into the trap of producing your own version of the Bible. You don't limit or prescribe which bits of the Bible should be read. You are not told a single rigid interpretation of the scriptures. And that's a very healthy state to be in and I hope you never move from that position.

Test everything against the scriptures. Read, study and pray through the scriptures daily. Allow the Spirit of God - who is the author of the Bible - to write the Word in your hearts and minds. If you do this, you will not fall into heresy and you will be fully equipped to discern heresy if it occurs in others.

That doesn't mean to say that there isn't sometimes room for challenging and controversial ideas. Back in 1642, the astronomer Galileo was executed by the church for proclaiming that the Earth wasn't flat but round, and that it wasn't at the centre of the Solar System and that the Sun, stars and other planets didn't revolve around it. It's a matter of demonstrable fact that he was correct, but the church saw this as a challenge to the accepted understanding of the universe and he was branded a heretic and executed. We all might have some ideas and theories that may, to others sound, very unorthodox. I, for example, believe that before The Fall, Adam and Eve had the ability to fly and the ability to breathe underwater. I don't require you to believe that, and it doesn't challenge in any way the central doctrines of the Christian faith and I'm not preaching it as a fact. So you're quite justified either to think I could be right, or to dismiss the idea, and dismiss me as an eccentric old gentleman! But it isn't a heresy and I don't need to be burned at the stake, thank you very much!

Just before we move on, congratulating ourselves on being a thoroughly doctrinally correct church ... just a reminder that there's more to being a good Church than just having accurate doctrine. I'm not going to explore that avenue this evening, but I will recommend the forthcoming series of talks from the Book of Revelation that are coming up soon in the Morning Service. In the early chapters of Revelation are the letters to the churches ... and you'll see from those that it's quite possible to be a bad Church even when your theology and doctrine are spot-on! So, please be encouraged to come to the Morning services when the series on Revelation starts.

As I said earlier, John's epistle is not concerned about how the Church should treat heretics. John doesn't even engage in the tit-for-tat arguments, disputing each and every bit of false teaching. Instead he gives us some plain and straightforward Christian teaching - reminding us of truths which we have already been told. And yet he does clearly tell us in verse 26 that: *I am writing these things to you about those who are trying to lead you astray.* So John is achieving two goals in this epistle: reminding us of basic Christian truths AND refuting the teachings of the false teachers - the antichrists.

John raised a challenge in verse 19 that has the potential to put us on our guard. Let's read it again: *They [then false teachers] went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us.*

I wonder if any of you ever have any doubts that you are part of the Church but don't really belong to it? Do any of you ever get those nagging doubts that tell you that, despite your enthusiastic support for the work of the Church, you're not quite like everyone else. You feel that everyone else's faith seems more certain than your own and you sometimes feel a bit of a fraud?

If so, then that verse 19 is going to make you feel more uncomfortable than before. How can you be sure that you are a part of the church and that you belong to it?

John answers this question before he asks it! Verse 3 says this: *We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands.*

Then our minds immediately say "What commands" And again St John is a step ahead of us. Verses 7 to 11: *Dear friends, I am not writing you a new command but an old one, which you have had since the beginning. This old command is the message you have heard. [8] Yet I am writing you a new command; its truth is seen in him and you, because the darkness is passing and the true light is already shining.*

[9] Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates his brother is still in the darkness. [10] Whoever loves his brother lives in the light, and there is nothing in him to make him stumble. [11] But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks around in the darkness; he does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded him.

I think that John there is alluding to things that Jesus himself said. *Matthew 22:36-39* "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" [37] Jesus replied: " 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' [38] This is the first and greatest commandment. [39] And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.'

This surely is the "not a new commandment" that John refers to in verse 7 of tonight's passage. And what about the New Commandment that he mentions in verse 8? I'm sure this is nothing other than the New Commandment that Jesus speaks in John 13:34 "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.

So if we keep those commandments, we belong to Christ and his Church. I've rambled a bit this week put it down to toothache! But if you go away with anything from tonight's talk, go away with these few points:

- Jesus was God in human form. As a man he was crucified and killed, which satisfied the Law of God requiring human life as the penalty of sin.
- As the divine Son of God, he was himself sinless and was therefore able to take upon himself the punishment for our sins because his life was not already forfeit due to any of his own sins.
- Jesus was fully human and is fully God. If we accept Jesus, we automatically have God the Father too.
- Therefore we should not divorce the spiritual from the physical. We should not despise our brothers and sisters and fool ourselves that being so-called "spiritual" excuses us from loving our fellow Christians.
- If we accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and Saviour; if we love him with all our hearts and minds; and if we love the fellowship of our brothers and sisters within the Church; and if we stay centred on the Word of God - we shall not go far wrong.

See that what you have heard from the beginning remains in you. If it does, you also will remain in the Son and in the Father. And this is what he promised us--even eternal life.

Amen.