

Sunday 18th April, 3rd Sunday of Easter – 1 John 3:1-7 'The Children of Love'

Today we continue our series in the first letter of John, which Alise began for us brilliantly last week. It's a beautiful letter, written near the end of the first century, as life for Christians was getting much harder. The church was under pressure from all sides – pagan emperors, Greek heresies, and many traditional Jewish synagogues who had rejected this radical offshoot of their faith. How were these small Christian communities to live, or even survive?

John's letters covers essentially the same themes as John's gospel: light and darkness; the power of testimony; sensitivity to the Spirit; and above all, **the centrality of love**. In a complex and hostile environment, the message at its heart is wonderfully simple: love Jesus, love your fellow Christians (who really need it at the moment), and in contrast, do not love the trappings of the world. Show your love for God in pure living, and your love for your sisters and brothers in practical ways.

And underlying these very simple, heartfelt teachings, born of a life of deep intimacy with God, is the encouragement to **keep remembering what we already know**: or as St John puts it: 'see that what you have heard from the beginning remains in you.' (2:24) Or to paraphrase it in today's language: 'You know all this, guys. It hasn't changed. Hold tight!'

And as our lives get more complex again, as restrictions ease and we have to get used to being with people, or making plans more than a day or two ahead – I think we need St John's messages particularly in this season. Life is confusing, but **the heart of our faith is simple: love Jesus, love your sisters and brothers and don't get distracted by the trappings of our culture**.

Each week we'll approach these foundational truths from a slightly different angle. Today, it's the question of identity. Who are we? St John's answer is full of excitement: we are children of God!

This is such an important message. It reminds us that we don't approach God just as created beings, or loyal subjects, or anxious petitioners. We approach as family members – as **beloved children**. This in itself is a great testimony of God's love: 'see what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!'

There's a deep theological truth behind this reality: Christ, the eternal Child of God, won our salvation. As we follow him, and as the bible puts it, are united with Christ – *in* Christ – so we receive the same blessings he has: we are adopted into God's family, so we can call ourselves God's children. So we too can address God as a loving parent, just as Jesus encouraged us to in the prayer he gave us: Our Father....

Not everyone has good human parents. Some don't have human parents at all. This is a great sadness, and all I can say to all in that position is this: part of the journey of your spiritual life will be to allow God to be the parent you never had. The best kind of parent, perhaps the one you wished you had. To those who were fortunate to have great parents: well you get what it means to call God our father, but God won't have any of the shortcomings of your human parents, he'll complete the positive image you already have.

There's a move in the church at present to diminish the parenthood of God – particularly the fatherhood of God – as an unhelpful doctrine. But can I say here that if we lose that, we lose the whole ball game. The whole point of the gospel is that in Christ we are adopted into God's family. The very word Christian means 'little Jesus' – and that's not just lifestyle, it's identity. In Christ we receive the same blessings, privileges and eventually access to God as the Son of God himself.

The Christian life is really about learning to live in this identity as God's children. John mentions two obvious outcomes in the rest of our passage today: first we carry the hope of becoming like Jesus: 'we know that when Christ appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.' (v2)

At the heart of this hope is, you guessed it, a transformation of love. As Dane Ortlund says: 'The Jesus given to us in the gospels is not simply one who loves, but *one who is love*; merciful affections stream from his innermost heart as rays from the sun.'

The second outcome is connected to the first: 'All who carry this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.' (v3) We all want to make ourselves beautiful for the object of our affections. For Christians, this love of God manifests itself in a desire to live pure lives. To avoid what John calls 'lawlessness' in this passage – or in chapter 2 'the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life.' Lives of humble service.

As the nation says goodbye this weekend to one very famous servant – Prince Philip – let us too be inspired by that example. But let us also hear John's words as to the source of this transforming humility: 'See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that should be called children of God! And *that* is what we are!' Amen.

As we respond to John's words today, and reflect on what it means to be beloved children, let's sing the simple song 'Abba Father'...