

Knowing the truth

26/4/20 dkm

Read: John 8:31-47, 1John 5

Text: 1John 5:18-21

Psalms: 46c:1-3 &6-11, 119:129-136, 73b:21-28, 72

The world has changed a lot since Donald Trump became president of the USA. He coined the term 'fake news' as he exposed the disregard for truth among large sections of the media. 'Why ruin a good story by a slavish regard for the truth' they said. Not that Trump has any more regard for the truth than the press! With the rise of social media, and the decline of biblical teaching, truth has gone out the door, or, as the prophet said, 'Truth is fallen in the street' (Isa 54:19).

John records the Roman governor asking Jesus, 'What is truth?', thereby acknowledging he did not know 'What is truth'. A similar ignorance pervades our society. Jesus was ready to answer this question- in fact, Jesus is the answer- but Pilate's question was not genuine. He did not really care about truth. Such is the situation in our society. Hindus speak of this world as an illusion, and to some extent they are right. We might think this world is the only reality, but we would be wrong. This world is not an illusion but neither is it all that there is. Jesus is the truth, or if you like, the reality.

If you are genuinely asking, 'What is truth', then know that Jesus is the truth, as well as the life (John 14:6). Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ (John 1:17), so it is possible for you, and anyone in this world, to know the truth, and the freedom found only in the truth: 'If the Son of Man makes you free you shall be free indeed (John 8:32, 36). Tragically, many do not even know that they are slaves to sin and Satan.

The apostle John closes his letter with three 'we know' statements, three affirmations or assurances. In his gospel John quoted the blind man whose eyes were opened by Jesus as saying; 'One thing I know: that though I was blind, now I see' (John 9:25). The Jewish leaders

did all they could to deny this reality or truth. Still today many try to deny the truth of the Bible. They attack the Bible from historical, literary, scientific, and every other angle. Sadly, some Christians are intimidated and draw back from affirming the truths of the Bible. They take a softly, softly approach, and some even side with the world in attacking those who dare to quote the Bible.

The three assurances given by John sum up much of his teaching in this letter: Know that one born of God does not sin, know we belong to God not Satan, and, know Jesus has come and that we can know the true God.

1. Know that one born of God does not sin

John is not saying a believer cannot or does not sin because he has already said that anyone claiming they have not sinned makes God a liar (1:10). Besides, he has just urged prayer for a brother who is sinning (5:16). John dealt with this matter back in chapter 3, where we concluded that he was talking about continuing or habitual sin (3:6, 9). New birth means we are a new creation in Christ Jesus. Our new heart is focussed on obeying Christ's commands and on pleasing our heavenly Father. Sin is by nature selfish, and as believers we have died to self and to the world, that we might live for God (Rom 6:11-14, Gal 2:20).

You, like me, will have noticed that this is not easy. We continue to experience the weakness of the flesh, and war within our hearts (Rom 7:23). Satan is always ready to fan into flame the desires of the flesh (Eph 6:12). But John assures us that the evil one cannot harm one who is born of God (5:18). Why not? Because, 'He who is born of God keeps or guards himself' (5:18). While it is true that we are to guard ourselves by putting on the armour of God (Eph 6, Jude 21), the best reading of this verse sees it as Christ guarding or protecting us (cf. Jude 24). John does not usually refer to Jesus as 'born of God' but he is 'begotten of the Father'.

Jesus is fully human, and as such knows the weakness of our flesh. He resisted Satan's attacks with absolute obedience to the Father. He died and rose again in victory over sin, death and the devil (Phil 4:7). Job suffered from attacks of Satan upon his family and his flesh but God was still guarding him from Satan's ultimate weapon, death.

Many years ago I was hiking in the Himalayas with our son and his friends. We were up above the tree line and approaching the snowline. We came to the steep side of a mountain. I ended up on my hands and knees grabbing tufts of grass and searching for a rock foothold. On one occasion I looked around and the view some 2000m into the valley below was awesome, but I feared I would be down there sooner than I hoped! As I clung on, the thought came to me that not only was I clinging on but that the Lord was holding on to me. I will never forget that scary moment, and I hope you will never forget that, as a born-again Christian seeking to obey the commands of Christ, the Lord is upholding you, keeping you safe from the evil one.

We keep referring to the Lord's Prayer as we study this letter. Last time we were reminded of the need to pray according to the will of God, and of praying for one another. We begin this prayer saying, 'Our Father in heaven' which reminds us of the relationship we have with God the Father through the grace of Jesus Christ. John keeps calling us 'little children' because we are the children of God (5:21). Today we are reminded of the petition, 'Deliver us from evil', or the 'evil one' (Mat 6:13). We should not be praying this prayer unless we believe, firstly, that there is an evil one called Satan, and secondly, that God is able to deliver us from him. Let us remember that, 'He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world' (4:4).

2. Know we belong to God, not Satan

'We know that we are of God' (5:19). This is the assurance we have when we understand the doctrines of grace, which tell us that we are saved by grace through faith and not of works (Eph 2:8-9). By his

word and his Spirit, God draws us and gives us to Christ, who promises, 'no one shall snatch them out of my hand' (John 6:14, 10:28). If you are born again of the Spirit of God you will know that you are in his hand forever. You will not fear being taken away by Satan. You will be tempted by Satan but you will be able to resist temptation because again, 'He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world'. 'Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and He will draw near to you' (James 4:7-8). Is this your experience?

Some Christians wonder why the people of this world do not accept them. They do all they can to fit into this world but find themselves like the proverbial square peg in a round hole. If you find this world a comfortable place, be careful. Remember Lot in Sodom- and remember Lot's wife (Luke 17:32). 'Little children', as John calls you, do not think it strange that the world does not accept you. Do not keep trying to fit into this world. Remember, 'the whole world lies in the sway/power of the wicked one (5:19).

Again, in the Lord's Prayer, as you pray, 'Your kingdom come' you are acknowledging that this world is not the kingdom of God. It is, in fact, the kingdom of Satan. Satan is the ruler of this world (John 14:30). He tempted Adam and Eve and they sinned. The blame-game started and they were cast out of the garden into a world of violence and murder, which is our world. Do you think John is wrong when he says that this world 'lies under the sway' or the control of the evil one? At the cross and the resurrection, Christ defeated Satan; he is a defeated enemy, but an enemy who is stronger than any human being who is not in Christ.

God does not see this world as we do. He does not see people of different genders or generations or religions or political parties or economic status. He sees people who belong to him and people who belong to Satan. If the whole world is under the control of Satan, then people who do not belong to God belong to Satan. John Stott

writes, “Everyone belongs either to ‘us’ or to ‘the world’. Everyone is therefore either ‘of God’ or ‘of the evil one’. There is no third category”.

Many do not see this clear line of demarcation. When Jesus told the Jews who rejected him that they belonged to the devil they were shocked (John 8:44). You and your unbelieving friends might also be shocked. For myself, I was shocked at the comment of James Montgomery Boice: ‘Most persons are what we might call free agents’. He thinks those referred to in John 8:44 were ‘an exceptional case’. Thankfully, and despite the contradiction, he then says, ‘once again John leaves no room for a third alternative, for either a person is of God or is in the power of the evil one’. This is your choice, dear friend. You are born in sin and into the kingdom of Satan, but you can be born again into the kingdom of God where Satan has no authority over you.

3. Know Jesus has come, and we can know the true God

We come to the third and final ‘we know’, which is double-barrelled with two ‘we knows’. In doing so we come to the heart of the gospel, which is, ‘the Son of God has come and has given us understanding’ (5:20). This is not new knowledge because John began his letter witnessing to God’s revelation in his Son, Jesus Christ. The central message of the gospel is Jesus Christ sent into this world by God to save us from the clutches of Satan, sin and death- a deadly trio! This gospel is to be preached in all the world, and all who listen and understand will be saved. ‘Understanding’, according to John, is something that is given; he is not speaking of intellectual approval but of experiential knowledge, of our hearts being moved by the Holy Spirit such that we confess our sin and believe in Jesus Christ.

We began this sermon talking about truth, about Jesus being the truth or the reality. John speaks of this understanding given by God as coming to ‘know Him who is true’ (5:20). There is only one true God and Jesus Christ is his Son. All other objects or beings that

people call gods are not true gods. When people worship false gods, gods that are a lie, they live lives that are a lie. They live to themselves and without moral restraint. John is not so much thinking of pagans and their gods of wood and stone as of those who worship a 'false Christ', a Christ of their imagination rather than the Christ of the Bible.

The Gnostics spoke a lot about knowledge, secret knowledge rather than knowledge of the truth. And as we have seen, their lives were without moral restraint. Cerinthus made Christ into a phantom, divine one day but not the next. And so we have all manner of 'Christ's' being set up and worshipped today. Some see him as a great teacher who met a tragic death; some make him into a stone or wooden idol to worship. What do you know and believe about Christ? Has God given you an understanding by which you know him as the only true God, and Jesus as his Son whom he sent into this world (cf. John 17:3)?

It is in knowing the true God and being in Christ that we have eternal life (5:20). Who is 'Him who is true' that John refers to in this verse—God or Jesus? Opinions vary. Initially it may be God, but when he writes, 'we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ' he seems to be referring to Jesus (the NIV, 'even in his Son', gives this idea). John goes on, 'This is the true God and eternal life'. Many modern scholars say that all three references to 'Him who is true' are to God. They acknowledge that if the reference is to Jesus then we have here, 'the most powerful statement of the deity of Jesus in the NT'. John speaks of eternal life being 'with the Father' and being revealed in the Son (1:1, 2 cf. John 17:2). Moreover, this is how the church fathers and the Reformers understood this verse, and in fact used it to defend the deity of Christ.

John closes his letter with a simple greeting, 'Little children', and with a clear warning, 'Keep yourselves from idols' (5:21). The mention of idols seems out of place, but he is not necessarily

referring to lumps of wood or stone, as plentiful as these would have been in Ephesus. He is referring to anything or anyone that people put before the true and living God, and Jesus Christ his Son. The false teachers condemned in this letter were guilty of idolatry. Jesus warned John not to be deceived by 'false Christs' (Mat 24:4-5), and John in turns warns us. False Christs are most likely to arise in the church. We must be alert, and we must decisively reject false teachers as idol worshippers.