

The word of life

27/10/19

Read: John 1:1-18, 1John 1

Text: 1John 1:1-4

Psalms: 145:1-7, 65:1-7, 22:14-18, 134

What is the meaning or purpose of life, of your life and my life? In the words of Question 1 of the Shorter Catechism: 'What is the chief end of man?' The answer, as learnt by our children, is: 'Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him for ever'. One of the verses upon which this answer is based is 1John 1:4: 'That your/our joy may be full/complete'. One thing we note about the Westminster Confession of Faith, of which the Shorter Catechism is a part, is that it is concise and succinct; no words are wasted. Countless books have been written about the meaning of life, but the Catechism gives the answer in just thirteen words.

John is similarly concise and economical in his use of Greek words. It is said that John uses the simplest Greek in the NT, but simple words are often the most profound; John uses words like 'life', 'love' and 'light'. Over one hundred 'Westminster divines' took three years to prepare the Confession. We do not know how long it took John to write this letter but it appears to be the work of this one man.

This letter does not begin with the greeting we are familiar with from the letters written by the apostles Peter and Paul: 'Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ' or, 'Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ'. In fact, there is no greeting at all; nor is there an ending that indicates who is the writer, where it was written from, or when it was written. If we include the two letters called 2John and 3John we note the greeting, 'The elder'. The writer addresses his readers as 'little children', indicating an older man (2:1, 2:28). John outlived the other apostles, as far as we know. The writer speaks of having seen, heard and touched Jesus, so must be one of his disciples. The letter opens with words that remind us of the prologue to John's gospel: 'That which was from the beginning'. All this points to the apostle John as the writer. John spent his later years in Ephesus and exiled on the island

of Patmos, from where he wrote the book of Revelation (Rev 1:9). Finally, church fathers, especially Irenaeus, refer to the apostle John as the writer of these letters called 1, 2, and 3John, and the book of Revelation. Since John was elderly, it was probably between 85 and 95AD when he wrote these letters.

Heresies were coming in the church that had been around for over fifty years. From its beginning Paul encountered Judaizers who wanted to enforce Mosaic Law, including circumcision. Later on Peter writes of false teachers promising 'liberty', as in freedom from moral restraints (2Peter 2:19). As we enter the second century we find a heresy called Gnosticism; John seems to have encountered the early stages of this heresy. The name 'Gnosticism' comes from the Greek word '*gnosis*' meaning 'to know'. This heresy taught a 'higher knowledge' as the way of salvation, rather than faith in Christ. It taught dualism, the division between God who is spirit and is good, and matter which is evil. It taught that the physical body is evil, but the spirit or soul is good. This being the case, some Gnostics become ascetics, treating the body harshly (cf. Col 2:21-23), while others became licentious and indulged the flesh because it had no place in salvation. John counters these attitudes, warning against the lust of the flesh, and reminding us that sin, as defined by the law, is serious (1John 2:16, 3:4).

This sort of dualism is evident in other religions, like Hinduism and Buddhism, in which the aim is to escape the cycle of rebirths and enter moksha or nirvana without the evil body. Secular humanism has its own form of dualism with followers blaming not their bodies as such but their brains or their DNA for their evil deeds. 'It wasn't really me, it was my brain' they say, meaning it was my body not my soul that sinned. Dualism is found in churches still today.

Gnosticism not only affected the way people behaved, it also affected what they believed about Jesus. Cerinthus (c. 50-100AD) picked up on this and concluded that God could not have come into

this physical world, and Jesus could not have been born of a virgin; he said Jesus was the child of Mary and Joseph. He said that the Spirit of Christ came upon Jesus at his baptism and left before he died. Another heresy called 'Docetism', from the Greek '*dokeo*' meaning 'to seem', taught that the body of Jesus was not real but phantom-like.

John rejects any teaching that denies the reality of Jesus' body (1John 4:2). He begins his letter emphasising this reality, having himself seen Jesus in the flesh, heard him speak, and touched him. Of course, John is not saying Jesus was just a man like him; he saw and heard a unique man who spoke like no other, and in the resurrection of Jesus he saw and believed that Jesus is indeed the Son of God (John 20:8). As we meditate upon the opening words of John's first letter we will do so under three subheadings: 'whose who?', 'witness of the apostles' and 'written for a purpose'.

1. Whose who?

John began the gospel that bears his name saying, 'In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God. He was in the beginning with God' (John 1:1-2). He begins his first letter in a similar way: 'That which was from the beginning'. In the gospel we understand the beginning to be the beginning of time, even before the creation of the world. It would be unusual if John meant something different by the word 'beginning' here in his letter. Some say he means the beginning of the gospel, which is true if we see the gospel as beginning before the incarnation. The incarnation, the death, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ are of course, central to the gospel. The gospel is the good news of Jesus Christ; there is no gospel without Jesus. John is making this clear, and making clear the nature of the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

The word 'which', a neuter singular relative pronoun, is somewhat off-putting. But John goes on to identify 'which' as 'the word of life' or the life-giving word (1:1, 2). 'Word' translates '*logos*' as in John's

gospel, where we also read, 'in him was life' (John 1:4). John goes on, 'which was with the Father and was manifested to us' (1:2). Again in the gospel we read, 'The word was with God and the word was God' (John 1:1). Jesus was with God the Father in the beginning; he is co-eternal and equal with the Father.

John writes, 'which we have heard' and 'was manifested to us' (1:2); he writes in the plural. Is this simply a 'royal plural', a 'we' meaning 'me'? This may be the case, but he is writing as one of the twelve who lived with Jesus for three years; so we might call it an 'apostolic we'. These chosen men, minus Judas and plus Paul, became the apostles, who after Pentecost proclaimed the gospel in all the world. They are no longer alive, but John wrote a gospel, and also wrote letters bearing apostolic authority. The apostles expected their readers, including us today, to respect this authority, an authority based not only on the inspiration of the Holy Spirit but in them being witnesses of the life and death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. John is writing to 'you' as in one who has fellowship with God, Father and Son, because of his or 'our' testimony, and as one who knows the joy of such fellowship (1:3,4).

2. Witness of the apostles

It is good to bear in mind what heretics like the Gnostics were saying as we read what John writes here in these verses, as well as in the rest of the letter. It is also good to keep in mind what heretics are saying today. There are people in the church who say it does not matter whether Jesus actually existed; you can be a Christian without believing Jesus is historical, so they say. John would be horrified at such a suggestion, and you also I trust! If this was the case, John's emphasis on an eyewitness account of the person he lived with, a man called Jesus, is a waste of time.

Some Christians, and even non-Christians, value the teaching of Jesus but care nothing about the historical facts of the incarnation. Sure, we read of supernatural facts, but that does not negate their

historicity. The teaching of Jesus means nothing apart from knowing Christ the person, and there is no salvation apart from the death and resurrection of this historical person.

John declares that Jesus is a real person, a living, breathing, speaking, and eating person whom he and eleven other disciples lived with. From our perspective as people who have never seen Jesus, he might seem unreal. Who is this man who turned water into wine, and walked on the sea, and stopped the wind? People at the time, including the disciples, were just as incredulous, so we are not alone. But they could not doubt that Jesus existed as a real person. This is what John declares to us today.

He writes, 'We have seen and bear witnesses/testify (1:2). His language is like that of a courtroom. John is in the witness box being grilled as to what he saw and heard regarding the person identified as Jesus of Nazareth. He testifies with no hesitation, and no equivocation. There is no, 'I think so', and no 'maybe' in John's testimony. It may have been a long time ago, but he can remember as if it was yesterday- or even today! We have five senses, hearing being one of these. Jesus was not like dumb idols that so many worship even today. Jesus spoke in words that John heard and understood (1:1).

Seeing is perhaps our most powerful sense; with his own eyes John saw Jesus (1:1). The 'see' here is more than the simple act of seeing; it points to thought being given to the object seen and the mind being active as the eyes focus on the object. This is further indicated by the next word translated, 'looked upon' (1:1). This points to something remarkable, even supernatural, something that makes a lasting impression upon us. Time and again John was amazed at what he saw Jesus do. Who could ever forget seeing Jesus stop the wind with a word (Mat 8:27, 14:33)? John was most amazed when he saw the tomb of Jesus empty, apart from the intact grave clothes: 'he saw and believed' (John 20:8).

Not just heard and not just saw, as powerful as these senses are, but also touched or handled is what John says from the witness box. (1:1). It was almost certainly John who lay his head on Jesus' lap at the Last Supper; this was after Jesus had washed his feet with water (John 13:23, 15). Jesus was flesh and blood just like any other person, but yet different in that he was the word became flesh, dwelling among us, 'and we behold his glory, the glory of the only begotten of the Father full of grace and truth (John 1:14). Jesus was different in that he imparted life; he was life and he imparted life, eternal life. John had heard Jesus pray, 'This is eternal life that they may know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent' (John 17:3). No other man ever spoke to God like this. John saw a person of flesh and blood, but a person who manifesting God to us and to the world.

3. Written for a purpose

John was writing in the context of false teachers coming into the church- or 'antichrists' as he calls them (2:18,19), but his primary focus is upon believers in the church, 'little children' as he calls us. He outlines tests which we can apply to ourselves, and tests by which we can judge teachers in the church. The church refers to the fellowship of believers or '*koinonia*'. This Greek word can also be translated 'communion' or 'participation'. This fellowship is based on the gospel as taught by the apostles. Paul wrote of 'members of the household of God, having been built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone' (Eph 2:19, 20). John is saying the same thing. We cannot have fellowship with God outside that which the apostles had. 'Divine fellowship demands apostolic fellowship'.

The church, not as an organisation but as a fellowship, is where we find fellowship with the apostles and share in the fellowship they have with the Father and his Son Jesus Christ (1:3). Those who deny Jesus as the Son of God, as the word who became flesh, do not have

fellowship with the Father. Those who cast aside the gospel taught by the apostles do not have fellowship with the Father. Furthermore, those who refuse fellowship with other believers have no fellowship with the Father (3:14).

In addition to having fellowship with the Father and with his Son, John writes that his 'little children' might have joy to the full. The best reading is 'that our joy may be full' (1:4, 2John 12). 'There is joy in heaven over one sinner who repents' said Jesus (Luke 15:7). The saved soul rejoices because of the forgiveness of sin and the new life they receive from Jesus Christ. Any preacher of the gospel, like John, rejoices when they see a soul saved from sin and death. They rejoice to see new life that grows and bears fruit to the glory of God. Do you have such joy? Is your joy growing as you come to know more of your Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ?