

Easter 3

(... or the second Sunday after Easter)

1 John 3:1-7

¹See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is *what we are*. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him.

²Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be, has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.

³And all who have this hope in him *purify themselves*, just as he is pure. ⁴Everyone who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. ⁵You know that he was revealed to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. ⁶No one who *abides in him* sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him. ⁷Little children, let no one deceive you. Everyone who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous.

My text today is written in 1 John 3.6-7:

⁶No one who abides in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him. ⁷Little children, let no one deceive you. Everyone who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous.

This Epistle is a favourite among us Methodists, as St John's 'spectacles' tended to have suited those of our founder, John Wesley, so well. We are a 'holiness movement', committed to the proclamation of the Gospel - *and living it*. In a sense we are Protestant's Dominicans – the Order of Preachers – dedicated to offering to others the precious gifts we have received. This passage was one of Wesley's favourites and he preached on it many times. In a sense, it reminds us of our USP (unique 'selling' point) – what makes us distinct - and how we can contribute to the enrichment of the Church and society.

We are not only 'called' God's children we 'are' God's children. By nature, we are not, we are mere *creatures* of God, created by Him; but by God's grace, we are *adopted* as God's children. Barclay makes the distinction between 'paternity' and 'fatherhood': paternity refers to our genes, our physical existence; fatherhood describes an intimate, loving relationship. In the sense of paternity, *all* people are children of God, but in the sense of fatherhood, we become God's children in a special and intimate way, when God 'makes his gracious approach to [us] and [we] respond.' This is available for all people without exception, and it is the Church's responsibility – and ours alone - to make this clearly known. If the wider church fails to do this, people as individuals, as well as society, lose out – because while God's love for them never changes – they are not given opportunities of discovering *how* they can live fulfilled lives *now*. Sharing God's love for all, and his offer of forgiveness and grace, should inspire and motivate us to being faithful to this, our privileged calling.

It seems so important to stress this distinction in today's world: the mere sexual act that leads to conception and physical birth, is just a tiny part of the situation; what is needed for any child, are not just parents, but a 'mother' and a 'father'. One of the ways where we see this distinction is in the gift of adoption. A mother taking her pregnancy to full term to give life to her child, and then being willing to give the child to another, because

she cannot give her child everything they need - must be both the most difficult and also a loving thing for a mother to do. Adopted children ought to feel special.

Previously, the relationship between God and humanity was one of covenant, sealed by complex laws that needed fulfilment. Now Jesus has given us a new way – by a deliberate act of God *adopting us in Christ* and inviting us to become part of a new family. And it is here that we come to our Methodist heritage and its emphasis on both *free choice* and *willing obedience*. We are all children because, not only do we owe our existence to God; but we become part of God *family* by *accepting* the gift of grace. When we do this, we begin to ‘abide in God’ (in verse 9 John refers to this first step as being ‘born of God’ verse 9).

Some find the last verses of the Epistle quite difficult, yet they are central to our Christian faith and our Methodist emphasis. It is obvious, when one looks at the context in which St John was writing, that they are not meant to be taken literally, because this Epistle begins with: “If anyone says that they have no sin, they deceive themselves ...” and “... if we say that we have not sinned, we make God out to be a liar ...” (1 John 1:8 and 10).

Barclay reminds us that St John is thinking, here, in a typically Jewish way: Jews believed in two ages, ‘this present age’ and ‘the age to come’. Christians, through the grace of God in Jesus Christ, inhabit both. One of the characteristics of the new age is that it is free from sin, but because we still have one foot in this present age, we have not yet escaped the power of sin. So, St John is speaking here about the ‘ideal’. What St John is referring to is *deliberate and wilful sin*, as Barclay explains: “... no Christian can possibly be a deliberate and consistent sinner; no Christian can live a life in which sin is dominant in all his actions ...” So, St John is exhorting us to be ever watchful and that we need to live lives in which ‘... sin is not the normal accepted way but the abnormal moment of defeat ...’ (Barclay)

Wesley preached on this verse more than once, because he held that Christians are called to lives of Christian *perfection*, not meaning that we ever attain it, but that this ought not to stop us from trying. We are a holiness movement, who, by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, seek to try to live *moments* of perfection, where we are in perfect love with God and our neighbours. Perfection happens when it breaks into this present age. Our calling is to seek to make this happen, and when it does, to sustain it. We see life, not as linear, but as cyclical. Perfection is not meant to be the end of the process, but something that is experienced now, even though it is impossible to sustain it in the longer term, because we sin. But this ought to be by *mistake* and not design. We tend to fall into sin when we neglect the means of grace, especially prayer and Bible reading and study. When we neglect these things, the voice of God in our consciences becomes dimmer and dimmer, until we no longer hear it. (An example of this is the case with David and Bathsheba).

It is important to note that verse 6 begins with those that ‘abide in him’. Here again, Wesley claims that this is more than the act of faith – being justified, what God does ‘*for*’ us – but also what God does ‘*in*’ us. “... the one restores us to the *favour*, the other to the

image of God. The one is the talking away of the guilt, the other the taking away of the power, of sin ...” (Barclay)

Christians, in facing the ever-present reality of sin, often give in to it saying that this is just our lot before Glory. What St John is reminding us of here, is that we *can* overcome the power of sin, and that it does not need to dominate our lives. We can be set free of its reality – if we *abide* in Christ - and we do so when we watch, pray and listen for the voice of God in Scripture – and respond in obedience. And the more God’s seed abides in us and as we grow in our faith – we will find the moments of Christian perfection come to dominate more and more as we ‘... walk with the Lord in the light of His Word ...’ (as the hymn writer puts it).

What took England and the world by storm in the 18th Century through the ministry of the first Methodists, was this message, and the fact that lives were changed dramatically. Societies too, were transformed. What once were no-go areas, became places of virtue. England changed and a journey began toward establishing the Kingdom of God here.

With a willing decision to embrace the means of grace and to stand against sin, sin can cease in our lives, and only be present in those lapses that result from our human frailty. It is possible, by God’s grace, to become holy.

We have a need to purify ourselves. We all know that we are declared right with God by His grace with God taking the initiative and doing everything for us. The Reformers spoke of the wonderful doctrine of “Justification by Faith” apart from the works of the Law, lest anyone should boast. Being declared right with God is the most wonderfully liberating understanding. But for too long, many thought that this was it – this is the Gospel. And it is, but only part of it. God also gives us His Spirit so that we can be *made into* what we have being *declared to be*. We do not have to be satisfied with our lives as they are, we can change, and we do change when we allow God to work his miracle of *purification* within our lives – what is technically referred to as *sanctification*. But, as always, there is a need for us to take some of the responsibility. We need to make a conscious and deliberate decision of the will to “purify ourselves” following the example of our Lord – we need to abide in Christ. It is when we abide in Christ, that we do not sin.

St John implies that sin is a deliberate breaking of the law and to obey oneself instead of God. Sin undoes the work of Christ, because Jesus came to take away sin. Sin results from failing to abide in Christ. Barclay then makes a wonderful comment: “... so long as we remember the continual presence of Jesus, we will not sin; it is when we forget that presence that we sin ...” St John put it this way:

⁶No one who abides in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him. ⁷Little children, let no one deceive you. Everyone who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous.

The Revd David Owen
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