

Sometimes, when you read a passage from Scripture, one verse or phrase jumps out more than the others. In fact, it might be the only part of a reading you'll remember as you move into the sermon.

For me, as I was thinking about today, it was verse 13 of our reading, when John says, "Do not be surprised, my brothers and sisters, if the world hates you"

It's very powerful.

And as we've discussed before, John's letters were written to encourage and give hope to new Christians, and to support them as they faced numerous challenges.

But I'll be honest, although I'm not an expert in advertising and marketing, that verse doesn't seem like the most inspiring or hopeful message.

And it seems really odd too. Because as John mentioned at the start of the passage in verse 11, all we have to do is follow the message we have heard from the beginning: "We should love one another" and why should this provoke such hatred?

At first glance, this makes no sense.

And yet, as you know, John is very careful with his language and he's basing this statement on years of experience. We see similar comments in the Gospel of John.

And he was right. There's good historical evidence to support his statement. Christians were hated by their world at the time. The Roman Empire was deeply unhappy with Christians for a number of reasons- they refused to follow the Roman cult and accept that the Emperor was a God. They also saw Christianity as a dangerous political movement that could destabilize the Empire. That's part of the reason why Christians were widely persecuted.

But the Romans were always anxious to keep the peace and would probably have ignored the Christians if they were accepted in their own lands. But they were hated there too. The Jewish leadership despised Christianity. As we move towards Lent, we'll be reminded of the persecution faced by Jesus at the hands of the Jewish authorities. They felt his teachings opposed their own and would destabilize their power. Some scholars have even argued that Pilate only crucified Jesus to avoid a Jewish revolt, to placate the populace.

And beyond this, many Gentile populations also feared and despised Christianity, when many of their teachings, as we see in Paul's letters in particular, were critical and opposed their social beliefs and structures.

But I'll be honest with you, I don't think these political explanations are enough. The ruling authorities could, and indeed, often did, tolerate differing political or religious viewpoints without the hatred mentioned by John.

So there must have been something different at work here. And I think John alludes to this when he mentions the story of Cain and Abel at the start of this passage. We're all familiar with the account from Genesis, where Cain killed his brother, in part because he was jealous of God's favour on Abel and it's widely used in Scripture to illustrate the dangers of jealousy, and choosing to become a child of sin, rather than God.

As we know, a political position doesn't always reflect the true opinion of the man in the street. We've seen this numerous times in our own political environment through the years.

And I think in John's time, that hatred of Christianity wasn't just confined to the ruling, political elite. It was also present amongst the common man. Otherwise, the crowd would not have shouted to save Barabbas rather than Jesus, or the audience in the Coliseum wouldn't have gathered to witness the sacrifice of Christians to the lions.

The people were jealous of the life we have been offered in Christ. A life that's available to all, if we only accept the Holy Spirit and love those as Jesus loves.

And I am sure we have all experienced that hostility ourselves. It exists in many different forms in our world. In some places, as we remember in our prayers, Christians face outright persecution and the threat of violence, imprisonment and even death for their faith.

And while we are blessed and fortunate not to be in that situation, we still face challenges here in Scotland today. We saw that with the young people's work this morning and the difficulties a young person faces being a follower of Jesus in a world of instagram and changing perceptions of morality.

Our beliefs are openly challenged and ridiculed in the media. We're portrayed as stupid or naïve for believing in a higher power, when science supposedly holds all the answers. If we hold a view on personal morality based on our theology, it's labeled as hate speech and we could be "cancelled".

We might not be targeted individually, but this culture is negative and genuinely makes it difficult to be a Christian. I fully understand why people don't want to openly confess their faith and publically witness Christ. As Alan discussed last week, hiding behind a mask is so much easier. We don't have to face that hurt on a daily basis because we are disciples of Christ.

And yet, I believe the world needs Christ's disciples now more than ever.

We live in a very odd, and sad world at the moment. People are still starving. Families, right here in Scotland, are about to face a massive cost of living crisis with fuel and food bills set to rise. And in the poorest parts of the world, people are dying because they still can't access a COVID vaccine.

And yet, at the same time, we live in a world where billionaires can buy themselves the opportunity to go into space. Where a superyacht is being built that costs more than a hospital, and people have no qualms about going on social media to boast about the latest expensive car, watch or item of clothing they've bought.

Money is being spent on these, material possessions while people are in genuine need.

If we think the world doesn't need Christ right now, I'd argue we are as blind as Saul before he encountered Jesus on that road to Damascus.

And as disciples therefore, we must be an example of a better way to live. We need to be that example of hope to others, by showing that we love our neighbours, the poor, the sick, the needy, even our enemies.

Because as it says in Luke 17:21, our faith in Christ means the kingdom of God is within us. We may not be billionaires financially but we have spiritual riches, given to us by God, that vastly exceed the wealth of the so called super rich.

God has given you the ability to love and to share that love with others. This could be a gift of service to the church or your community, it could be the gift of intercessory prayer for the vulnerable or needy, or it might just be the gift of you as a person. The friendship and companionship you show for others.

But if we covet these gifts, and hide them away, only bringing them out when we're amongst our friends in church, or safely at home, we will be as guilty as those billionaires, hiding behind their high walls and security, selfishly enjoying their wealth.

Don't confine these gifts to the church. Don't be like the super wealthy. Instead, share them with others. Because as we know from Scripture, God will reward you for this with a generosity beyond our understanding. A peace and happiness that money can't buy.

But don't be surprised if you face hostility for this generosity. You are being called to be an example to the world but by doing so, you will inevitably highlight the selfishness and failings of others.

People won't like that. They will be embarrassed and ashamed, and when they see your spiritual rewards, they'll experience the jealousy of Cain.

But God understands what you will face.

His only son, who was perfect and without sin, a man who loved everyone and judged no one, was sent to the cross to die a most horrible death.

Although it has great meaning for us today, the people sent him to his death through hatred and jealousy.

The people mocked and laughed at his faith, and the Roman authorities were too afraid to support and save him.

God understands the hurt and suffering that meaningless hatred can inflict. Through his son, he has experienced this too.

And yet, he calls us all, as disciples of Christ, to make this living sacrifice. He doesn't want us to hide behind a mask, as the young people showed us so clearly last week.

He wants us to be like Christ and accept this burden, knowing that through our faith, and the Kingdom within us, we can, and will change the world for the better.

But He's not asking us to do this alone. Far from it. In the book of Isaiah 41:10 it says, "So do not fear, for I am with you: do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand"

In other words, we shouldn't fear that hatred.

Because God has chosen us for this task and by doing so, he has placed at his right hand to give us the strength and help we need to face these challenges.

And so, if you truly want to be a disciple of Christ, I ask that you don't shy away from this living sacrifice you are being called to make.

By loving others, even your enemies, and confronting hatred with God given strength, you are following Christ's example and being a true disciple. You will be a beacon of hope in a world that desperately needs light.

And so, going back to my original point, I think that John was right. We shouldn't be surprised if the world hates us.

In fact, I think it's a huge encouragement. Because if we encounter that hostility, we know we are truly living the life of Christ.

We should take hope from that message, because we are keeping God's commands and doing what pleases him. And through this, we live in him, and he in us.