

**SERMON – 30/1/22****'Distinctive Living'**

1 John 2:12-17

"The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives for ever." (1 John 2:17)

This past week we have marked 77 years since the liberation of Auschwitz concentration camp first began to bring to light the horrors of the Holocaust, the Nazis' Final Solution for the so-called 'Jewish Problem.' In truth, the world has always had a problem with the people of God. Six centuries before Christ, the people of Israel were taken from Jerusalem into exile in Babylon. There their captors and tormentors asked them to sing the songs of Zion and the cry went up that is recorded for us in Psalm 137 – "How can we sing the Lord's song while in a strange land?" (Ps.137:4)

Today in many countries of the world our Christian brothers and sisters take up the same words as their persecutors taunt them not only in prisons and modern day concentration camps but even as they go about their daily work or simply walk along the street. But we don't need to be persecuted for our faith to recognise that following Jesus sets us apart from those neighbours and friends and family members who do not share our Christ-inspired world view and to feel sometimes that we too are singing the Lord's song in a strange land.

As we read our way through this First Letter of John we are taking as our theme the life of Christian discipleship. So far we have looked at the foundations of our faith in Jesus Christ, the Word of God made flesh, and at the new start in life that comes through the forgiveness of our sins if we decide to go the Jesus way. Last Sunday Ian helped us to start thinking about what it means to live out our faith, walking with Jesus in the light, in love and forgiveness, and this morning I want to continue on that track as we consider how we as Christians are called to live distinctively in the world.

The verses we read earlier in fact constitute two short asides in the flow of the letter, one in which John affirms the standing we have before God if we are Christian disciples and the other which exhorts us to live out that standing in the context of our daily lives, and it is those two themes that I would like to explore with you this morning.

I don't know if you noticed as the passage was read for us just now, but the apostle directly addresses different groups in the Christian community. Twice over he speaks to children, then to fathers (that is to say perhaps more senior members of the church) and then again to young men (perhaps younger people in the fellowship), and since these words are directly addressed to us too in our day it's worth pausing to reflect on what we are being taught here.

What is clear is that there is a reference here to people who are at different stages in the journey of discipleship, not necessarily because of physical age but more likely in relation to spiritual maturity. Both Luther and Calvin agreed with the early church fathers that when John is addressing 'dear children' (as he does in fact at various points throughout the letter) he is talking to *all* Christians, the *whole* church. If you remember, Jesus says "Unless you change and become like little children you will never enter the Kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:3) which is why it is so important that we are *all* 'growing young' – that is to say becoming more childlike in our faith, no matter what physical age we may be. But within the whole church John also singles out two groups in what he writes here – those who are mature in the faith and those who are newer disciples – because it's also true to say that in our childlikeness of faith we need to be constantly growing up and maturing too.

We can trace a progression in these verses from the early experiences of the new Christian for whom the forgiveness of sins through Christ and coming to know God as Father through the Holy Spirit are particularly important; through the initial journey of growing as a disciple when strength is found in studying the Word of God and the battle is begun to find not just forgiveness from past sin but also deliverance from sin's power in the present; towards a ripener, deeper knowledge of God, a greater

sanctification and a sense of already consciously living in eternity rather than in the here and now.

So let me ask you where you think you might be along the journey of discipleship?

I hope that you know yourself to be a dearly-loved child of God, assured that your sins are forgiven and that you have fellowship with the Most High. If not, then come and have a word with me because I really long for every single one of you to have that simple assurance today.

Perhaps you *do* have that assurance but you don't feel as if you have progressed any further since Sunday School or your first tottering steps in the journey of faith. Maybe you feel like it has become a battle to keep on the way with Christ and you would like a bit of help in fighting your way through – that is why it is so important to feed upon the pure spiritual milk and upon the solid food of God's Word, in personal Bible reading, in the mutual support of group study and in reflections like these in church week by week.

Some of you, I know, are what (in Scots) is sometimes described as 'far ben' in the faith – it's what all of us should be aspiring to: a steadfast confidence in the eternal truths of the Gospel and a natural living as what Paul in his letter to the Philippians describes as 'citizens of heaven' (Phil.3:20) albeit here on earth. I pray that this series of sermons on discipleship may encourage us all (again in Paul's words to the Philippians) to 'press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me' (Phil.3:12) and to 'press on towards the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenwards in Christ.' (Phil.3:14)

Now, if what John says to these different groups within the church are affirmations of what you might call our 'standing' before God, what he goes on to say concerns the way we live that out in our daily lives. If this is what you *are* in Christ, John is saying, go out and *be* that day by day. "Do not love the world," he writes, quite starkly, and by 'the world' he means that which stands in opposition to God, what the Good News translation describes as "what the sinful self desires, what people see and want, and everything that people are so proud of." (v.16)

Do not love the world, he says, because love for the world is incompatible with love for God. Remember what Jesus Himself said: "No-one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other or you will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money." (Matthew 6:24)

Do not love the world, John says, because while God is eternal, the world (and everything in it) is transient. As we noted a moment ago, as Christians we declare that 'our citizenship is in heaven' and that means that our ways should be the ways of God's Kingdom, not the ways of the strange land in which we find ourselves currently exiled.

It's not that we are to try and escape the world – no, because God loves the world and wants all people to be saved, which is why we need to be active in singing the Lord's song here and now – we are to be *in* the world but not *of* it, in the world but distinct from it, like the exiled people of Israel in Babylon, we are to be un-worldly without being other-worldly, we are confidently and joyfully to sing the Lord's songs while in the strange land of this world. It will mean holding conversations that are consciously seasoned with grace, it will mean choosing not to let our eyes be beguiled by things that will lead us away from God, it will mean walking humbly with God, walking out of the shadows into the light, standing up for the truth, contending for justice, considering others better than ourselves, honouring God in our relationships with others, living life not for the moment but from the perspective of eternity.

And so, dear children, do you know that God is your Father and that your sins are forgiven? If you are young in the faith, are you assured that you have overcome the Evil One, and if you are mature in the faith are you consciously living eternal life? If not, then what are you going to do about that this week? And if so, what difference is it going to make to the way you *live* on Monday morning or Thursday afternoon or Saturday evening? Our love for the Father and for His Son Jesus Christ must take us into a different orbit from those whose love is for the things of this world, and into a lifestyle where our thoughts and words and deeds set us apart for the better from those who do not share our faith. Christian disciples are called to be distinctive and to do so in

such a way that this world just a little bit more resembles the Kingdom of God.

“The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives for ever.”

### Prayer

Gracious and loving God, we are humbled that you should have come to us and sought us out, never mind that you should have given up your life for us that we might be forgiven. We so long to honour that by giving our lives for you, to do your will day by day and to shine like stars in the world as we hold out the word of life which you have entrusted to us. We recognise that that is a battle but we rejoice that in Christ we have already overcome the world and the Evil One whose influence makes this such a strange challenging place for us to live out our faith. Help us to deepen our faith and to walk more closely with you day by day, in Jesus' name we pray. Amen.