

## **"A LETTER FROM JOHN – 1"**

### ***1 John 3:11-24***

We're into November now and it won't be long before Advent is upon us, when we'll be thinking about the things which led up to the coming of Jesus into our world. In the three weeks between now and then, though, we're going to have a look at three little letters which we find towards the end of the New Testament. Over the past few years we've reflected on some of the longer letters – the letters of Paul to groups like the Philippians, the Colossians, the Ephesians and the Corinthians, groups whose names give us the titles of those letters. The letters we're going to look at this month are identified not by the recipients, like those, but by the author. There are only seven altogether – two from Peter and five beginning with J, as it happens – James, Jude and the three letters of John. It's those letters from John that we're going to have a look at over the next three weeks.

All Paul's letters and the letters of James and Jude begin with the name of the author, but there is nothing in the three letters attributed to John to link them directly to him. The author is not identified by name in any of them. Nevertheless, by the second century, the main figures in the Christian Church were saying that this was all John's work. Irenaeus, Clement, Tertullian and Origen – the big guns of the growing international Christian community – all said that these letters were by John. And the John they meant (because it was a fairly common name then as now), was John the son of Zebedee, brother of James, cousin of Jesus himself – his mother Salome was Mary's sister – and one of his closest disciples, and the author of the *Gospel of John* and, traditionally, the amazing *Book of Revelation*.

The reasons for taking this line included the many idiosyncratic similarities of style and vocabulary that there are between the Gospel and these letters, and the several clear references to the author as an eyewitness of Jesus' life and ministry – not least in the opening sentences of this first letter (1:1-4). It was written towards the end of the first century – maybe around 85-95 AD – by which time John was an old man and very likely to refer to his readers as "*dear children*" (5:21).

Mark's Gospel tells us that, along with his brother James, John was known as a "*son of thunder*", which may explain some of his forceful language at times. But his best-known description is probably that which he uses of himself in his Gospel when he refers to himself on several occasions as "*the disciples Jesus loved*" and he reclined next to Jesus at the Last Supper. That description is very important when we come to look at this letter, as is John's account of all that Jesus had to say before that Last Supper about love and the way it was to be a mark of his disciples.

Because this First Letter of John is shot through with love. It is John who coins the phrase that "*God is love*" and he writes extensively to his first readers, members of the early Christian Church now being scattered by increasing persecution, about God's love for them and their love for each other. In fact, John uses the word "*love*" more than any other New Testament writer: "*love*" as a noun or a verb is found 46 times in these five chapters. And it is the Greek word "*agape*" that he uses, the word which, as opposed to erotic love or the love of friendship or familial love, means active love, love in action – even sacrificial love. It is the love that is to be the mark of real Christian discipleship – as Jesus made clear in that passage we mentioned from John's Gospel: "*A new command I give you: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another*" (John 13:34,35).

So what is this love really all about? How can we identify authentic love? These are important questions in a culture where love is so often used as a synonym for lust, or thrown around with a complete lack of sincerity, or simply peppered through the lyrics of popular songs, both sacred and secular. Well, John is quite explicit in 3:16 (in a strange quirk of translating and editing, 1 John 3:16 providing a fitting companion to 3:16 in his Gospel – "*For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son*"). He says, "*This is how we know what love is ...*" – this is how we identify true love, this is the supreme example of what I'm talking about – "*Jesus Christ laid down his life for us.*"

If you want to know what love is, look at Jesus: he personifies the love of which John is writing. He gives us the very best example. Giving up the glory and majesty and power and security of his place in heaven

at the very right hand of God the Father, Jesus came down into our world – the world that God had created so good, but which had become so distorted and perverted by the presence of evil. He came down to make a difference to men and women whose lives had been blighted by the activity of the forces of evil, who were suffering, anxious, divided, dissatisfied, unfulfilled, not able to live life to the full as God had intended. Jesus came into our world, sharing our fragility and vulnerability, but teaching about a better way and showing by his actions what that better way could look like, giving us glimpses of God's Kingdom – healing the sick, exorcising the possessed, giving dignity to the downtrodden, giving hope to the desperate, pointing everyone towards the possibilities that faith in God could unlock for them. He was criticised, ridiculed, betrayed, arrested, beaten and bloodied for that. And then, as John says, he *"laid down his life for us"* – he allowed himself to be executed, nailed naked and exposed to a rough wooden cross, even then reaching out in love to his mother, his fellow victims and even, in forgiveness, to those who'd nailed him there.

As he hung there, his life ebbing away, his body being emptied not only of the divinity he had already surrendered but also of the humanity that he had taken on, he became the lightning conductor for all that evil could throw at humanity, taking on himself the cosmic consequences of every wrong choice, every wrong decision, every stupid mistake, every calculated criminal act, every deliberate rejection of the good that you or I could ever make. He dealt there with the results of our sin so that we could one day join him in God's renewed creation, living the lives of satisfaction and fulfilment that God originally intended for us. He gave up everything so that you and I could look forward to enjoying everything. That is how we know what love is!

And what does John go on to say? Exactly what Jesus said when John heard him in that upstairs room on the night of the Last Supper. Jesus said, *"As I have loved you, so you must love one another."* John writes, *"Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters."* We are to follow the example of Jesus himself – that's what John comes back to again and again in this little letter. Read through it again when you get home and see just how much John stresses that. We are to reflect the love of Jesus in our dealings with each other. We need to be prepared to give up anything and everything to help those around us who are struggling.

And this isn't just a question of talking about it, of discussing it, of comparing Greek words for love or spotting the similarities between Bible passages or planning for new initiatives or looking for clever definitions. John writes in *v18*, *"Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth."* You can try and define love all you want, but until you actually get on and show it, it is totally useless. It has to be shown in action. If you've got the means to do something and you don't do it – you simply waste time thinking about it or talking about it – you're not showing love, says John: *"If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person?"* This is all a million miles away from the current obsession with "my rights", having to do things my way, I am not going to be inconvenienced, and so on. This is about looking out for others, reaching out to brothers and sisters who are struggling – whether it's trying to encourage and support persecuted Christians in other parts of the world, making changes in our lifestyles to try and make a difference to those whose homes and livelihoods are at risk because of changes in our climate, or showing our care and consideration for those who are anxious and fearful, rather than just telling any of them that they're not trusting God enough.

And just notice, at the end of this passage, that John makes it very clear that, for those who claim to follow Christ, this self-giving, self-denying love is not some kind of optional extra. When you take the decision to follow Jesus, to accept his call to discipleship, you're not given a check-list of things to do and the opportunity to choose which ones you feel you want to go for. Look at the vocabulary John uses here in *vv21-24*. What's the word that stands out in all that? Surely it's *"command"*. *v23* is the key verse here: *"And this is God's **command**: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to **love one another** as he **commanded** us."* This is a non-negotiable, folks. Look at *v14*: *"We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love each other. Anyone who does not love remains in death."* In fact, in the next chapter John actually says, *"Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love" (4:8).*

Do you call yourself a Christian? Do you claim to follow Jesus? Do you say you follow God's ways? Well, if you say that, however loudly, and don't show that self-denying, self-emptying love that Jesus showed in your everyday dealing with other people, your words ring hollow. Let's pray that this church will be known as a place of love, and that each one of us will stand out as we try to show love to one another and to those around us, reflecting the amazing love of God in a world becoming ever darker under the shadows of self-interest and self-assertion. It's not really an option, you know – it's a command. *"Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth."*

### **For reflection and discussion**

- 1) If we say, as John does in *v11*, *"We should love one another"* are we just simplifying Christianity? Indeed, is it really distinctively Christian at all?
- 2) In *v13* John warns us that the world will hate us as Christians. Do you feel hated by the world? Why/why not?
- 3) How can we truly *"lay down our lives"* for each other? What would that entail in practical terms today?
- 4) Look at *v17*. What are the practical implications of that for us today? Can you think of any real situations in which it might be relevant? What can we do about it?
- 5) What particularly strikes you in this passage? What are you going to do about it?