

We continue last Sunday's reading from 1 John
Chapter 3 continues

John is still dealing with the problem
how do we know if we really are Christian?
Or perhaps – how do I know
if someone else is a Christian.

This was important in a persecuted church
when there might be spies in the camp.
There might be someone in church
who is not a Christian
and will betray the others to the authorities
which might mean prison, torture and death.

He is leading up to a definition
that a Christian is
someone who obeys God's commands
and does what pleases God.

God's law is about love.
So he has to define love, first of all,
and the definition he gives
is to compare with the love that Jesus shows.

Jesus laid down his life for us all.
Jesus' love is giving, sacrificial love.
That same love should characterise our lives.

If someone says they are a Christian
but their nature is to look after self, not others –
then there is good reason to think
that they do not have the love of God in their hearts.

This is how we know love ... Jesus laid down his life for us
The Son of Man came ...
to give his life as a ransom for many

Proper 24
(Trinity 17)

1 John 3. 16 → 4. 6
Mark 10. 35 – 45

Equally if their lifestyle is to indulge in behaviour that is distressing to God then they are lacking in the required evidence to be counted part of the church.

You might think this is not worth stating. Of course Christians aim to please God. Of course they have kind loving hearts.

But I have known of churches where generosity is not their nature. In some places, people belong to the church and hold onto their places on the PCC in order to preserve part of their community's heritage probably the building possibly a style of worship
from, say, their grandfather's time. and such people sometimes end up on Deanery Synod, Diocesan Synod,
even General Synod.

Their God-appointed task, they believe is to defend the church against change.

In their communities, they speak for the church their voice is the mission of the church.

And John would say – they are not Christians.

Sadly that makes the real mission of the church, and the job of their clergy, very difficult in for example, some village communities.

I have been there.

We need to pray for such churches.
Pray especially for the clergy there
and any real Christians among them
because their life and witness becomes very difficult.

There are churches that can break the heart and soul
of devoted clergy.

But then John realises
and maybe it is true for you
that his readers will be examining themselves
and maybe finding themselves wanting.

Am I loving enough to qualify?
Perhaps I am not really a Christian.
The standard is high. Woe is me!

John says – if your heart condemns you
then you are probably not guilty.
The fact that you care enough
to test yourself
says that your heart is probably right with God.

God is the judge – not your heart.
And God does not condemn.

The ones whose hearts are not yet captured for Christ
will not be aware – because they do not care
about the true mission of the church.

If you are **trying** to do what is right
if you **care** about doing what is right
that pleases God.

But then John thinks again, again.
Oh dear, it sounds as if he is saying
as long as you do good stuff
and show love to people
that makes you a Christian.

No it doesn't. The test doesn't work both ways.

“No love” means “no Jesus”
But “love” doesn't mean “Jesus”
verse 23 says – two conditions.
Believe in Jesus, and love your neighbour.
Good works without Christian faith
will not suffice.

But if you believe in Jesus
and your faith shows in practical love
Then be reassured – Jesus lives in you.

That leads him on to another problem.
It all makes sense to John –
but does it make sense to his readers?
What does “believe in Jesus” mean?

Lots of people believe some things about Jesus
but they draw a line.
He was a Good person – a good example to follow.

He was a great teacher – lessons to be learnt.

He was one of God's prophets,
speaking not just words of wisdom
but words of truth, accompanied by signs of power.

All that is true – but there is more.

Moslems believe all that –
but they do not believe Jesus is the Son of God.

You have to believe
that Jesus is God come in the flesh.

You have to believe in Christmas, or Easter doesn't work.
God was born as man, so it was God who went to the cross.

So, you have to have the evidence of a changed life.
And you have to believe in Jesus – all the God stuff
virgin birth, miracles, sinlessness, resurrection
then you can be quite confident
that what you **thought** you had done
is what you **truly** have done.
You have become a Christian.

4.4

You, dear children, are from God.

We can know who is part of the church, really
and who is just acting the part, without belief.

Don't listen, says John, to those
who are just acting, but do not believe.

If their hearts and spirits are not right
don't trust their wisdom, or their teaching.

We need to be very careful
who we appoint to advise us.
And whether we listen to Bishops or not.

The classic example is of course
in the gospel – Mark chapter 10.

Here are the Twelve – chosen by Jesus
each with their own ideas as to what is important.

And it makes sense.

Jesus is number 1 – but who gets positions 2 and 3?
Let's go for it – while Jesus is still around.

James and John want to sit on Jesus' right and left
when he takes his place in glory.

It is not about rank and status
it is about suffering, witnessing, even dying
because you are a disciple of Jesus.
Does your faith take you that far?

This was the same John that wrote the letter 1 John.
He has learnt a thing or two by then.

The difference was – back in Galilee or wherever
James and John, and the others, were not yet Christians.

They were followers of Jesus,
but they didn't know who Jesus was.
So they didn't have faith.

They haven't yet confessed their sins and been forgiven
so they are not yet born again –
they certainly have not yet received the Holy Spirit.

They are good men, who want to follow Jesus.
But they are not yet born again and Spirit-filled.

Again, there are people like that in our churches.
Nice people, loving people
probably nicer, better people than I am.

But if they have not yet come to the foot of the cross
and surrendered all
they have not yet started.
And their wisdom cannot be trusted.

I could point out such people
in high positions in the church.
Bishops and Archdeacons.
They are all around us.

Nice people.
But as Brandon Jackson (Dean of Lincoln)
used to say about some of his colleagues
“he is not a saved man!”

Jesus made it clear why he came
and we should be the same
not because we copy
but because we are driven by his Spirit

So what drove Jesus?

*Whoever wants to be great among you
must be your servant,
and whoever wants to be first
must be slave of all.
For even the Son of Man
did not come to be served
but to serve,
and to give his life as a ransom for many.
*λυτρον πολλων**

Mark 10.45 – one of the most important verses in the Bible.

We have to be sure that the gospel message we proclaim –
and perform –
is more than – be good people because that pleases God.

That's good – but it is not enough.

We have a much bigger message.

We have to proclaim the good news of sins forgiven
through Jesus' death on the cross.

we have to introduce people to the life-changing power
of God's Holy Spirit.

We have to teach about who Jesus was and is
without pulling our punches about Jesus' unique claims
to be the Son of God, and the only way to the Father.

And if there are churches who don't do these things
that is their problem.

We will get it right, because that is what pleases God.
And the Apostle John agrees.

We are to be saved (born-again) Spirit-filled believers
who proclaim and demonstrate
the whole message of the gospel.

Then God will be pleased
and we will be helping to extend his kingdom on earth.

And that is our task, as the church.