



Thought for the Week 7th February 2021

READING 1 John 2:12-17 (ESV)

¹² I am writing to you, little children,
because your sins are forgiven for his name's sake.

¹³ I am writing to you, fathers,
because you know him who is from the beginning.

I am writing to you, young men,
because you have overcome the evil one.

I write to you, children,
because you know the Father.

¹⁴ I write to you, fathers,
because you know him who is from the beginning.

I write to you, young men,
because you are strong,
and the word of God abides in you,
and you have overcome the evil one.

¹⁵ Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. ¹⁶ For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions—is not from the Father but is from the world. ¹⁷ And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides for ever.

SERMON

Borders are very much in the news at the minute. The so-called border down the Irish Sea caused by the UK's withdrawal from the EU and the subsequent "Northern Ireland Protocol" has moved the heated debate between local politicians away from the line that divides six counties from the other 32 counties on this island, which has been the bone of contention here for the past 100 years. We have borders to establish sovereignty over what land belongs to and is ruled over by the United Kingdom and what belongs to the Republic of Ireland, or what land belongs to France and what belongs to Germany. Wars have been fought throughout human history over borders. It was Germany's invasion of Poland, taking control of its territory that triggered the start of the Second World War in 1939.

Towards the end of the first century, when the Apostle John wrote to the Christian churches that he mentored, he wasn't concerned about a border on a map for the vast Roman Empire had removed all the local political borders of that time. But he was concerned about the boundary between two kingdoms - the kingdom of God and the kingdom of this world.

This wasn't a border that could be defined as easily as the one on a map for essentially these two kingdoms inhabit the same territory – the whole of this planet. Like the illustration of the Dentyl Mouthwash/oil and water that I shared with the children, Christians are in this world together with all sort of people – people who know nothing of God and people who worship other Gods. To be effective as Christians in the way that Jesus taught us, loving and serving others so that they see him

in us, we need to be in the world. But on the other hand, we also need to be different to others. If we are indistinguishable from everyone else, then how can we be an effective witness for Christ. Where is the boundary line between being in the world, but not of the world? This is a very relevant question for us in our world today, just as it was back in John's day. And some of the problems the early Christians faced parallel those we face today. Like them we increasingly find ourselves a minority in a world that is at best unsympathetic and at worst openly hostile to the church and the Gospel.

But before he dives headlong into tackling this difficult issue, in verses 12-14 John pauses to give some words of encouragement and assurance to his readers. They can do the same for us. If you look at this passage in your Bible you will see that most modern translations (though not the AV) lay these verses out differently. John begins each sentence with, "I write" or "I am writing" followed by a "because" addressing three groups - children, fathers and young men each twice.

First there are words for "dear children." John seems to consider everyone in the churches he mentored to be his "dear children," so most commentators believe these are not words addressed specifically to children or young people. Children of God are all those who know the fatherhood of God in a way that no other can. They are those who have put their faith trust in Jesus Christ his Son and know that their sins are forgiven through his atoning death on the cross. Adopted as sons and daughters, they are now part of God's family and can call him "Abba, Father."

Secondly, John addresses the "Fathers" in the Christian community. There is debate among commentators about who exactly John means by "fathers." Most agree that it is a generalised term for those who are spiritually mature in their faith, whose knowledge of God is firmly anchored.

The third group is referred to as "young men." Again, this is probably meant to be a more generic term referring to Christians (of any age) who are full of freshness and vitality in their new-found faith but are in need of assurance in the spiritual battles they are fighting every day with the world. John reminds them, and us, that the word of God (Jesus, the logos of John 1) lives in us and because he overcame the world and defeated the powers of darkness and evil by his mighty resurrection, we too can overcome the evil one.

It is important, whichever of these categories we fit into, that we have the kind of assurance that John gives as we live out our faith in the world. Like the early Christians to whom John wrote, we need the assurance that we have a strong anchor to our faith as day and daily we face the storms of life and work out where the boundary lines are between the church and the world.

Having assured his readers, John then moves on to his next main point which he hammers home with his typical bluntness: "*Do not love the world or anything in it.*" It seems that John is drawing a very clear border, a definite boundary line here. This was most likely because there were problems among the believers to whom he was writing. For John the world is a treacherous place for Christians and worldly values had invaded the church. Sinful humanity has lost its moral compass and has drifted away from God and his plans for humanity as set down in the Bible and some believers had failed to stop the corrupting influence of the world from invading their lives and the life of the church.

Surely it's not difficult to see that this is not just a 1st century problem. The world around us in which we live has lost its moral compass. The Christian values which were held in our society until not that long ago are no longer the norm. A generally held Christian consensus has given way to a new, almost "sacred," devotion to science and materialism. We see all sorts of modern myths and alternative religions forms which people believe.

And this has had a significant impact on the contemporary church. David Wells has written a book called, *“God in the Wasteland. The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams.”* In it he shows that our Western “First World” culture is being upended and that the church is awash with change. Modernity has rearranged the reality of God in such a manner that he no longer makes a real difference in the church of today. Wells calls it a “silent revolution” that we barely notice, which has produced a “weightless God” who really is of little or no consequence in daily life to those who say they believe. He says that God ...

“rests upon the world as inconsequentially as not to be noticeable. ... he is less interesting than television, his commands less authoritative than [our] appetites for affluence and influence, his judgements no more awe-inspiring than the evening news and his truth less compelling than the advertisers’ sweet fog of flattery and lies.”

According to Wells the church is in trouble yet it barely knows it because it has failed to see what the corrupting influences of the world and erect formidable boundaries are and make potent and compelling claims for the truth.

So, what’s the answer? Do we retreat into our church buildings haul up the drawbridge and bring down the portcullis and wait for Christ to return? Some have tried that, of course, and some do still have a *“come ye out from among them”* approach. But how does that sit with our Lord’s commands to, “go and make disciples” (Matthew 28:28) and to be his witnesses to the ends of the earth? In John 17 Jesus prayed to his Father for his followers, not that he would take them out of the world, but that he would keep them safe in the world. Here’s how Eugene Peterson paraphrases verses 13-19: ***Now I’m returning to you. I’m saying these things in the world’s hearing so my people can experience my joy completed in them. I gave them your word; the godless world hated them because of it, because they didn’t join the world’s ways, just as I didn’t join the world’s ways. I’m not asking that you take them out of the world but that you guard them from the Evil One. They are no more defined by the world than I am defined by the world. Make them holy—consecrated—with the truth; your word is consecrating truth. In the same way that you gave me a mission in the world, I give them a mission in the world. I’m consecrating myself for their sakes so they’ll be truth-consecrated in their mission.***

“We are in the world, but not of the world” is how it is sometime put. There’s an old saying that goes, “It’s good when the boat is in the water, but it’s not so good when the water is in the boat.” Someone has paraphrased it to say; “It’s good for a Christian to live in the world, but it’s not so good for the world to live in a Christian.”

That’s why John says we need boundary lines – so that we quite literally know where we stand. We need to be sure that there is a boundary between our life in Christ and the life promoted by the world around us. Of course, it’s not that we should be so heavenly minded that we’re no earthly use or that we are so earthly minded that we are no heavenly use. There is a balance to be found here, and it’s not always an easy one to maintain.

We must always be guided by Scripture, asking the Holy Spirit to lead us in its truth. Sometimes this will bring us into direct conflict with the world and with the beliefs and practices prevalent in the society around us. We need to make the boundary lines clear, but of course we need to speak the truth in love.

I leave you with the paraphrase of 1 John 2 :15-17 from the Message which I believe clearly set out for us the border which we must not cross.

Don't love the world's ways. Don't love the world's goods. Love of the world squeezes out love for the Father. Practically everything that goes on in the world—wanting your own way, wanting everything for yourself, wanting to appear important—has nothing to do with the Father. It just isolates you from him. The world and all its wanting, wanting, wanting is on the way out—but whoever does what God wants is set for eternity.

PCI “Let’s Pray” 7th-13th February 2021

Moderator

Amidst pressure for major social change, Ireland north and south faces a different future. Pray for PCI as we make comment on proposed changes to the law on issues such as end of life care, assisted suicide, abortion, and the provision of overseas aid.

General Council

Pray for the various important meetings regarding United Appeal taking place this week and for wisdom and discernment for the decision makers in these challenging times, both financially and in many other ways, in the life of all congregations.

Council for Training in Ministry

Applicants for deaconess training have their first interview this Thursday. Pray for the applicants and the interview panel - that the Lord would guide clearly. Give thanks for the work of deaconesses as they serve in congregations, hospitals, the International Meeting Point and elsewhere.

Middle East

Pray for students and staff at JETS (Jordan Evangelical Theological Seminary) as they engage in the theological teaching-learning process under some restrictions in relation to Covid-19. Thank God that in spite of the disruption caused by the pandemic, JETS continues its strategic role in the Middle East ‘training Arab leaders for the Arab world’.

Myanmar

Pray for Myanmar following the recent military coup. Pray for peace, for a fair and just government for all the people of the country. Pray too for the leaders and members of the Presbyterian Church of Myanmar.

Chris & Rachel Humphries (global mission workers, Portugal)

Pray for the Comunidade Pedras Vivas church plant, that as Christ’s body they would continue to be salt and light, and open and alert to the needs of those around them. Pray too for the people of Portugal, who have been badly affected by the pandemic.

Norman Harrison (chaplain, Royal Group of Hospitals, Belfast)

Pray for Norman and all healthcare chaplaincy staff. Pray for all those ill in hospital, for full and quick recovery and that patients who don’t have Covid-19 will be protected from it. Pray too for staff working in challenging conditions and for families unable to visit.

Bellasis, Cavan, Drumkeeran & Killeshandra

Pray for these four linked congregations in the Monaghan Presbytery, continuing to worship (online) and witness during the pandemic, and for minister Rev Jean Mackarel.

Bray and Blackrock

Pray for these home mission congregations, the kirk sessions and minister Rev. Andrew Gill as they meet online during restrictions, and that new people will watch the services and hear the gospel.

Social Witness

Pray for all the Staff Teams in our 15 locations, as they continue to work during these ever-challenging days. Their dedication over the past 10 months has enabled CSW to sustain a high level of care – often working long hours and having little time for relaxation or family life. Pray for doctors, nurses and other Health Care professionals as they continue to provide a service in these stressful days.