

Thought for the Week 21st February 2021

READING 1 John 4:1-6

¹ Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. ² This is how you can recognise the Spirit of God: every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, ³ but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world. ⁴ You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world. ⁵ They are from the world and therefore speak from the viewpoint of the world, and the world listens to them. ⁶ We are from God, and whoever knows God listens to us; but whoever is not from God does not listen to us. This is how we recognise the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood.

SERMON

It isn't always easy, is it to know what's true and what's false? "Fake News" is a new terminology that has appeared in recent years for what we used to just call "lies." How do you separate truth from falsehood.

A number of years ago a young engineer was sent to America by his company to work in a new electronics plant. He accepted the two-year assignment that because it would enable him to earn enough to marry his long-time girlfriend. She had a job back home here, and their plan was to pool their resources and put a deposit on a house when he returned. This was in the days before mobile phones and facetime, so they corresponded often by post, but as the lonely weeks went by, the girl began to have doubts that he was being true to her, exposed as he was to the glamorous American girls. He wrote back, declaring with some passion that he was paying absolutely no attention to the local girls. "I admit," he wrote, "that sometimes I'm tempted. But I fight it. I'm keeping myself for you." In the next letter he received a package. It contained a note and a tin whistle. "I'm sending this to you," she wrote, "so you can learn to play it and have something to take your mind off those girls." The boy quickly replied, "Thanks for the tin whistle - I'm practising on it every night and thinking of you." At the end of his two-year stint and he was transferred back to company headquarters. He took the first opportunity to be reunited with his girl. Her whole family was with her, but as he rushed forward to embrace her, she held up a restraining hand and said sternly, "Just hold on there a minute! Before any serious kissin' and huggin' gets started here, let me hear you play a tune on that tin whistle!"

Of course, it's not always so easy to apply a test especially when it comes to what we might call 'spiritual matters.' When a person says or does something and they claim that it's God at work – how can we tell for sure? That was the problem that was facing the Christians to whom John wrote his letters at the very end of the 1st century. People claiming to be teachers and prophets from God had come into the churches. They said that their words and the new revelations they had were inspired by the Spirit of God. John was very concerned that were not bringing words and revelations from God at all. They were frauds, pedalling "fake news."

We need to appreciate the situation in the early church. The churches were usually small house groups in isolated cities throughout the Roman Empire. Their scriptures, as we have them today, were not available apart from a few letters from apostles and collected stories about Jesus. There were few formal creeds or statements of belief. Much of what they knew about Jesus and the gospel came from an oral tradition. They learned from what they were taught by spoken word – which of course was open to abuse. How can you tell if someone arrives into your church fellowship with some great new exciting teaching is telling the truth or not?

John says that they were to “*test the spirits.*” The first test was a simple one – what they said about Jesus. If a teacher denied that Jesus Christ had come from God in the flesh, then they were a false teacher. This was beginning to be a particular problem at the end of the 1st century. Influenced by Greek thought, some were saying things such as, God is spirit and because spirit and flesh can never mix, Jesus must have only “appeared” to be a human being – a kind of apparition, or that God simply took over the body of a man called Jesus at his baptism and then left him again when he died on the cross.

The acknowledgement (NIV) or confession that Jesus was both fully God and fully man is crucial. It stands at the very heart of our faith. Do away with this confession, and you do away with everything. The Saviour must be both human and God. He must be completely human in order to take our place and bear our punishment for sin. If he is to represent us, he must be one of us. On the other hand, it is equally necessary that the Saviour be fully God. Were he merely human, his death would have limited value. It could only pay the penalty for one sinner, no more. If the Saviour is to be able to atone for the sins of all humanity, His death must have inestimable value. Only God could fulfil such a requirement. Therefore, the Saviour must be both God and human, or he cannot save.

This was not just a 1st century problem, throughout history there have been heresies with the church that have denied this fundamental tenet of the faith. About 150 years after John wrote his letters Arius was a popular preacher and elder in the Church of Alexandria who clashed with his bishop, Alexander, over the divinity of Christ and how that was to be interpreted. Alexander felt that the divinity of Christ should be preserved at all cost. Arius believed the opposite. Arianism is an absolute form of monotheism which could not allow the possibility of the Son or the Holy Spirit being God. It states that the Son had to have a beginning and was created or made by the Father out of nothing. Before this, the Son did not exist, and it is therefore incorrect for the Son to call God eternal Father. Alexander attacked this doctrine against Arius, and Arius went about the streets chanting “There was a time when he was not!” To settle the dispute a church council met in the city of Nicea in 325 A.D. and produced what we know as the Nicene Creed, which clearly states: *We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one being with the Father.*

The doctrinal basis of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland is laid out in the Westminster Confession of Faith and it mirrors the words of the Nicene Creed : *“The Son of God, the second person in the Trinity, being very and eternal God, of one substance and equal with the Father, di, when the fulness of time had come, take upon him man’s nature with all the essential properties and common infirmities thereof, yet without sin ... so that the two whole, perfect and distinct natures, the Godhead and the manhood, were inseparably joined together in one person... the only Mediator between God and man.*

In the 1720s and again in the early 1800s controversy arose within Irish Presbyterianism over the Westminster Confession of Faith – some held to the view that the Scriptures were the only standard of faith and practice and that they did not need to subscribe to any subordinate standard such as the Westminster Confession. The majority did not agree so in 1829 the non-subscribers, led by the Rev. Dr Henry Montgomery of Dunmurry (who was, incidentally, baptised and brought up in Killead Church) withdrew and formed what became the Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church of Ireland. Although most of the ministers and elders who withdrew were orthodox in their theology (and some within the denomination still are), they were infiltrated by English Unitarians who did not believe in the divinity of Christ.

Many of the contemporary groups and cults that might claim to be Christian in some way deny, diminish or distort the Person of Christ. The test is so simple: was Jesus truly God’s Messiah, the Word made flesh, fully man and fully God? If not, whatever the source of the denial, it cannot be called Christian. Also today, there is a movement that is usually called “Post-Modernism” in which there is a broadening of truth, so that truth has become relative. In essence it says - whatever is true for you, then that is the truth. No-one should impose their version of truth on anyone else. As a result this is no “absolute truth.”

If I asked you to guess how many sweets were in a jar everyone would probably have a different answer. One of you may even have the right answer. On the other hand, if I were to ask you what your favourite song is, again, everyone would have a different answer. But which one of those songs would be the right answer? Of

course, there is no “right” answer to that question because favourite songs are simply a matter of personal taste and preference. When you decide what to believe in terms of your faith, for many it is more like choosing their favourite song – the answer is relative – the right answer is what I think is right. That’s the world we live in. And the world of the people to whom John was writing in the first century, were also living in a world where there were people who were saying, "This is true," or "This is true and not that."

And so, there was that same kind of feeling that truth was something you discovered for yourself and it really was what you made it out to be. In response to that, the apostle John writes this letter, and specifically he writes in verse 1 of chapter 4, "Don't believe every spirit. But, in fact, test the spirits." He's very specific here in telling us there is a test you can apply to what you hear, what is purported to be true. There is a test you can apply that will enable you to discern what is absolutely truth and what is false, because you know there really is no middle ground. There is either the Spirit of God teaching and instructing, or there is the spirit of the anti-Christ. You'll notice in this passage, and this is typical of John – we have come to expect that now, there is no third option. There is no, "And then there's these guys, who are talking sometimes from God and sometimes" He doesn't say that. It's one or the other.

We can ask ourselves a question. In the post-modern world, many people would say, why have a test at all? Why even try to figure out what's true and what's not? So, that's our first question. Why have a test at all? As I read this verse 1, there was a statement that was both implied and also specifically taught when it says, "Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether or not they are from God." When he says that, he is saying that there needs to be a differentiation between these two spirits. And when John uses the word 'spirits', we're not thinking of ghostly figures floating around. Spirit is that force or that person that is impelling and compelling a particular person to say things, or a particular movement to go in a particular direction, or a certain church to be what it is, or a certain group of people. It's what is driving them. So, it's important for us to get away from the idea that this only applies to disembodied spirits. There are disembodied spirits and there are spirits in the world, but they manifest themselves in very physical and very specific ways.

So, John says, "Don't believe." In other words, "Don't just automatically get sucked in. But, instead I want you to test. I want you to see if what you are looking at is the genuine article." In other words, there is an absolute standard, and absolute truth. The Greek word that is translated 'test' here is a metallurgical term. It's one that would be used to check the purity of gold. There is an absolute standard for gold. You may have seen, if you watch an old western movie, somebody will take a 20 dollar gold piece and bite it. Because gold is rather a soft element and you will be able to dent it very slightly. If it was made of iron pyrite (fool's gold) it wouldn't do you teeth much good. These are the imperatives. Don't believe everything, but test.

We have an advantage over the believers to whom John wrote in that we have an absolute standard in the word of God contained in the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Just as there are absolute standards for measurement agreed internationally, so the Christian Church has an absolute standard in the Bible. If someone is teaching a belief, doctrine or practice that is not in accord with what is laid down in scripture then it is false and not of God. The Spirit will not teach anything that contradicts scripture.

The question is why. Why should I test? And here it is in the rest of that verse, "because many false prophets have gone out into the world." Here's the reality of the situation we cannot afford to overlook. As soon as Jesus Christ showed up in the world, as soon as Jesus Christ was incarnated, Satan automatically put up opposition – substitutes, counterfeits. That's his nature. Whatever God does, Satan does the opposite. He puts out an opposition to it. So, when God gives law, Satan sends up a spirit of antinomy – to be against the law. When God sends love, Satan will send hate. When God sent Jesus Christ and the Spirit of God comes into the world, then Satan will automatically stir up a spirit of anti-Christ. Wherever there is light, there will be darkness. Wherever there is truth, there will be error. Wherever there is life, there will be death. It is the way the world works. And, specifically, as we have embraced Christ and have become a part of the family of God, Satan's forces will be targeted on us to fool us and to take us away from a dependence on Christ alone and begin to tempt us with other things that may look like Christ and may look godly, but they're not. Satan knows he can't beat God, but who he can beat is the people of God. It's just like, instead of attacking a family's father, you attack the kids.

Just this week we've been watching a BBC drama from 2017 called "The Last Post." It is set in Aden in 1955. The NFL wanted to liberate the area from British rule and, in the story, they attached the Military Police by kidnapping and threatening to kill George, the 6 year old son of the Commanding Officer. That's exactly what our enemy is doing. And he does it by substitution, by counterfeits, by things that look like the Spirit of God, but are not.

Look at verse 2, "This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God." John is always very practical so he tell us how we know if a person is speaking by the Spirit of God. "Every spirit that recognizes that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God. And every spirit who does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God." That word 'acknowledge' means 'the recognition of the identity of a person and the commitment to that person.' It doesn't just say, "He can say, 'Jesus Christ came in the flesh,'" but that he acknowledges it, that is that he recognizes that it's true and he has made a personal commitment to it.

You'll notice it doesn't say, "who believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God." That's not the test. The test is that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh. In other words, the doctrine that is central here to the ability to discern from one spirit to another, is the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Now, we have a lot of phrases to describe the coming of Christ. We say He was born as a baby. But Jesus was much more than born as a baby because we were all born as a baby. He is the one who came in the flesh implies something important. It implies that He was before. We didn't come into this world - we were born into it. We didn't exist, except in the mind of God, before that. But Jesus did. And so, when Jesus came and when it says, "has come in the flesh." John talks about this in the Gospel of John 1, "The Word became flesh." That's the best way to describe the incarnation. "The Word [of God] became flesh and made His dwelling among us. We have seen His glory, the glory of the One and Only who came from the Father, full of grace and truth." We sang that in our opening hymn song. "He left His Father's throne above." The incarnation of Jesus Christ. Jesus didn't just become a man, or take on flesh, come down here, live, die, rise again, go back up to heaven and lay His humanity aside. He still is and always will be fully God and fully man. That's exciting. That means we have a real representative in heaven who knows what it's like to be a human being, and the existence that He experiences in heaven is a pattern for the experience that we will have.

Also, because He is fully human, He is able to sympathize with us and with our state and with our condition. The incarnation of Jesus Christ is the very centre of the gospel message. It shows us our helplessness. If we could do it ourselves, why send outside help? If you can fix it yourself, why do you have to call in a specialist? You fix it yourself. Well, there are times in our life when we understand that we can't fix it ourselves, especially when it come to our sin. The whole human race needed someone outside the human race to become part of the human race in order to do for us what we could never do for ourselves. It shows God's love and grace in sending a powerful Saviour.

When we believe in Jesus, and entrust ourselves fully into his hands we have been rescued from the deceptive trap of Satan and are now indwelt by the Holy Spirit of God. We have been freed from pursuing the foolish lies that make up the world's system. And John encourages us in verse 4 when he says "You have overcome, then because the One who is in you [that is God, the Holy Spirit of God] is greater than the one who is in the world (Satan)." The world will parade before us tricks and images and enthusiasm and lies that look like the truth. But, here's the good news. We have been free from following the world. We don't have to follow the world. We've been freed.

Do you believe that Jesus Christ is God who came in the flesh? If you believe that, you're the winner. No matter what else is going on in your life, you are a victory because of that one truth. We have found what the Bible calls the Pearl of Great Price and His name is the Lord Jesus Christ. As we look at Him and acknowledge Him, that the show that the world trots out begins to be revealed in all of its shabbiness and its emptiness. Don't go looking for something not of Jesus. And if you've not acknowledged Him yet for who He is, don't go any further. He said it Himself, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No-one comes to the Father but by Me." We believe and we know that Jesus Christ is God who took on flesh, died for us, lives for us, and someday we will be with Him forever.