

The Transforming Power of Hope - 1 John 3

Summary of Rachel's sermon on 2nd October

Introduction

I started by talking about “Neal Street Espresso” run by an off-shoot of The Message Trust which David and I have visited recently as this is a story of transformation and hope. To find out more about them go to <https://nealstreetespresso.com/about-us/>

I think that 1 John 3 is also about the transforming power of Hope – even if the word doesn't actually appear in the NLT version!

I then quoted from a book called “Getting Better” by poet, author and former Children's Laureate, Michael Rosen. Whilst there are a number of helpful things in the book, I was actually quite struck by his lack of any real hope. For example, he writes “*The way I see it, there really isn't much reason why we're on earth. When we're focussed entirely on daily troubles and chores, we don't notice it's all ultimately pointless*”

I then contrasted that with my own experience having been part of a church for my entire life and having never felt like that. I firmly believe that there is a point to life and a reason why we are here. My faith in, and love for, Jesus means that I have always had ‘hope’ even if it has felt somewhat dimmed by challenging times at various times during my life.

My summary of the passage would be that through the hope that we have because of Jesus – we have a new identity, and new ways of living and loving.

1 John 3:1-3: See how very much our Father loves us, for he calls us his children, and that is what we are! But the people who belong to this world don't recognize that we are God's children because they don't know him. Dear friends, we are already God's children, but he has not yet shown us what we will be like when Christ appears. But we do know that we will be like him, for we will see him as he really is. And all who have this eager expectation will keep themselves pure, just as he is pure.

A new identity

I introduced this section by talking about people being reunited with missing family members on TV programmes such as “Long Lost Family”.

In all cases, they can't wait to see what this person looks like – first they are shown a photo and then a few days later they meet them in person. There are often comments about how alike people look or what features they share – it's just such an amazing moment when the person comes face to face with the relative, they have been searching for, often for many years. This often leads to a real change in the people involved – suddenly, for example, they become a sister, or son, or mother in a way they haven't been before. They become part of a new family – discovering blood relatives for the first time. They have a new identity.

I think we get a sense of something like this at the start of this chapter – yes, we became God's children when we put our faith in Jesus, but we have never actually seen him. We may feel close to him, have experienced him living within us, heard his voice - but we haven't yet seen him “as he really is”.

“Once in Royal David’s City” includes the line “And our eyes at last shall see him through his own redeeming love”

As Tom Wright puts it in his commentary on this passage *“There ought to be a catch in our voice when we say or sing that. If we have any love for Jesus right now, our deepest longing ought to be that we would come face to face with him at last, to see his smile, to catch his facial expression, to begin to know him in a whole new way. And that of course is what’s promised here in verse 2”*

However, whilst we know that we are already God’s dearly loved children – we also know that one day “when Christ appears” we will also be very different.

So – we had a new identity when we became Christians, and this affects the people we are now, gives us a purpose in life and a reason to be here.

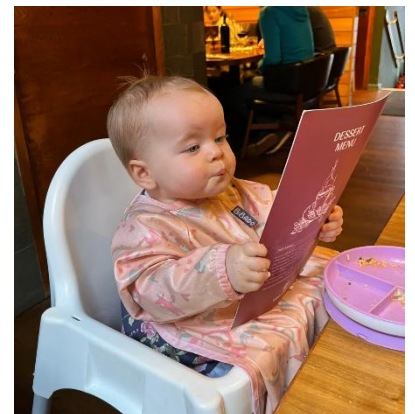
But – we also know that there is more to come. This is the real hope that we have – that, once Christ returns, we will see him for who he is and become completely like him.

I then explained that whilst there is a lot we don’t know about what we will be like, what God’s new world will be like, after Jesus comes back and God’s kingdom is finally established on earth - what we do know though is that it will be so much better than what we experience now.

And ,as John says, “we will be like him”.

We have a glimpse in the gospels of what the risen Jesus was like – in some ways the same as he had been before his death, yet also strangely different so that people sometimes didn’t recognise him – but when we finally find ourselves face to face with the real living risen Jesus the reality will far outshine any images we have formed, any ideas we may have.

We will just be able to gaze on the face through which God has loved us and perhaps his look will transform our faces too and we will begin to copy his expression – just like young children copy the expressions their parents make. [\(Illustrated by Emily at 10 months copying her parents and grandparents by carefully studying the dessert menu at the Old Post Office!\)](#)



I then explained that it is so important to remember that there is this glorious future to look forward to – alongside a real appreciation that there is so much that is also glorious about the present.

It might not always feel like that – but all around us we can see evidence of God’s beautiful creation, we can see glimpses (of varying sizes) of God’s redeeming and transforming love in the lives of people around us and we have the knowledge of “how much the Father loves us and calls us his children.”

When we are tempted to despair at what we see and hear and read about – let us never forget those aspects of God’s love that are also present in his world.

But then, at the end of this section, John says that *all who have this eager expectation (or “hope”) will keep themselves pure, just as he is pure.*

We are going to meet Jesus and so we want to be like him – just like if you were going to meet someone important to you in a foreign country you might want to make some effort to learn a bit of their language or understand some of their customs before you met them.

John then goes on to expand on this in the next section which feels extremely challenging.

A new way of living

1 John 3: 4-10: Everyone who sins is breaking God's law, for all sin is contrary to the law of God. And you know that Jesus came to take away our sins, and there is no sin in him. Anyone who continues to live in him will not sin. But anyone who keeps on sinning does not know him or understand who he is.

Dear children, don't let anyone deceive you about this: When people do what is right, it shows that they are righteous, even as Christ is righteous. But when people keep on sinning, it shows that they belong to the devil, who has been sinning since the beginning. But the Son of God came to destroy the works of the devil. Those who have been born into God's family do not make a practice of sinning, because God's life is in them. So, they can't keep on sinning, because they are children of God. So now we can tell who are children of God and who are children of the devil. Anyone who does not live righteously and does not love other believers does not belong to God.

John is very clear here that following Jesus, living with him, belonging to him, abiding in him means that we will have a very different kind of life that we would have if we weren't. Our lifestyle and characters should be very different to what they were – we should have a new way of living.

I explained that for some people this happens very dramatically and others more slowly – and that partly depends on what your life was like before you encountered Jesus and allowed him to change you. But whatever our starting point, all of us needed to change and we are all still a work in progress!

John isn't saying that we will never sin, never mess things up – after all, earlier in his letter he spoke about the need to confess sin and a recognition that we have an advocate who will plead our case when we do sin.

What he is talking about is an attitude of continually sinning - repeatedly and deliberately doing things which we know are wrong and will damage others and/or ourselves. We should be aiming to avoid sinning, even though we know we will fail at that; however, those failures should be part of a life where sin is no longer the dominant force.

John has one other challenge in this section “Don't let anyone deceive you about this”. There were people then – as there still are – who say that “It's fine to carry on sinning, it's not that big a deal, God will keep forgiving you”

Carrying on deliberately sinning is absolutely not the right thing to do – for two main reasons.

Firstly - John is saying here that if we carry on just as we always did, as if no change in our attitudes or our lifestyle was needed then we are no different to anyone else – there is nothing to show whose side we are on – God's or the devil's.

At the start of this chapter John has reminded us that God has made us his children in a whole new way and being fathered by God means that our new selves, our new real selves, cannot and will not sin habitually, as a way of life.

Now I know that there may well be some things within us which are deeply ingrained, old ways of living which keep dragging us down - and we will need people to support us and pray with us as we face those battles.

I reminded everyone that this is why small groups are so important - whatever you call them. We all face battles and temptations and, we need people we can be open and honest with and who we know will be there for us whatever happens. We all need the help, support and encouragement of others as we live this new way of living as a child of God.

But there is another reason for not continuing to sin – and whilst this may not be obvious from this passage, it is clear from other places in scripture – and from our own experiences.

Sin damages people – and I can guarantee that everyone here will have been damaged at some point – by your own sin or the sin of others. As that is the case, why would we want to cause more damage to ourselves or others by continuing to sin?

The main thing to bear in mind as we consider what John is saying in these verses is what do we really, deep-down, want our lives to look like? Are we wanting to live lives that show we are children of God – or lives which are damaging ourselves and others and give the impression we are on the side of evil?

And then, at the end of this section, John implies that the greatest sin is the failure to love others. And so, as well as a new way of living – we need a new way of loving – and that is also quite challenging!

A new way of loving

1 John 3 11, 16-18: This is the message you have heard from the beginning: We should love one another.

We know what real love is because Jesus gave up his life for us. So we also ought to give up our lives for our brothers and sisters. If someone has enough money to live well and sees a brother or sister in need but shows no compassion—how can God's love be in that person?

Dear children, let's not merely say that we love each other; let us show the truth by our actions.

I introduced this section by talking about an interview I had read with American scientist Dr Francis Collins who is a Christian and also regarded as one of the greatest scientists of his generation. He was at the forefront of the fight against Covid-19, and his team developed the Moderna vaccine. Although this was seen by him, and many others, as an answer to prayer he sadly faced much opposition for his work, some of which was quite vitriolic – mainly from evangelical Christians.

(You can read this interview here: <https://www.premierchristianity.com/interviews/francis-collins-the-christian-scientist-who-discovered-a-covid-vaccineand-then-became-a-figure-of-hate/20316.article>)

In response to a question about the divisive times we live in, Francis said this

“We are allowing our sense of truth to be overtaken by political views, and it breaks my heart – particularly in people of faith, who should be in the best position to resist mean-spirited politics. How is it that so many Christians now seem to be people of anger, resentment and acrimony? We should be people of love, not just for our neighbours, but for our enemies as well. That’s what we are called to do.”

.... and this is precisely what John is encouraging is to do in his letter – love one another.

John is particularly exhorting his readers to love their fellow believers and, of course Simon spoke about this last week as well as it is a theme running through John’s letter.

We should love one another even if we don’t agree with them – whether that’s about their politics, their worship preferences or their views on what the Bible says on any number of a whole host of controversial topics!

We should love one another even if they are very different from us.

We should love one another even if they annoy, irritate or upset us.

We should love one another even if they don’t seem to love us.

Why? Because this was a command that Jesus gave us and because, as John says, loving one another is a way of showing we belong to Jesus.

This is a new way of loving – the Jesus way – the ‘Agape’ way. The Greek word for love in this passage is ‘Agape’ – meaning unconditional, sacrificial love. It’s a love that gives without expecting anything in return, that persists regardless of circumstances and involves sacrifice for the good of others.

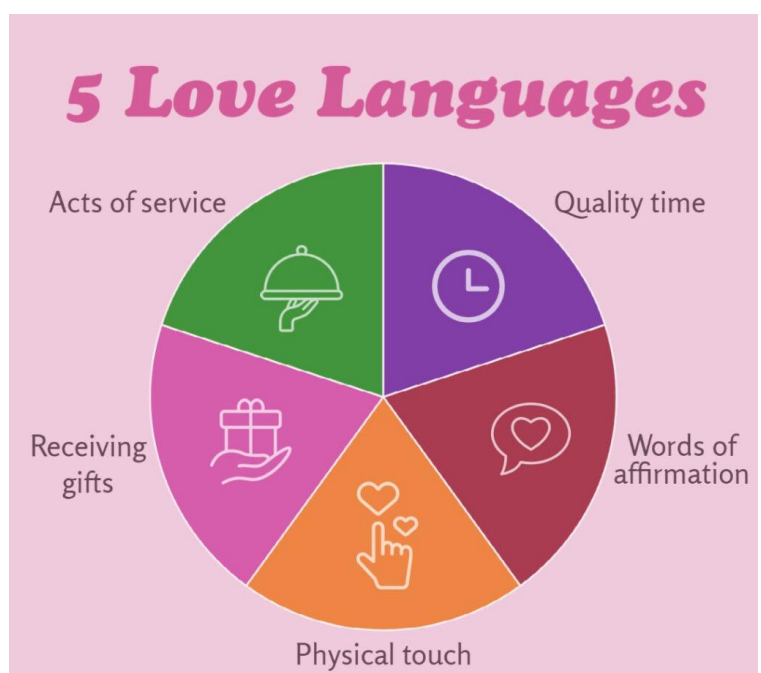
Agape is the love that God has for each one of us and so we have the supreme example to follow – and, unlike other types of love, it is a conscious choice – not one that is prompted by fleeting emotions.

I then asked the question “How should we love in practice?” before expounding one of my recurring themes when I preach – ,we are all different! And one of the things which makes us different is the way that we express and receive love.

I spoke about the five “love languages” – a concept which I believe originated in a 1992 book by an American Baptist Minister called Gary Chapman.

I gave examples of how these could be expressed within a church context – explaining that because we are all different, we are all likely to be more drawn to one or two ways of expressing love – which is great because, between us we’ve probably got all of these ways well and truly covered!

I then said that difficulties can come when you don’t realise that what someone is



doing is their way of showing love – giving a couple of examples from my own experience

However, the important thing as John says in verse 18 is “let us not merely say that we love each other, let’s show the truth (of our love) by our actions”. So let us all do that in whatever way works for us and also receive love in the spirit with which it is given.

We also need to be sensitive to those people who, for whatever reason, struggle to show love or receive it and learn how to help and support them in ways which will be helpful to them.

I then linked this with “encouragement” - Simon’s key word at the moment- saying that whilst I totally agree with him that encouraging people is one way of showing that we love them – we also need to realise that what one person sees as encouraging, someone else doesn’t necessarily see the same way.

I then gave some examples of what that might look like before concluding that - of course, we absolutely should do all we can to be loving and encouraging to one another – but we also need to recognise there are different ways of doing that. We then may need to respond graciously when we do sense someone wants to show us some encouragement even if it’s not actually what we need at that time – and maybe, if appropriate, explain graciously what would actually encourage us.

I then explained the difference between “affirming encouragers” and “challenging encouragers” and that we each respond differently to those types.

I illustrated this by talking about two different midwives who were with me when I gave birth to Matthew nearly 40 years ago.

The midwife for the first part of this was what I would call a challenging encourager – she kept telling me I needed to try harder, to make more effort because there was still quite a long way to go and I was perfectly capable of giving more! Now some people (I believe) respond well to that sort of encouragement – but not me. I remember just thinking that I don’t have any more to give, I really can’t keep going, I just want to give up!

But then a new midwife appeared, and she had a very different approach – you’re doing so well, she said, you’re nearly there, just keep going and soon your baby will be here. What a relief – someone who thought I was doing well rather than telling me off for not trying hard enough! That was what I call encouragement – and it worked!

So some people are encouraged or spurred on by people telling them what they are doing isn’t quite good enough and so they need to try harder – but I really think most of us respond better to more positive affirming encouragement - “thanks for what you said to me - that was so helpful” or “you are amazing” or “you are so good at”

I then said that I was a bit more of an optimist than Simon and so I actually think we are quite an encouraging church. I then asked people to indicate if they had been encouraged in any way by someone else in the church within the last couple of weeks. *Well over half the people present did so. Given that we had a number of visitors there plus some people that are not there very often (and there will always be people who won't respond to such a request) - I would say that, generally, people in our church are encouraging one another!*

I then referred to the story Simon had told about Barnabas and John Mark the previous Sunday (Acts 15:36-41) – one of my favourite Barnabas stories where he is prepared to give someone a second chance. We don’t know why but we might well assume that, as they were related,

Barnabas knew John Mark well, loved him and wanted to give him the encouragement of another opportunity.

I then said that I think that the people who often need the most encouragement and love are those who have messed up and need a second chance; or those who have tried something which didn't quite work and need support to try something different; or those who are struggling with all that life has thrown at them and just need someone to sit with them.

Those people don't need lots of cheering and shouts as an encouragement – in fact that would make them feel worse; they need people to quietly encourage them often just by being there, maybe providing practical help or a gentle word of wisdom.

So let us all keep an eye out for people who really need that quiet gentle word of encouragement – as well as those people who we want to encourage more loudly! Let's be people who are sensitive to the needs of others and are able to discern the best way to love and encourage them.

This is a new way of loving – the Jesus way – and we do that because the hope Jesus has given us is transforming us into the people he wants us to be.

Why is all of this important?

1 John 3: 19-24: Our actions will show that we belong to the truth, so we will be confident when we stand before God. Even if we feel guilty, God is greater than our feelings, and he knows everything.

Dear friends, if we don't feel guilty, we can come to God with bold confidence. And we will receive from him whatever we ask because we obey him and do the things that please him.

And this is his commandment: We must believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and love one another, just as he commanded us. Those who obey God's commandments remain in fellowship with him, and he with them. And we know he lives in us because the Spirit he gave us lives in us.

The way we live and the way we love one another is one (very important) way in which others will see Jesus

God calls us to live in him, so that we can live for him in the places he has called us to be, doing the things he has called us to do – to be salt and light, to demonstrate the kingdom to a world who needs to hear about him.

In this final section, John reminds us that we can approach God with confidence and ask him for all we need – including his help to love and love his way.

If we are followers of Jesus, then we are God's children and have his spirit living within us. We have been transformed by Him and the hope he has given us – so we can see that there is a point to live and a reason for living – to demonstrate God's kingdom to a world without hope.

Our lives have been transformed, and others need to hear about that and see it lived out in us. May He continually help and guide us as we seek to do just that.

Amen