

**Pentecost 6**  
**1/7/2018**

**Mark the Evangelist**

**1 John 3:1-3**  
**Psalm 30**  
**Mark 5:21-43**

### **Children of God?**

---

‘See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called the children of God.’

The *attraction* of the phrase, ‘children of God,’ is that it carries the warmth of an intimacy of the human creature with God, such as we see in the best of parent-child relationships.

The *problem* with the phrase is that, today, we are easily tempted to interpret it *apart from the gospel*, as a ‘religious’ element of a general theory about what a human being is: that we are *all* ‘children of God.’ *Regardless* of our confession, this is part of what it means to be human.

John’s affirmation is not quite as open as this. He is not saying here that God is a kind of sky-father and all people, by virtue of simply being born under that sky, are God’s children. John speaks here only of the community of faith to whom he writes: *you* are children of God.

This can sound arrogant to us, for it seems to imply an *exclusivity*: that ‘we’ are more than ‘they’. And there is a differentiation being drawn, although ‘exclusivity’ is not the most helpful way of expressing it. ‘Exclusive’, for us, hangs off ‘inclusive’ as harsh black-and-white, yes-or-no, categories requiring that we have to be one or the other. But this is not John’s game. If he is not ‘inclusivist’, this doesn’t mean that he is ‘exclusivist.’ John’s point is that it is not a *natural* thing that we are called the children of God; we are not ‘naturally’ part of God’s family in John’s sense. To be a child of God not a status or a dignity of the human being. Rather, this is something which *happens* to us, a *condition* in which we find ourselves (or not). John differs here from our well-intended but ultimately confusing insistence that, because God loves all, all are necessarily God’s children and welcome as such.

The notion that all are God’s children can seem justified even by John himself, who insists that God gives Jesus for love of *the world*, and not for the holy huddle only. Yet, when John uses the term ‘children of God’ here, he speaks of being ‘*called*’ children before affirming that we are. He indicates a particular *claiming* of us by God which *changes* what we are in our reception of his gift in Jesus. The condition ‘child of God’ is, then, *conferred* and not natural. ‘Children of God’ and the ‘world’ – even the world God loves – are not synonymous. Not everyone is a child of God in *this* sense because not everyone recognises and receives the gift.

This offends against our sensibilities, because we are accustomed to thinking first about ourselves, and then about God. Liberal humanism has taught us – appropriately – that if it looks like a human being, walks like a human being and talks like a human being, it probably is a human being. From here we conclude that if *I* am a loved human child of God – because the Bible tells me I am – then you must be, whether you know it (or like it) or not, for we are both human.

Of course, at *one* level again, we must say that this is Christianly true. At another level, however, it cannot be. This is because Jesus the Son (the child of God), is *crucified* by those we might call his brothers (and sisters, to be inclusive, but basically it was his brothers!). John continues on after today's passage to recall the murder of Abel by Cain, of the righteous by the unrighteous, the murder of the child by the not-child. Adam's family is highly dysfunctional, from Cain to Christ, and we are part of that family.

The death of Jesus is a death at the hand of the 'not-children' – at our hand. It denies that Jesus is the divine Son (which, we have seen, is another recurring theme in 1 John); the death of Jesus denies, then, the possibility of our own life as children of God. When John says of his church that they are called children of God, he means that they know about, and have repented of, crucifixion-like, not-child sin and its lesser manifestations in themselves.

If we want to insist that the expression 'child of God' means anything more general, then we have to reckon with what John says a child of God would look like: 'no one who abides in him sins' (3.6); 'those who have been born of God [who are God's children] do not sin' (3.9). If 'children of God' is all-embracing of humankind, then it comes with the impossible qualification of sinlessness. John is not being naïve here, happily overlooking sin even in Christians; quite the opposite. It is *because* of sin that he is excited to be called a child of God – *how else* could this be possible but by a work of grace?

For this is the gospel: *Behold the love of God*, that we *are* 'called' God's children. It is because God *calls* us this that we *are*, despite the un-child Cain-and-Abel aspect of our lives together and with God.

To be a child of God is to see what it would take for broken humankind to be claimed by God as God's own children – to be said to be God-like. John speaks of this in terms of sinlessness. To be a child of God, then, is to see that we cannot achieve this ourselves. To be a child of God, then, is to receive this relationship as a *gift*. The child of God – this side of Eden's Apple – *is* a child of God by accepting the reality of sin in herself and giving thanks that this is overcome.

There is a *humility* called for here but not a belittling. There is a confession required but it is not the mere confession of *sin*. We confess also our faith that this is the God who loved us before it occurred to us to ask for love.

*Our* children don't need to be humble in order to be our children; they are this by nature. But to be *called* children when we are not yet children requires a change in us and in the one who now claims us as his own. This change we model as move from Word to confession of sin to confession of faith to thanksgiving in the Eucharist. In this process we are 'adopted' as children, and God becomes 'Father' to us.

To be the children of God – of *this* God, at least – is to *be adopted* into God's life of love. It is, *then*, to begin to become more God-like, to take on a family resemblance.

See God's love for you – you are called God's very children. This is what God desires. And for God to desire it is for God to give it.

Rest in this, then, by doing what God does:

seek for yourselves more brothers and sisters to know themselves as part of God's family.

God's love is not exhausted in but a few children; we are only the beginning.

*By way of response, a prayer of confession:*

*We offer thanks and praise, O God,  
because you have created and sustained us  
and all things.*

*And yet we confess that, in thought, word and deed we have sinned against you and  
against each other.*

*Forgive us when the un-child in us presumes  
too quickly a happy standing before you  
which precedes your call and grace.*

*Kyrie, Kyrie, Kyrie eleison;*

*Forgive us when the un-child in us  
fails to see that you would embrace all  
as your children,  
even those we would not have as  
sisters and brothers.*

*Christe, Christe, Christe eleison;*

*Forgive us, then, when the un-child in us  
– the angry word, the lack of generosity,  
the envy, the fear –  
separates others from knowledge  
of your desire to claim them as  
beloved children.*

*Kyrie, Kyrie, Kyrie eleison.*

*Almighty God,  
to whom all hearts are open,  
all desires known,  
and from whom no secrets are hidden:  
cleansing the thoughts of our hearts  
by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit,  
and create in us clean hearts  
which beat with yours, heavenly Father,  
that we may perfectly love you,  
and worthily magnify your holy name;  
through Christ our Lord.*

*Amen.*

\*\*\*