

Easter 3
19/4/2015

Mark the Evangelist

1 John 3:1-10
Psalm 4
Luke 24:36b-48

“No one who abides in [Christ] sins”

“No one who abides in [Christ] sins”. Let that rest for a moment on the surface of your mind: “No one who abides in [Christ] sins”. The Bible says it. Can we believe it?

Most of us are likely to feel a little uncomfortable about this, and all the more so when we discover that it is no mere slip on John’s part. Elsewhere in the epistle we hear similar things: “Those who have been born of God do not sin, because the seed of God abides in them; they cannot sin, because they have been born of God” (3.9). “We know that those who are born of God do not sin, but the one who was born of God protects them, and the evil one does not touch them” (5.18).

What makes us feel uncomfortable about this, in the first place, is that we know Christians – we know ourselves – and so we “know” John can’t be right. There are too many undeniable failures to ignore, and many Christians are more than happy to acknowledge the fact: “not perfect, just forgiven” (declares one of our less helpful bumper stickers).

But, if we weigh up the possibilities fully, there enters another reason why we might be uncomfortable about John’s confident declaration about sinless believers: if John is right, then we who purport to believe must wonder whether indeed we are those who “abide” in Christ. In fact, if we allow these words their *scriptural* status, the simplest way to make sense of what John says right here is to conclude that those we call “Christians” – ourselves or others – are not who John means when he speaks of those abiding in Christ.

John, then, seems to present to us two possibilities (or at least he does for those of us who imagine ourselves to be believers): either John is wrong about believers and sin, which perhaps presents us with problems about the authority of scripture on this matter, or he is right, which forces us out of the picture.

Yet this is too simplistic. If we are going to claim our status as Christians who somehow belong to God, we will object that surely John writes to someone, to some real, historical group of believers, and surely they are not that different from us. And in fact, just this is acknowledged in other parts of the epistle: ^{1.8}“If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us... ¹⁰If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.” ^{2.1}“My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous...” ^{5.16}“If you see your brother or sister committing what is not a mortal sin, you will ask, and God will give life to such a one...”

On the one hand, then, there are those who are “called the children of God” (3.1), in fact who are the children of God now (3.2), who “abide in him” and so cannot sin. On the other hand, these same ones have sinned, may sin, and indeed do continue to sin. As such, John calls them lawless and so “children of the devil”.

What are we to make of all this?

We might dismiss it all as religious doublespeak which says yes and no at the same time, pretending that this actually stands for something. Or we might call for “balance” – trying to say a little bit of a yes and a little bit of a no, although in fact we’ll end up saying more of one than the other. Both approaches make some sense of what is seemingly gobbledygook.

But if, instead of trying to transform what *John* says into something which makes sense for us, we allow him to transform how *we* think, we will discover something much more interesting than what we already know, something which breaks through the barriers of knowledge which limit us.

While Easter is now quite forgotten for another year by the wider world, for the church it is still here, and is ever with us. As we noted on Easter Sunday: either the proclamation of the resurrection is a game-changer or it is nothing. The word “resurrection” implies that the dead might no longer stay where we put them. But this is not for the New Testament a mere fact. Death is fundamental to human experience and our measure of ourselves. If death is upset, then everything is upset: a new world order is imaged, and faith is a re-imagining – a re-*image*-ining – of ourselves after that sign.

What John presents to us in our reading from the epistle this morning springs from just such a re-imagining. The resurrection of Jesus may seem to be nowhere in sight in this text, yet all of the New Testament is a description of life in the world from the point of view that Jesus has been raised. What really confronts us here is not the surface issue of doublespeak about sinless people who sin, or children of God who are also children of the devil. Though it is nowhere explicit in our reading, the “problem” John causes for us rests in his confidence that Jesus has been raised from the dead. This is a problem because of all those who might have been raised from the dead, Jesus was the *least* expected. We have noted before how this contradicts our inherited religious sensitivities after centuries of “Christian” moralistic conditioning. In the crucifixion Jesus is judged – named – as blasphemer. He is then, so far as any can see, a moral failure. His naming and bearing of himself was apparently wrong, and his persecutors were simply fulfilling their religious duty in demanding his execution.

The resurrection is the *re-naming* of Jesus, now by God. The resurrection declares, “This is my Son, with whom I am well pleased”. (These words, borrowed from the baptism and Transfiguration narratives, are – in those places – actually resurrection statements. This is because, if there is not resurrection, there is no ongoing interest in Jesus [who is “proven” blasphemer], and so no “recording” of the baptism of Jesus or the Transfiguration). A shift takes place from our naming of Jesus to God’s naming of him.

What has this to do with anything? We began by noting that we name ourselves as Christians, and yet John seems to say that such as we do not sin, and yet we do often seem to sin, so that John makes little sense. But who names us, and how, is at the heart of the confusion. In our naming of ourselves, we end up with a great complex of contradictory hyphenated names: Mr Christian-Sinner (whether the sexually abusive priest or the congregational gossip); Dr Religious-Atheist, who professes no belief in “god” but whose life is thoroughly determined by influences she scarcely recognizes, let alone acknowledges; Mrs Selfish-Giver, who gives time and money more for the recognition this gets her than for those in need; Miss Capitalist-Greenie, whose radical eco-Tweets are made from a phone built in a far-away place under slave-like conditions.

Our attempts to name ourselves create a thoroughgoing moral confusion from which we cannot extract ourselves, such that hypocrisy – that sharpest of critiques which can be made of anyone who commits to any statement of themselves – is unavoidable.

At this level of our experience, the only recourse is self-justification. With this, if we are honest, comes anxiety. Am I more “Christian” than sinner, more socialist than capitalist, more generous than selfish, more what I publically profess than what I permit myself in private? This is not necessarily a religious anxiety about whether I’m “saved” or will inherit eternal life. It is a thoroughly and broadly human phenomenon: am I safe from what might threaten me, whether the dangerous thing which might over-run me or, more importantly here, that I might be discovered not to be who I’ve presented myself to be. These are the fruits of our naming of ourselves. We are more – and less – than we can say, and that difference between what we say and what we are creates anxiety.

But the good news which is the gospel is that God speaks to us our true name: God fundamentally “defines” us. “Children of God” is a name given us by God, and not by ourselves: “See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called the children of God” (3.1). This is a surprise for John. We are so familiar with it that it’s almost meaningless, just another self-designation. The surprise is in that what we have understood ourselves to be is enveloped within something which is not only more comprehensive but also healing and liberating: God renames us – and remakes us – according to the name he has for Jesus – Son, “child”.

While we might presume to *call ourselves* children of God, only God can *make* us his children, because to be a child of God is to be as Jesus is to the Father (cf. 5.1,18), and this is unknown to us until God makes it known by doing it (3.1b) – showing us what this relationship looks like, what it can overcome. To say that God “loves” us is to say that the Father does just this – makes his life our life by taking the name he has for the Son and letting it be the name he has for us: “children”.

This is both our present reality, and our future reality. In the experience of Jesus we learn that we are loved by the Father as children, and yet in the Spirit of Jesus we are still being loved into that reality. Thus we hear the strange but necessary call: become what you are. John says (paraphrase): We are God’s children now, and yet we do not know what that actually looks like. All we know is that we will be like Christ (3.2) This being “like Christ” is not a *moral* state – being without sin – but is the state of being a child of God, sharing in the life the Son enjoys with the Father. In *this* we are purified (3.3), because it does not depend upon what we do and our trying to make a claim on God through that. It depends on God’s claim on us.

In this way it is not so much that we do not occasionally – or very regularly – sin. It is rather that this sin does not define us, is not our completion. Sin, which looms so large in much Christian-speak, is now set to one side as a secondary thing: merely the sign that we are not yet become what we are. (This archaic English construction [still present in German, French] – “are not become” – seems somehow to capture something more than the more familiar “have not become”, marking the becoming as ever a present [“are”] process). Not *our* actions, *our* demonstrating of ourselves, *our* naming of ourselves, but God’s, is what matters: You are my son, my daughter, in whom I will be well pleased.

This is the gospel, and our calling is to begin to look like it is true.

By the power of God's Holy Spirit, may this ever being re-shaped into the humanity of the Father's Son become ever more manifest in us, to God's greater glory and our greater life and freedom. Amen.
