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I Was There

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This week's bible reading is from the first letter of John, chapter 1.

Introduction

Saint John, the Apostle and Evangelist, sometimes referred to as "the beloved disciple" is the only Apostle mentioned as being present at the crucifixion, and Jesus speaks to John from the Cross and tells him to take care of Mary, Jesus' earthly mother (cf. John 19:26).

Some years after the Resurrection, John became the head (or bishop, if you like) of the Christian community in Ephesus, building on the work done by St. Paul. But over time, false teachers came in spreading the Greek philosophy of Gnosticism amongst the believers there, and they began to lead some of them away from the truth of Christ. John's letters, three in all, were very likely written in response to this crisis, in order to reaffirm the basic teachings of Jesus and to reassure the people of the fundamental truths of the Christian faith. John does this with authority, but also with very obvious love and deep pastoral care.

Authority

John's authority derives not just from his being an Apostle, but more importantly, from his actually being with Jesus during the three years of His ministry, and John emphasises that fact that he saw Jesus and heard Him. The point being that, when John preached the Gospel, He wasn't simply sharing a good idea or suggesting some sound and sensible ways to live; rather he's making it clear he is speaking from first-hand, personal experience of Jesus himself. John speaks with authority because he knows what he is saying is true, and his teachings are not based fine arguments of clever men, but they are grounded in his actual experience of Jesus Himself. In essence, John is able to say to his readers, "I was there".

For example, John isn't saying he believes God became man, or that it makes sense that God became man; or that this is what a wise person should believe. He can say that God became man because he saw the truth of it with his own eyes; he heard Jesus with his own ears; indeed John had reached out and touched the very hand of God Himself.

The Word Became Flesh

But why though, does John go to such great lengths to stress this point; this fact that his teaching and preaching is based on a personal, first-hand experience of Jesus? Well, what he's doing is simple. He's making it as clear as he possibly can that the incarnation actually happened; that God really did take on flesh and become a man.

This though, then begs another question - why? Why does John choose to open his letter in this way, with such a very physical, tactile description of his own experience of Jesus? Answer - because the incarnation is the central doctrine of our faith. The whole of the Christian faith rests on this one single doctrine – that God came down to earth, took on human flesh and became a man and lived amongst us, as one of us. This theme of course, is very similar to chapter one of his Gospel, where John tells us that:

“The Word 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.”

But getting back to our reading from John's first letter. Right from the outset then, from verse one, John is putting down a marker that this doctrine of the incarnation is not negotiable. Either you believe this and you are one of us, or you don't believe it and therefore place yourself outside the fellowship of the church - effectively you become a non-believer. Or to put it another way, if you want to be a Christian then you must hold to this doctrine of God becoming a man; it's not optional. Without this belief at the heart of your faith, John is saying, then you have no faith – at least not a Christian faith anyway, and therefore you have no fellowship with the rest of the Church, because you're not part of it.

This of course, is what John is at pains to avoid. His purpose in writing the letter is to promote truth and fellowship: truth about Christ, and through that, draw people into the fellowship of the Church. John doesn't want to lose any of his flock to the false teachers, so he is emphasising the real, solid foundation that the Gospel is based on. John isn't giving them abstract theology here, but sharing with them a concrete experience that he had.

More Than Just Belief

However, in verse 6, John says this:

“If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth.”

In saying this, John moves from sharing his experience of the living Jesus, to urging us to live for Jesus. Belief alone is not enough - there has to be a response that is more than head

knowledge, more than just an acceptance that Jesus is God incarnate. In other words our faith in Christ must result in some change in our lives. Our belief in Jesus must affect who we are and how we live. Our faith must be transformational, if it is to be a saving faith. The idea being that we become more like Jesus Himself, as each day passes. John tells us that:

“God is light; in him there is no darkness at all”

This gives us some idea of the level of transformation that needs to take place. For which of us can say, “in me there is no darkness at all”? I can’t. And I don’t believe anyone else can either – not if they’re being truthful and honest with themselves. Darkness here represents sin, so we all have a long way to go in the journey of becoming truly Christ-like, even though we may have been followers of Jesus for many years, we are not without sin.

Forgiveness and Reassurance

John goes on to remind us that, even though we are guilty of sin, we can be forgiven through our faith in Jesus. His death, His blood, covers our sin and in Him we are purified – provided we continue to walk in His light.

This teaching, that we can receive complete forgiveness through faith in Jesus, is at the heart of the Gospel message that John preached, and which we still preach today of course – that hasn’t changed and never will.

And the purpose of this opening chapter in John’s first letter, is to remind us that the Gospel message is based on the reality of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection. A reality of which John was an eye witness, being present not just at the crucifixion, but also a witness to Jesus’ resurrection from the dead as well.

We still have this letter today and when we read it for yourself, do so knowing that the one who wrote it, John, is saying to you – ‘look, the Gospel which has been preached to you, is truth. I know, because I was there. So stand firm, remain faithful, and hold fast to the truth. If you do this, your reward will be salvation and eternal life. Just as Jesus promised.’ Amen.