**1 John 3.13**

There’s a story from the New Testament which always makes me very sad. It’s when the parents were bringing their little ones to Jesus so he could bless them. And the Bible says that ‘the disciples tried to stop them’. In their minds Jesus was too grand, too important, too special, too busy, too tired, to be bothered with small children. Why would the Son of God waste his time on soppy women and grubby children?

The reason I find this story so sad is that I suspect religious people continue to behave like the disciples, probably with all the best intentions.

In my study I have loads of books. Books about the Bible and church history and doctrine and pastoral care. It is quite extraordinary to me that people can write so much about the Christian faith which is, frankly, dull, wordy and over the heads of most normal people. It sometimes seems as though wrapping the faith up in ponderous words and ideas keeps it in the hands of the clever and important. Before the Reformation in the Western church the Bible was kept in Latin to stop ordinary people getting hold of it and reading it for themselves, interpreting and misinterpreting it for themselves. For the best of intentions, and maybe for some bad reasons, the faith was kept for religious people. The educated and powerful elite.

But if we read the epistle today we hear the absolute simplicity of what it means to follow Jesus. Nothing fancy, officious or complicated. Something a child can understand. Something a person with very little academic ability can get hold of. St John writes: And this is his commandment, That we should believe on the name of his Son Jesus Christ, and love one another. That’s all.

We don’t need ancient languages or qualifications in metaphysics. We need to believe in the power of Jesus and love one another. Now, of course, there’s a great deal in all of that. There’s an understanding of who Jesus of Nazareth was and is in respect to God. He isn’t just a great teacher or miracle worker. This is a man whose name means Saviour. This is one whose relationship with God brings a whole new dimension to our lives. This is a man who opens the way to a relationship with God. To first century Jews who believed God was transcendent and unreachable to ordinary people. To Greeks who believed in a whole gang of tempestuous and volatile gods and goddesses, this is a whole new thought.

To believe in the name of the Son of God is to accept that, in Jesus, God has done a whole new thing. And to accept that the gods and goddesses who ran the world from afar, were actually just stories. Here was a new truth and a new understanding of God. And it was good news. In Jesus there is salvation, forgiveness, healing, acceptance and friendship with God.

To believe on the name of Jesus is a more life changing activity than to believe that Jesus is the Son of God. I believe all sorts of things but they make no material difference to my life. I believe that surgeons can save lives by performing major heart surgery. But that’s a different thing altogether from letting a surgeon perform major heart surgery. That involves trust and risk and faith.

Many people believe that Jesus is a special person in relationship to God. But they don’t trust him with their life, with their career, their money, their relationships, their time, their eternity. They believe THAT. They don’t believe ON.

So the first thing we have to do is put our trust in the Lord Jesus as Son of God and Saviour.

And the second thing is to love one another. And this passage makes it very clear that love is the evidence of the faith we claim to have. Love for the poor and the dispossessed. Love for the unlovable and ungrateful. Love for our brothers and sisters at church. Love for the denominations we are bewildered by and the leaders we don’t agree with. Love.

The disciples tried to stop people coming to Jesus and over the years the church has tried to hold onto theology and learning to stop people mangling the things of God. It was well intentioned but profoundly misguided, in my view. But here’s the irony. As Christians we have put far more people off the faith, stopped people coming to Jesus by our bigotry, pettiness, unkindness and self-righteousness. I have never heard anyone say they stopped coming to church because they didn’t understand the Trinity. I’ve heard far too many say that the people were unwelcoming or unkind.

People approach Jesus often when they feel in need of help; fragile, nervous, uncertain. It is all too easy to put them off. They expect us to sneer and disapprove. I’ve often had people ask me if anyone would mind if they came to church. We have a serious image problem. And we can begin to make a difference with our own friends and relations. We can’t fix all of it. But we can play our part.

The Christian faith is not complicated. It isn’t just for the clever, the middle class, and the respectable. It’s for soppy mothers and grubby children; it’s for sinners who need forgiveness and fearful, anxious people who need to be welcomed in. The Christian faith is for all who want to know God and receive his love and saving kindness. Those seeking God will be from all faiths and none; all life styles and races. It will include people whose lives we don’t understand or really approve of. It will include people we don’t like and don’t want. But Jesus offers them a welcome and he offers them his love. What right do we have to say the master has no time for them?

Believe in Jesus and love one another. Let’s do that and make sure that, as religious people, we never prevent people from coming to receive the blessing of the Lord Jesus.

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