

The following Sermon was preached by Brian Brown on 27th December 2015

Have you ever given a witness statement?

This may seem a strange question to ask at Christmas time, but bear with me. I once spent two and a half days in the witness box at the Old Bailey. It's not something you forget quickly!

Yet being a witness is basically quite straightforward. You say what you've seen, what you've heard, what you've done, what you know. You don't have to be an expert, or clever, or learned. And the most valuable witness statements are from people who were there at the time, who saw and heard what happened - eyewitnesses who can state clearly what they saw and heard and know.

Our first reading today, from John's first letter, chapter 1, begins with a profound witness statement. It's a profound witness statement about Jesus Christ, whom John knew well. We're going to have a look at it - today's first lesson, the first letter of John chapter 1 verse 1.

Reading from verse 1, John says:

“That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched – this we proclaim concerning the Word of life.”

Then verse 2: **“The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us.”**

And verse 3: **“We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.”**

And verse 5: **“This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you”**
This is an authentic eye-witness statement, John is telling his readers. He's telling us what he's seen and heard and touched - he's proclaiming it to us, he's testifying to it, witnessing to it. He's not talking about some theory, or some belief, or some vague ancient myth, he's telling us about actual events that happened at a specific point in time, in history - events that were seen and heard by eye-witnesses, who wrote them down in eye-witness statements.

And John says this again in the gospel reading we heard this morning - at the end of chapter 21 of John's gospel verse 24 reads:

“This is the disciple who testifies to these things and who wrote them down. We know that his testimony is true.”

(By the way, testify and testimony and witness are all the same word in the original text - they're interchangeable).

It's really important, John is telling us, that you realise that my gospel and my epistle are witness statements. They're about what actually happened. I saw it - I was there!
The bible is full of witness statements - that is how God reveals himself to us so that we can know him and have fellowship with him, have a deeply rewarding relationship with him. In the Old Testament, God reveals himself particularly through the prophets: in the New Testament God reveals himself supremely through the person of Jesus Christ himself.

As the letter to the Hebrews begins, in verses that we read here over Christmas:

“In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe.”

God made himself known supremely through Jesus. Jesus in turn made himself known to his disciples. And his disciples, through their witness statements - their gospels and letters - in the bible, made him known to us.

This is why it's so important for Christians (and anyone seeking to know God) to read the bible. If we seek fellowship with God; if we seek a relationship with God that will last into eternity and fit us for heaven, we have to go to the bible. It's the only link with God we have, the only way there is to know him. That's how God's designed things.

So - back to our passage today - what is this witness statement of John telling us about God? What aspect of God's character is in view here?

At verse 5, “This is the message we have heard from him - that's Jesus - this is the message we have heard from Jesus and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all.”

This is marvellous! God is light, he is pure, absolutely truthful, absolutely good. He's not an ogre, or a tyrant. He's not vindictive or nasty, he doesn't change or blow with the wind. He is blindingly pure light - in him there is no darkness at all - not a shadow or a trace of evil, not an impure thought or word or deed.

THE VERY BAD NEWS

But this reveals a problem, doesn't it? A big problem. Christmas is very good news - but there's only very good news because there's very bad news.

And the bad news is that we're not like God - we're not light, we're darkness. We're not good at all. We are sinful. We rebel against God. We don't want God running our show. We want to go our own way, we want to do it our way, thank you very much. We constantly disobey the greatest commandment which Hugh read earlier in this service - to love God with all our heart. We are sinful and we cannot hide this from the searching light of God.

This is not a popular message today is it? People don't like being told they're sinful. We take offence. We want to wriggle out of it. John sets out three great lies - three ways in which we might try to wriggle out of it.

Firstly, he says we can try to claim that sin doesn't affect our relationship with God.

Verse 6, “If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth.”

It can be tempting to take sin lightly. We might like to think we can sin and still be OK with God - that he won't **really** mind. ‘I've done some naughty stuff, but my heart's in the right place - God won't condemn me for that, surely? He's in the forgiving business, I know he still loves me - sin doesn't really matter. I can still have fellowship with him.’ But this is a lie! If we think sin doesn't matter, we have no fellowship with God.

Christians too are in danger here - in danger of thinking ‘I'm not perfect but I'm a Christian and I needn't worry about my sin any more.’ Yes, I need! Christians need to confess their sin like everyone else - indeed, the nearer we get to God, the more we realise how sinful we really are!

Secondly, John says, we can claim we're not sinful. But this is just self-deception - verse 8, "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us."

We may think that any guilt feelings we have require counselling, not forgiveness. We may like to believe in the fundamental goodness of people - despite massive evidence to the contrary all around us and in the news every day! But if we think we're fundamentally good - if we think we're not sinners living in darkness, we deceive ourselves. We're not just liars, but we have no part in God at all because God is truth and the truth is not in us.

Thirdly, says John, and in a sense worst of all, we can claim that we don't actually sin. Verse 10, "If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word is not in us."

Maybe we don't like to call sin 'sin'. Adultery - well that's just having an affair - remember Ashley Madison, the company that encouraged people to have secret affairs which came badly unstuck earlier this year? We don't steal, we just borrow things, or take the perks. We don't deny less fortunate people food, water, shelter, and refuge from war and persecution - we just want to keep them out to preserve our culture and lifestyle. We don't defraud our neighbours, we just fiddle our tax returns - because 'everybody does it'. We don't act selfishly or hate people - we just stand up for our rights. We don't actually sin, do we? Yes we do! And worse, we call God a liar!

The very bad news is that we are sinners. As much as we might try and convince ourselves that we're not, the grim reality is that we are sinners. As much as our culture might tell us sin doesn't matter, it does. We can't hide our sinfulness - God is light - pure, searching light and he sees it all. And since God cannot dwell with sin or darkness, he cannot dwell with us. We can have no part in him or he in us. We might try and persuade ourselves that we don't need God, we can do without God - but in reality we desperately need his forgiveness, or we're doomed to future darkness - to what we call hell.

THE VERY GOOD NEWS

But there's good news! Very good news! Because if we accept our sinful nature and our sinful ways - if we will only accept the truth - God will forgive us. He will forgive us and get to work on us and purify us and make us fit to be with him, to live in fellowship with him. We will have peace with God.

We see this in that glorious verse 9, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."

It's deadly to deny our sins, because if we deny our sins, we're not going to confess them - and if we don't confess them, God can't forgive them.

"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness..."

This, then, is the really good news of Christmas. That child, lying in a manger, the Son of God, the exact likeness of God, born into our world at a specific point in history, was born with a purpose: to die. Jesus was a man with a mission, and his mission was to die. To die an innocent death, to take the penalty for our sin and save us.

Jesus did fulfil that purpose. He did die - he went through all the blood, muck, sweat, tears and agony this world could throw at him and on top of that suffered the wrath of God due to us. Then God raised him again to life to show that his sacrifice was accepted - that we can be forgiven through him. And of Jesus' birth, life, death and being raised again to life there are many eye-witnesses.

THE AMAZEMENT

This is not just the good news of Christmas, it is the amazement of Christmas - amazement that this God who is light, who is so good, so powerful, so pure, loves us so much that he should stoop so low to save us.

Jesus never promised peace in this world - indeed he promised wars and rumours of wars and famines and earthquakes. But he does offer peace and fellowship with God for ever. So of course Christians rejoice at Christmas!

And Christians do more than rejoice; we witness. We tell others the truth about Jesus - the truth which we have learned from God's witness statement, the bible. We don't need to be trained or educated or clever to witness to God and Jesus - and we certainly don't need to be good - Christians can be some of the worst people around! - but we can tell others what we've heard and read, what God has revealed to us through the bible. And telling others brings us further joy - complete joy.

If you're not a Christian, my plea and prayer is that you will examine the eye-witness testimony in the bible - perhaps start with this very letter of John, and see who Jesus really is, see how much he loves you, how as the light of God he searches you and knows you - see how much he desires your company, your fellowship.

Rejoice this Christmas, for that child lying in a manger is our Saviour, our Friend, our Great High Priest, our Lord and our God, Jesus Christ the Lord of all.

Let's pray.