

THE PROMISE OF LOVE IN A HATEFUL WORLD

A Sermon for the Second Sunday after Trinity, 2011

On the Text: Propers for the Day

By the Reverend Doctor Randolph Constantine

Our Epistle lesson this morning, from St. John's first Epistle begins with this warning: 1 John 3:13 **Marvel not, my brethren, if the world hate you.** That is the way the KJV of the Bible put St. John's words into English 400 years ago. Modern English in the ESV says it as: 1 John 3:13 **Do not be surprised, brothers, that the world hates you.** To say that the world hates us might be taken to mean that the dirt, rocks, trees, mountains, lakes, and the oceans, together with all the animals and plants hate us, but that's not true. We should not ascribe any sort of consciousness to the world of nature. All we can say is that the natural world is indifferent to us. Landslides happen; tsunamis happen, earthquakes happen, tornados happen. If a person happens to be in the way of one of those events, he is likely to be killed or injured; but hate was not involved because hate is a human emotion. When a lion, a tiger, or a bear attacks a person, it is not because of hate; most likely it is because the animal views the person as food, or because the animal was trying to protect its "territory" or its young. Of all that is on this earth, only man can hate.

Back in 1959, when popular music was changing from love songs to rock and roll, there was a brief time when folk music was popular. One group that was sort of "semi-folk" was the Kingston trio, and in 1959, they recorded a little song called "The Merry Minuet" We all thought it was funny, but its first verse described the state of hate in some of the world at that time fairly well. It went like this:

They're rioting in Africa, they're starving in Spain.

There's hurricanes in Florida, and Texas needs rain.

The whole world is festering with unhappy souls.

The French hate the Germans, the Germans hate the Poles.

Italians hate Yugoslavs, South Africans hate the Dutch.

And I don't like anybody very much!

Then the last two lines ended it with this:

They're rioting in Africa, there's strife in Iran.

What nature doesn't do to us, will be done by our fellow man.

Hatred happens for all kinds of reasons: ethnic, both racial in regard to skin color; or tribal, as in Rwanda; national; political; and, yes, religious. It is the religious hatred that St. John is talking about, but the other factors can be seen in that as well from the point of view of the Jews, especially the Pharisees, because they could not accept the fact that Jesus was the Messiah, nor that Jesus opened the gates to the Gentiles (that's an ethnic reason) and sinners, whom the Pharisees rejected out of hand because they assumed there could be no redemption for such people. However, it was a Pharisee named Gamaliel who had been St. Paul's teacher and who was a member of the Sanhedrin, the Council of all the Jews, who argued in Acts 5 that the early Christians should be left alone. Here is what Gamaliel said: Acts 5:35-41

35 And he said to them, "Men of Israel, take care what you propose to do with these men. 36 "For some time ago Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody; and a group of about four hundred men joined up with him. And he was slain; and all who followed him were dispersed and came to nothing. 37 "After this man Judas of Galilee rose up in the days of the census, and drew away some people after him, he too perished, and all those who followed him were scattered. 38 "And so in the present case, I say to you, stay away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or action should be of men, it will be overthrown; 39 but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them; or else you may even be found fighting against God." 40 And they took his advice; and after calling the apostles in, they flogged them and ordered them to speak no more in the name of Jesus, and then released them. 41 So they went on their way from the presence of the Council, rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for His name.

I tend to think that this was the Holy Spirit speaking through Gamaliel in an action that kept all of the twelve Apostles alive for a much longer time than might have happened had more of the anti-Christian members of the Sanhedrin had their way. As it was, Christianity grew more quickly because of Gamaliel's influence on the Sanhedrin that day.

I chose to preach on the Epistle today because of this first verse of it and because the religious news from around the world this past week is pretty glum. St. John says we have to expect the world to hate us, and indeed it does. Just about every day, I peruse about 5 or 6 serious Anglican blogs, several from the United States, one from England, and one from a theologian in Australia. In the past week I have found out some disturbing things:

In England, they have an “Equality Commissioner” who has said that the Muslim immigrants were integrating into English society better than many Christian populations and that Roman Catholic adoption agencies were more discriminatory than Sharia courts.

In Scotland, the Scots civil servants are now banned from using the word, homosexual.

The Australian theologian, Bill Muehlenberg, who is originally from Michigan, posted an article Friday titled, “As a New Dark Age Descends Upon the West”, in which he describes how the rise of Western Civilization could not have happened without the influence of the Christian religion, and how the attacks on Christianity are causing the decline of civilization as a whole.

There is so much of this I could go on for hours, but I won't. It is almost enough to make one think of going to hide in a cave somewhere, and as Jesus said shortly before He was nailed to the Cross, Luke 23:29-30 **29 For behold, the days are coming when they will say, 'Blessed are the barren and the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!' 30 Then they will begin to say to the mountains, 'Fall on us,' and to the hills, 'Cover us.'** However, hiding our heads in the sand or hiding in caves is not what Christians are supposed to do. This idea of wanting to have the mountains fall on us is written again in Revelation 6 in St. John's description of what happens after the opening of the Sixth Seal of the Scroll, but it is not something that Christians should wish for. There we read this in Revelation 6:15-17 **15 Then the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, 16 calling to the mountains and rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, 17 for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?"** We are not to be like the kings of the earth and flee in fear from the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. No, we go to him humbly, but with joy in our hearts; for He is the reason we came into existence and continue to exist, that we shall be His people, His brothers and sisters.

The life of the Christian will not be free of trouble on this earth. We shall have to bear the hatred of the secularists and of the pagans and Muslims, but in the end, Jesus Christ will prevail, for He is the only Way.

I chose to look at this Epistle Lesson for two reasons, the first to look at the hatred for us that is in the world; the second is to look at what is in the rest of chapter because it is one of the hardest of the hard passages in the Bible. If you were to look in your PB at the top of page 607, you would see Article XX, where it says, “... **yet it is not lawful for the Church to ordain**

anything that is contrary to God's Word written, neither may it expound one place of Scripture, that it be repugnant to another." I am not allowed to preach that one part of the Bible contradicts another part, but what happens in this third chapter is that St. John seems to contradict himself in the first 12 verses. Those 12 verses provide the immediate context for our Epistle lesson, so we need to look at them to gain the best understanding of today's lesson. I'll read them with some comments verse by verse so we can see what John wants to teach us in today's lesson.

What I read in various commentaries and in the book, *Hard Sayings of the Bible*, is that there are at least four possible explanations for what St. John is doing here in chapter 3, verses 1 – 12. Rather than look at all four of them, let's just look at the one that most scholars think is the best, which is that the context of these 12 verses is the entire Epistle. So the context of the Epistle lesson is verses 1-12, but the context of those 12 verses is the whole Epistle, esp. Ch. 1.

It will be helpful for you if you will take a Bible, a pew Bible or your own and open it to 1 John, Chapter 3 and follow along.

Verse 1: See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. This tells us in part why the world hates us; it is because it does not know us or Jesus.

Verse 2: Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when He appears we will be like Him, because we shall see him as He is. Here, John agrees with St. Paul that when Jesus comes again, we shall all be changed, and Christians will be given glorified bodies so that we can see the risen Lord Jesus as He really is.

Verse 3: And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as He is pure. How can the believer purify himself to be as pure as Jesus? The hard problems start here. John is using hyperbolē here. He is stating what the goal is, to become pure as Jesus is and what the process is to get there, but he says it as if the process has been completed.

Verses 4 and 5: Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. 5 You know that he appeared to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. Here John states what all believers should already know.

Verse 6: No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him. What can John mean here with these absolute statements? Especially since in verses 7-10 of chapter 1 John said, 1 John 1:7-10 7 But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us

from all sin. 8 If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. 9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. 10 If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us. Is John contradicting himself and what he said in Chapter 1? No! In chapter 1 he indicates that while we continue to sin, Jesus cleanses us if we confess our sins.

The consensus is that John wrote this in chapter 3 to show some proto-Gnostics that they were wrong in believing that they not only no longer sinned, but that they were *beyond* sin. Some of those Gnostics thought that the soul and body were so separate that the body could sin and the soul would not be affected by it. Ah, what an excuse for being a libertine. The Gnostics simply did not want to recognize their sins for what they were, ... sins.

In verses 7-12, John continues in this hyperbolic way. Those 6 verses can be condensed into this: You are either a child of God or of the devil, and children of God never sin, or at least, if you became a child of God, you will not continue to sin, which John has earlier admitted that we already do. So he keeps pounding on this belief of the early Gnostics to show them that their idea that they do not sin is false. Then in verses 11 and 12 he introduces hatred and murder.

Our lesson continues with the idea of hatred, but begins an alternation of hate and love, where, in the second verse of our lesson, verse 14, he introduces love, Christian love and shows us how we should express it. Then he continues this alternation with his if-then arguments but not in as dogmatic and hyperbolic a way.

Verse 13: (Hate) 1 John 3:13 3 Do not be surprised, brothers, that the world hates you.

Verse 14: (Love) 1 John 3:14 14 We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death.

Verse 15: (Hate) 1 John 3:15 5 Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.

Verse 16 (Love) 1 John 3:16 16 By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers.

Verse 17 (Hate, sort of, in an if-then question) 17 But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him?

Verse 18 (Love with an exhortation) 1 John 3:18 18 Little children, let us not love in word or talk, but in deed and in truth.

Verse 19 to 24 (From here on, it is Love with exhortation and promise) 1 John 3:19 – 24: 19 By this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our heart before him; 20 for whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything. 21 Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God; 22 and whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him. 23 And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. 24 Whoever keeps his commandments abides in him, and he in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit whom he has given us.

John is not confused. He has confused us by writing in a strange way to those with wrong beliefs in order to show them the truth. In the last verse, John refers to his own Gospel in more than one place. We know that our hope “that he may dwell in us and we in Him” comes from Jesus’ Great Prayer in Chapter 17 of the Gospel of John, but when he refers to keeping His commandments, he also has in mind Jesus’ last commandment, “that you love one another as I have loved you.” in John 13:34. If we live and love as He would have us do, the hatred of the world cannot touch our souls. So, let us go forth in Christ, in faith, secure in His Holy Love.

AMEN!