

1 John 1:1-2:2 The Second Sunday of Easter, series B. Ascension, Brandon, 2009.

You might imagine that we are living in a sort of twilight. I mean that if God's light shines in the world, but it is hampered by dark forces, dark deeds, dark thoughts, then the result might be a world in which the light of God is dimmed. But that is not the case. No, where the light of God shines, it shines completely, dazzlingly. But where it is blocked out, it is blocked out completely. That is the image of the world that John paints in our text. It reminds me of a comic strip cartoon image, you know the kind of picture I mean, where the shadows are absolutely black. That is how John is seeing the world.

And the people in the world, they are dwellers of the light, or they walk in the darkness. Like little nocturnal creatures, they scurry from one black shadow to another, always anxious to avoid the light. Or they walk in the light, wary of the shadows, staying out of them in their natural bright habitat.

And what is this light? It is quite simply God. It is God in the world. And the darkness, the black shadows that are cast over the world, these are lies and deceit. The light is God and the truth. The darkness is the sheer absence of those things.

It is a clear and uncompromising way of seeing the world. Its not a twilight zone, but a chequered board, white and black, not grey; light and dark, not dim; truth and lies, not shades of opinion.

So this is the scene set at the beginning of John's letter. Our moral stage is a dramatic terrain floodlit by the presence of God, but littered with lies and deceit casting their grim shadows and blocking out the light. Then into this scene he drops a word, and that word describes the actions of the characters against the

backdrop. Six times he drops that word in as many verses. And the word is “if”. If this, then that. So the script is open-ended – it can go different ways.

If we walk in the light, well then we have fellowship with each other and the blood of Jesus cleanses us. There is no wholesome fellowship in the shadow of deceit. How could there be, for there all they have in common is that they lie one to another. One would think that they cannot trust one another. They have a fellowship of a sort to be sure. They have a family. At the head of the family is the one Jesus called the “father of lies”. People in this day and age often struggle with the personification of evil as the devil. But perhaps the problem is that they expect a more elaborate personality than the Bible, at least, ever ascribes. There is so little to it. We experience it as the opposite of what God is, the dark in place of the light; the shade that obscures the presence of God; the lie instead of the truth. He has few lines to say in the whole of Scripture, but the opening ones reveal the character. “Did God say that you may not eat of the fruit of any of the trees which are in the garden?” And when he is told that all of the trees are for them except the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, eating which man and woman shall surely die, he says. “You shall not surely die”. Spoken with all the authority in the world, I’m sure, convincing, reassuring, reasonable – but completely untrue.

It is not much of a personality, just an insatiable appetite for lies. But for some reason it attracts many friends who acquire the same taste. These are the dark places, where the deceit passes for truth, and everything that God says is contradicted. Everything. The big things, the ultimate questions, to begin with. If God says that this is his creation, it has a purpose and a destiny, and this life is a prelude to eternal life, then the darkness will contradict it: this is a random chance of a world, without purpose and without goal except what we could invent for it, and there is no more to it than what we can experience in this life. And everyday things about how we should live. If God says repay no-one evil for evil, the darkness will entice us to get even; if God, who made us, tells us that what is best for us is to seek first the kingdom of God, then the darkness will turn those

priorities on their head – and thrust material ambition to the forefront. If God says that all life is sacred, the darkness will obscure it and assure us that life is dispensable. There is no end to it. But if we walk in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus cleanses us.

But there are more “ifs” in this script. What if, for example, we say we have fellowship with God, but we walk in the darkness? Well then, John says, we lie and we do not live according to the truth. That, of course, is self-evident. If we say one thing and do another, we have told a whopper – we lie. But behind this obvious fact is a glimpse of something sinister. A person who aligns themselves with the light, who says, publicly that they have fellowship with God, suppose that person strays into the shadow. Do they not then make a lie of their confession? And their hypocrisy compounds the deceit, and their darkness is blacker than the person who proudly takes their stand in the other camp.

And here’s another “If”. What if we say we have not sinned, that we have never ventured into the darkness. Then, John says, we make God a liar! We drag God and his reputation into the diabolical blackness if we say or think that we have never associated with the father of lies. And then, his word is not in us. For God tells us otherwise. God tells us that all have sinned, that all fall short of his Glory. God tells us that none is perfect and all have strayed like wayward sheep. And if we say we have no sin, we also deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. Just by saying it, we make it untrue, we kid ourselves that we are in the light, but we are more deeply in the darkness we deny.

By the way, people do not often say that they have no sin, do they? I mean, it is not a claim you are likely to find on someone’s CV: I have a PhD in nuclear physics, my hobbies are sky-diving and ballroom dancing, and I have no sin. But it is, as John puts it, a matter of self-deceit. I can imagine that there is so little of the ark about my life that I am OK with God. But I deceive myself. I can make a judgement on another person, as if I were faultless (let him who is without sin

cast the first stone, said Jesus). But it is a con. Or I can make a philosophical excuse, that God demands more than can realistically be hoped for, and I am as good as I can be. Or I could make a psychological defence, in my own mind, of course, that circumstances are to blame for my faults – other people mostly, stress, whatever. And I may convince myself. But I will deceive myself.

So, let us consider where John has brought us. Has he not left us betwixt a rock and a hard place? Isn't it a no-win situation in which we find ourselves? On the one hand, if we walk in the darkness we lie. On the other hand, if we say we do not walk in the darkness, we lie. We are damned if we do, and damned if we don't – literally. And that is exactly the point. We are lost, and doomed to be sucked into the eternal darkness – the outer darkness where there is no fellowship with God. And it is vital that we understand that. Because then there is one more "if".

If we confess our sins, he (God) is faithful and just, and will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. You see, even in the light there are no people who have not known the darkness. There are no people who do not sometimes trespass into the shadow of deceit. But, if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. Jesus Christ the righteous means that he entered our world, in fact he was seen with eyes and he was touched with hands, and people came out of the darkness to lay violent hands upon him, and kill him. But he never entered the darkness himself. Jesus Christ, the righteous, our advocate with the Father. His blood cleanses us from all sin.

For us, who have walked in the dark places of the world, this is the great and ultimately the only reassurance we need. If we sin, we have an advocate with the father, Jesus Christ the righteous. As advocate he will make our case before God, and the case will be this, that he has cleansed us from all sin. So he rehabilitates us as children of the light and restores us to the fellowship of God.

But there is also a danger that we might hear the reassurance as a free licence to walk wherever we will – in the light mostly, of course, but if we stray into the darkness from time to time, well it doesn't matter, because if we sin we have an advocate with the father. Since that is all so easy, why not then have the best of both worlds? Why not enjoy the light, but still not miss out when the other place offers an easier or more attractive alternative? I don't need to spell this out, because you know what, for you, are the appealing things in the devil's shadowland.

But we are not the first to ask this question. As soon as the apostle St. Paul had explained the gospel of God's forgiveness, completely free and by God's grace alone, he knew that a hankering for the old ways would soon rise up in those who heard it. And so he put their question for them:

“What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?”

You see the logic of his question. I am sure that it has entered all of our minds. If the death of Jesus was sufficient to cover all sins, so that his blood cleanses us from all unrighteousness, well then where is the harm in adding to that tally a little, and in fact the sacrifice of Jesus will be even better value – if sin abounds, grace abounds all the more.

Of course, that question, logical though it is, comes straight from the darkness and from the realm of lies. No, responds Paul, By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? The lie is exposed. Children of the light cannot abuse the grace of God by boldly defying his love. And nor would they want to. For they know that not only does it hurt God, it hurts them too. However enticing the father of lies can make the serving of his alternatives, it is a trick. God has told us the happier and more fulfilling place to be – walking in his light. And nor is it true that it doesn't matter if we wander into the darkness here and there. Do we ever really wander alone? Are others being enticed there too?

In the last book of the Bible, the apostle John who wrote the text and the letter we have been looking at, was also given a vision of heaven. No longer, like ours, was it a place of light and dark, where long shadows obscure the presence of God. He reported it thus: "And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine upon it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. By its light shall the nations walk; and the kings of the earth shall bring their glory into it."

Children of the light will live for ever in the light.

Amen.