

What would you say are the big issues facing the church today? If you were to write an open letter to the church – and have it published in the churches page of the Belfast Telegraph – what issues would you choose to deal with?

Within a generation, the infant church of the first Century had a great deal to contend with. Its leaders were being tortured and executed in the great circus for entertainment. Its birthplace – Jerusalem – was invaded and overthrown in a cataclysmic way and the early Christians were scattered across the world.

If you were going to write to them about the issues that were of greatest importance – issues whose importance would remain a priority for the next 2000 years – what would you choose to write about?

That is what we are going to look at this morning.

We have spent a lot of time over the past few weeks learning about what one person – Paul – wrote about; but this morning we want to turn our attention to 4 other men whose writings make up a significant section at the end of our Bible – and we want to think about what occupied their minds.

These 4 men are Peter, John, James and Jude.

Peter and John were among the first people to follow and study at the feet of Jesus. They were working as fishermen when he called them to be his disciples and for 3 years they listened to him, watched what he did, wondered at what he meant, were amazed by his power and his generosity and his insight – and what they wrote was heavily influenced by the intimate knowledge they had of him because of those 3 years.

James and Jude were brothers – that much is sure – but what is also almost certain is that they were also half-brothers of Jesus himself. They were almost certainly two of the children that Mary and Joseph had after Jesus' miraculous virgin birth. If that is so then they knew Jesus much longer than Peter or John – they knew him for 33 years – but the truth is that for most of that time they did not believe him to be anyone other than their older brother. It was only after Jesus died and rose again – and before he returned to Heaven – that he went and spent time with James in particular so that his heart was changed and he became not only a passionate Christian but actually a leader of the Christians in Jerusalem.

These are the 4 men whose writings follow on from the writings of Paul and the unattributed letter to the Hebrews. What then are the issues that they dealt with?

You understand that it would take weeks to properly answer that question. I say again what we have said for the past 20 weeks as we have worked our way through the Bible in this series – this morning is just a birds eye view – I want to tantalise you to go and dig for yourselves to fill out all the detail that I don't have time to

give you – read the letters for yourself – all I am going to do is give you one word for each of these 4 men to associate for you what I believe they were preoccupied with.

For James that word is DO.

James said that what you actually do matters. You say that is an obvious statement – well it may be but it gets overlooked a lot in this world.

James taught that if you delve into the truth of God and discover him in all his wonder –

- and discover what life is actually all about –
- discover what real freedom is in a world where people are held in slavery to addictions and habits and financial crises and fear anxiety –
- discover what real power is ... the power of mercy to bring about transformation where judgement can only destroy –
- discover what real wisdom is: wisdom that ends wars rather than starting them – or
- discover what real wealth is ...

James taught that if you have listened to the truth of God – felt good in your heart – appreciated the beauty of his revelation – and then gone off and lived as if you had never heard God at all – then you are like someone who checks himself out in the mirror and then walks away and does nothing about what he has just seen.

Doing has become a bad word in the mind of many Christians.

- You see we believe that we can do nothing that will make us right in the eyes of God.
- We believe that we are accepted by God completely and utterly as a free gift thanks to the intervention of our saviour Jesus and that there is nothing we can do to earn that –
- and in fact any attempt to try to earn it automatically says that we are not depending on Jesus and thereby rules us out of his free gift.

So doing has rightly become a bad word. Why then did James say that “doing” was so important?

I was talking to someone just after the Lisburn half marathon this year – and they told me they had been watching for the front runners to appear at a particular point in the road when these two guys came running down the road apparently in the lead. They didn't look very fit but they were running well and there was nobody in front of them. But then he realised that they had no numbers on their vests and actually they had probably not been in the race at all and had just run a short distance from somewhere round the previous corner. They were running – but they were never in the race so their running was pointless.

I can imagine this story being a good illustration in a sermon about the futility of “doing” without first “belonging”.

But I would like to look at this from a different angle. Can you now imagine someone signing up for the race – getting the teeshirt – pinning the number to it – turning up at the start – enjoying all the excitement and buzz waiting to get going – and then at the last minute walking off to get a cup of coffee.

What a waste – what a let-down – how unfulfilled that person must feel.

If you have given your life to Jesus then you are entered in a race. You don't need to win that race – you don't even need to run that race – Jesus is still your saviour whether you win the race, run the race, walk the race or go off and get coffee. But James wanted you to know ... how will you ever know what it feels like to run in the race unless you get out there and do it. How will you know what real freedom feels like unless you take a risk with God and get out there and experience it for yourself. Not because it will earn you points with God – but because it is the only way you will learn more about the God who has saved you.

For Peter my word is PURPOSE

We already know that Peter had been a fisherman until the day when Jesus called him away from fishing to follow him as his disciple.

That calling from Jesus defined the purpose for his life from that day forward.

Having a purpose does that to a person. I remember listening to Stephen Redgraves the 5 times Olympic rower tell of the purpose in his life that governed his life for over 20 years – it determined what he did every day, even on Christmas day – because every day in his life he got up as a challenger for an Olympic gold medal and he lived that day according to that purpose.

Peter had a purpose that put an Olympic gold medal into shadow. His purpose was to be **effective and productive in his knowledge of Jesus** – his purpose was to **receive a rich welcome one day into the kingdom of Jesus** – and he lived every day in his life according to that purpose.

It was that purpose that stopped him thinking like the rest of the world – when the rest of the world despaired because the world seemed to be coming apart around them – much as it seems to be to us today – Peter was unflappable. His purpose was not affected by global meltdown – he remembered instead a day when Jesus had taken him and his two friends up a mountain. They had gone up that mountain in the company of what they knew to be a great teacher – but they came down that mountain in the company of what they knew without a doubt to be the son of God himself.

At the top of the mountain, Jesus was filled with the Glory of God and he shone like the sun, but that wasn't the best of it. With him appeared the two greatest heroes of Jewish history, temporarily visiting this world for a moment of glory – Moses and Elijah, but that wasn't the best of it. Peter without thinking offered to

celebrate the prestige of his rabbi by an equal tribute to him along with these two great heroes – when from the heavens there thundered a majestic voice saying “**this is my son whom I love – hear him**”.

And Peter never lost sight of that glory – and the distinctive vision that God gave him – this is my son, hear him. Nobody else matters. Nothing else that can happen will ever matter.

For John the only word I could possibly use is LOVE

John had no interest in any impersonal pretence. I remember a quotation on a poster I once saw that said “a true friend is someone who knows everything about you ... and loves you in spite of it all”. John knew well the tendency in human behaviour to present a face to the outside world that is very different from what is really going on in your heart. He wrote his letter to challenge that on two important levels.

Firstly between us and God. He said simply: God is light – in him there is no darkness at all. What did he mean by that? Just this – if you want to be intimate with God – if you want to say that you know God – if you dare to say that you love God – then you absolutely must be prepared to live in the light.

The internet has become one of the most common places to meet new people. There are websites for finding a partner for a date. There are chat-rooms where you can get to know people effectively as pen-pals by writing to them. There are even virtual worlds where you can “meet” animated versions of people. But the thing is ... so many people present themselves on the internet as very different people than they are in real life. Many of them don't ever expect to meet up for real so this is their chance to reinvent themselves and become the person they dream of being.

You know that kind of role playing might even be fun for a while – but if there is ever going to be intimacy between two people then they have first got to come into the light of day and see each other as they really are.

When John said that God is light – he was saying that if you want to love God and if you want God to love you then you must be prepared for him to know everything about you in all its ragged edge rawness. Not tidied up and made presentable – but as it really is. And the incredible message from John is that if you are willing to take that risk with God – then he will love you – completely – just as you are. John's letter has within it some of the most powerful words in all the Bible for he wrote:

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 purifies us from all sin.

If we claim to be without sin we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.

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

If we claim we have not sinned we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives.

And the secondary effect of all this is that if we start being honest with God – if we let God know the truth about us – then that honesty will spill over into our relationship with other people. John wrote – whoever does not love, does not know God, because God is love.

When it comes to Jude what word should I use? The best word I could find was WAIT.

The biggest company in the world decided to expand into a region of economic hardship. It was going to mean new jobs – good jobs – it was going to put the region on the map – the prestige of the company would rub off on the area – it was a good thing.

Premises were acquired, contracts were signed, and a team of handpicked volunteers was sent to the region wearing the company sweatshirts and polo shirts to begin to prepare the community for the arrival of the company.

Their arrival began with such excitement. They held a big party – were guests of honor by the local mayor – handed out teeshirts and other company merchandise – told everyone about the company and of its plans for the region – and created a buzz.

But this was only one of many important plans in the overall global strategy for this large company – and as it happened the expansion into the region in question was delayed.

The advance party found this difficult – they had already held interviews for a lot of new staff – the company had even authorised them onto the payroll and simply told them to join the advance party in promoting the company in the mean time. Wear the company colours with pride and make sure the community is ready to receive us.

But the local newspapers love a conspiracy. Before long they had found or invented reasons for the delay – rumours began to spread of financial difficulty within the company – of management failures – of product quality issues. The brand that had become an overnight sensation in the region with the news of thousands of new jobs began to seem a bit tarnished as it became the butt of so many jokes in pubs around the town.

The advance party no longer wore the company colours – they no longer tried to enthuse about the company and all that it would mean for the town. Actually they were a little bit embarrassed about their job and some of them even started to look for other work.

And then one day the company arrived in all its splendour and in complete fulfilment of all the greatest promises that were ever made about it. All the rumours evaporated in the heat of renewed enthusiastic fervour in the community for the arrival of the saviour of their local economy and the name that would give their little region a new name in the eyes of the world.

For the advance party this was at last a vindication of all that they had ever forecast. But what thoughts must have troubled them in the privacy of their own mind – thoughts of their betrayal of the company name in the face of the groundswell of local opinion against the company ... thoughts of how they had not kept faith in the promises they were sent to make to the community ... if only they had had the confidence to wait.

Jude's message is a message to you and to me – to wait with confidence – when all the world around us is mocking the name of Christ and slandering heaven and following their own desires – Jude writes:

Keep yourselves in God's love as you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you to eternal life

To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy, to the only God our saviour be glory, majesty, power and authority through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and for ever more! Amen.