

13th August 2023 – The People of God #11 ‘Holy’ (1 Peter 1:13-25)

I wonder what you think of when you hear the word ‘holy’? And let’s clarify at this stage that I’m not talking about socks or cheese or football defences or even Batman and Robin catchphrases – I mean the spiritual word ‘holy’. Chances are that it’s not necessarily a positive set of associations. At best you might think of meeting someone slightly unnerving – the sort of wild character that changes the world but probably isn’t someone you want to invite to your birthday party. At worst you might think of a sanctimonious killjoy that you definitely *wouldn’t* invite to your birthday party – or indeed to any other kind of gathering.

Unlike some Christian words like hope, joy, peace, and of course love, which have almost universally positive connotations, the word holy or holiness is, shall we say, something we’re a bit less sure about.

In part that’s because we’ve all heard the sort of lazy theology which contrasts the ‘holy’ God of the Old Testament with the ‘loving’ God of the New – more on that old chestnut later. Certainly **if I was to ask you the dominant character trait of God revealed in the bible, I imagine nearly all of you would say ‘love’**. And that would be a good answer, wouldn’t it? It’s perhaps the greatest of all revealed truths in the bible, that the Almighty God, creator of the universe, the source and author of all things, the Lord of life, is, in his very being, *love*.

This was the apostle John’s great insight, the amazing distillation of over a thousand pages of divinely inspired scriptural revelation into this one simple phrase: God *is* love. It stands to reason, therefore, that the two great commands given to human beings – who are made in God’s image, the God who is in his very being love – are these: love God and love your neighbour. Even the Pharisees knew that.

But it’s not quite that simple, is it? For a start, there are four different words for love in the New Testament. The Greek language already had three, but the early Christians realised that none of them were adequate to define love as they now understood it, in the light of Christ’s great act of self-giving on the cross. So, they invented a new word for love, *agape*, which really means selfless service. Nothing romantic about this word at all – saturated with compassion, absolutely, but an earthy, gritty, costly form of love – love as behaviour, as humility.

Nevertheless, *agape* remains much the most common word for love in the New Testament, mentioned no less than 259 times as either a verb or a noun (and more often as a verb, which again tells you a lot about the nature of love – it’s a doing word). However, you might be surprised to learn that there is a spiritual virtue mentioned even more often than love. Only just, admittedly, but coming in top of the charts with no less than 261 mentions is the word.... you guessed it, given the title of our talk today, it’s *holy*.

Funny isn’t it, that we all know that God is agape, God is love, but **even in the New Testament, there are more references to holiness**. That’s primarily because the word used to name Christian believers in the New Testament, which most bible translations translate as ‘saints’ is in fact the word *hagioi* – which means holy ones. Not *agapoi* – loving ones – but holy ones. In other words, the single most compelling characteristic used to define Christians in the New Testament, i.e. the first and original generation of the church, is that we are *holy*.

So let's go back to basics – **what does the word holy mean? It means set apart** – particularly set apart *for God*. That is why God's very essence is defined as holy, because God is uniquely set apart from all of his creation – yes, creation is good, but only the Lord God is perfect.

Naturally, when this God sends his Spirit it is known as the – you guessed it – *Holy Spirit*. And whatever God blesses can also be holy, following the pattern of its maker. The first thing named to be holy in scripture is the Sabbath – when God rests from his work after creating the world, he blessed the seventh day and made it holy (as an aside, that is why what we've done to our Sundays in the last 30 years is reaping such havoc with our wellbeing – imagine trashing the very first thing in the universe that God makes holy?). But as scripture unfolds, we learn that God's name is holy, the law is holy – and also, God calls his people to be holy: 'a kingdom of priests and a holy nation' is how God describes them to Moses just before the giving of the Ten Commandments.

That was 1,200 years before Jesus, but his great friend Peter is still working with the same frame of reference when he introduces our passage for today quoting God's words from the Old Testament law: **'Be holy because I am holy.' If the fundamental call of the Christian life is to become more like Jesus – then we grow not just in love, or joy or peace or hope, but in holiness too.**

And it's helpful to think of the idea of being set apart in various ways – what we are set apart *from*, what we are set apart *for*, and what we are set apart *in* – all ways that we find in our passage:

Firstly, are set apart from sin – and this is the dominant way we think about holiness, isn't it, and why we tend not to like the word very much. But it remains fundamental to our calling that when the Holy Spirit of Christ fills us, we start to make different decisions about how we live our life. It starts with our motivations: 'do not conform to the evil desires you had' is the way Peter puts it in v14. Just after our passage he refers to things like malice, deceit, hypocrisy, envy and slander.

Sin always starts with ill-directed desire, so holiness is not just about what we do, it's even more about what we desire. If we live for pleasure or self-promotion or putting other people down to bolster our own fragile egos or constantly looking at what other people have and we don't, then our lives will reflect that – and they'll also look like most other people's lives, i.e. not set apart at all.

Because this is really a heart thing, it's interesting that Peter refers to both ignorance (v14) and empty ways of life handed down to us (v18) as things which unhelpfully influence our desires. That is why it's so important to feed our souls with scripture and anything which helps us to absorb the living and enduring word of God – wise and godly friends and mentors, study groups, daily notes, anything that helps us to learn both the wisdom of God and healthy self-awareness. Every thriving Christian also needs a capacity for honest self-examination, to be able to ask: am I just reflecting empty values I picked up along the way, or truly growing in the grace and wisdom of Christ? Scripture holds a mirror to our lives, but we have to be brave enough to look into it!

This is naturally the primary way we interpret holiness – but if we only stop there, then we miss a truly rounded and mature view. Because if it's all about what we're set apart from, we can miss the positive emphasis that we are also set apart for some amazing things. **Fundamentally, we are set apart for new life: 'for you have been born again,'** Peter reminds us in v23 – in other words, there is a deeper reason why we no longer conform to old desires – we're not that person anymore.

Christians are more than just human *beings*, if I can put it like this – we are human *becomings*. In Christ we have a new life, and so of course we now dance to the beat of a different drum. We are growing into the likeness of Christ, with all the positive virtues that entails. In this passage, Peter encourages us to set our hope on the grace to be brought to us (v13), and just after it he reminds us that we have already tasted that the Lord is good – so with that thought in our hearts we are to keep growing.

One thing I've always found about genuinely holy people is that although they might be unsettling, I also find myself drawn to them. There is just something about them that makes me want to know more. Maybe you find that, too. Take a moment to ask yourself if there's anyone like that in your life at present, and maybe pray for opportunities to benefit more from time with that person.

Finally, we are set apart in love. This is perhaps the most important observation of all, and it also demolishes the shallow old argument contrasting holiness and love, as if the one is superceded by the other. Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth, Peter begins v22, and we think, oh yes that's very Old Testament, quite stern, all pursed lips and tight collars – look how he continues: 'Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for each other, love one another deeply, from the heart.' Real holiness is seeped in love. We love because we are holy, we are holy because we love. This reflects the true character of God – God desired holiness for his people in the Old Testament because he loved them so much – and having loved them even to the death of the cross, so now he calls us to be holy, that is, set apart to love with a profound and deep love, a true love from the heart.

Love which does not call people to live holy lives is not love at all – if God thinks something is wrong, we have to be brave and humble enough to trust God on that. Equally, holiness which is not saturated in humble, gracious love is not true holiness, just a diet version of the real thing. Holy people love deeply, from the heart.

I believe in the holy Church – set apart from sin, yes, but also set apart for life and in love. May God grant us grace to be that kind of church, reflecting the image of our divine and glorious Maker. Amen.