

1 John 4:1-6

Introduction

A couple of months ago, in this country, the government introduced a new emergency warning system. On Sunday the 23rd of April, messages were sent to mobile phones across the country to check that this new system was working. If you were watching the Snooker World Championship on TV, you might remember that play had to be paused while all the phones in the audience starting buzzing and beeping. And in the future, we're told, if there's a risk to life where you are, the government will send an Emergency Alert to your mobile phone, warning you of the danger and telling you what you need to do.

I don't know what the apostle John would have made of the idea of mobile phones, but he's doing something similar in this letter.

If you're one of the students visiting us from the Netherlands this morning, we really are delighted to have you with us, and you're joining us as we work our way through a letter in the Bible known as 1 John.

John was one of the first disciples of Jesus. He knew Jesus personally. He had seen and heard everything that Jesus did first-hand. And when he wrote this letter, he was one of the leaders in the church.

He's writing to fellow believers. And this letter is an Emergency Alert.

He's warning them about the danger of certain people who claimed to be Christians but were travelling around, teaching things about God that weren't true. These people presumed to speak *for* God but didn't know what they were talking about. And John's saying to his readers: Don't believe everything you hear.

It's advice we hear all the time.

Perhaps at school, your teachers warn you not to believe everything you read on social media. Perhaps at home, your parents tell you not to believe everything your friends tell you. As we grow up, we learn to exercise discernment. We're careful who we listen to.

And John's warning us, as we read this letter, to be careful about what we believe.

It may not have come as an Emergency Alert to our mobile phones, but this warning is just as relevant to us today as it was 2,000 years ago. The world is full of people who claim to speak for God, and even call themselves Christians, but are teaching things about God that simply aren't true. So, this is a message that we all need to hear.

John says: Test everything!

And he gives us two specific tests to establish whether someone's message is reliable.

Firstly, he says, what do they say about Jesus?

That's test number 1. What do they say about Jesus?

Test #1: What do they say about Jesus?

Please look down again with me at verses 1 to 3. When John refers to 'spirits' here, he mostly means people. And he writes this:

Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. This is how you can recognise the Spirit of God: every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world.

If you buy something on eBay or Etsy, you want to know that the seller is reliable. That's why the websites have seller ratings and feedback. We want to check them out before we place an order. We want to know that they're reliable.

How do we know that someone who claims to speak from God is reliable?

Well, here's where to start, John says. Do they acknowledge that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh?

He's not merely saying: Do they believe that Jesus was a real person?

There's more to it than that.

To acknowledge that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is to acknowledge that he's come *from* somewhere and that he existed before his birth. If someone moves to Hastings, one of the first questions we might ask is, 'Where have you come *from*?' To acknowledge that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is to acknowledge that he has come *from* somewhere. Before he came into the world, he existed eternally as God the Son. Without giving up his deity, he left the glory of heaven to take to himself a human nature. It's therefore to acknowledge his deity.

Here's the wonder of the Christian message. It's that God himself has entered our world in the person of Jesus. If we want to know what God is like, we need to look at Jesus. When we look at Jesus, all our speculation about God ends. Jesus is God.

And to acknowledge that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is also to acknowledge his full humanity. He is God come *in the flesh*. He wasn't pretending to be human. His humanity wasn't an illusion. He wasn't only partially human. Jesus was as fully human as you and me. He is both fully God and fully man.

And that means that he knows what it's like to be us. God knows the ups and downs of human experience because he has been through them himself. He has experienced our humanity first hand. And that means that the God of the Bible gets you. We probably all know that frustration of trying to speak to someone about something we're going through and realising that they just don't get it. They don't understand. But God does. Whatever you're going through, he gets it. He understands. And he will be with you through it. Just as we were talking about with the children, during the All Together Time, we can talk to God about anything.

But even that doesn't exhaust what John's saying here.

Who is it that has come in the flesh?

It's Jesus Christ.

Our names often have meanings. When parents are expecting a new child, they often spend time looking into the meaning of different names. Jesus means 'God saves'. God told Mary, his mother, that he was to be given the name 'Jesus' because he would save his people from their sins.

Christ isn't a name. Joseph and Mary weren't Mr and Mrs Christ. It's a title. A bit like 'President'. It means 'God's king'.

So, to acknowledge that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not merely to acknowledge who he is but also to acknowledge the purpose for which he came. He came to save God's people and to establish God's kingdom.

And he did that by dying on a cross.

We all sin. Sin is very normal. But sin is also very serious. And it must be punished. A just and righteous God cannot turn a blind eye to sin and pretend it didn't happen. And we wouldn't want him to. We want evil and wrongdoing to be punished. We're angry when people get away with doing what's wrong. We want justice.

Justice matters to *us* because it matters to the God who made us. He is a just God.

And because he is a just God, he must punish all sin and wrongdoing, including our own. The Bible says that the penalty for sin is eternal death in a place it calls Hell.

But here's the amazing claim of Christianity: that in his love for us, God himself left the glory of heaven and came into the world to save us.

He came into the world to swap places with us and to die our death in our place, so that we might have eternal life. He came in the flesh to die in the flesh.

If you were inventing a religion, you couldn't possibly make this up! That God himself would enter the world to die in the place of those he had created!

And on the third day he rose again and appeared over a period of forty days to hundreds and hundreds of people.

Now, today, through faith in him, we can receive forgiveness for our sins, be welcomed by God and receive a place in his eternal kingdom.

By coming in the flesh, Jesus has opened the way to God.

And Jesus isn't simply one way to God. He is the only way to God. He said, '**I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.**' (John 14:6)

So, John says, if someone claims to speak from God, even though they might claim to be a Christian, do the equivalent of checking their seller rating. Ask yourself: What do they say about Jesus?

Do they teach that he is both fully God and fully man?

Do they teach that he died on a cross to save us from sin?

Do they teach that he and he alone has opened the way to heaven?

If not, John says, then don't be taken in by them. They don't *know* God. And they certainly don't speak *from* God. In fact, John says, they are driven by the spirit of the antichrist. Do you see that in verse 3?

This is the spirit of the antichrist, John says.

'Antichrist' means 'against Christ'.

Although such people may claim the name of Christ, they are enemies *of* Christ and need to be recognised for what they are.

So, that's the first test: what do they say about Jesus?

And here's the second: Do they listen to the apostles?

That's test number 2: Do they listen to the apostles?

Test #2: Do they listen to the apostles?

Please look down at verses 4 to 6. John writes:

You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world. They are from the world and therefore speak from the viewpoint of the world, and the world listens to them. We are from God, and

whoever knows God listens to us; but whoever is not from God does not listen to us. This is how we recognise the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood.

John begins these verses with words of assurance: **...dear children**, he says. He has every confidence that his readers truly are children of the living God because they have already overcome the false teachers. They have already rejected their teaching in favour of the true gospel preached by the apostles. Presumably, that's why the false teachers went out into the world.

And that is the work of the Holy Spirit in them. The Bible says that all believers have the Holy Spirit inside them, and the Holy Spirit enables us to recognise truth.

The false teachers don't have the Holy Spirit in them and don't speak from God. All they do is regurgitate worldly ideas. Their teaching may come dressed in Christian clothes, but it merely mirrors the views and values of the world around them. And that's why the world is so pleased to listen to them and applaud them.

On the other hand, John says: **We are from God, and whoever knows God listens to us; but whoever is not from God does not listen to us. This is how we recognise the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood.**

John is speaking here of himself and the other apostles.

They went everywhere with Jesus for three years. They learnt from him and were eyewitnesses of all he did. He appointed them to be his representatives in the world and to teach with his authority after he had gone. Their message is recorded for us in the pages of the Bible. And, John says, whoever knows God listens to them. In other words, whoever knows God, listens to, accepts and believes their teaching contained in the Bible.

Jesus comes to us through the teaching of his apostles.

Here, then, is the test of a true preacher as opposed to a false one: they believe and submit to the teaching of the apostles and proclaim it as truth.

Someone may claim the name of Jesus and preach passionately. They might refer to the Bible and quote from its pages. But if they dismiss as outdated and irrelevant the teaching of the apostles contained within its pages, then, John says, they're fakes.

They might be very positive about Jesus. They might admire his moral character and urge us to follow his ethical example. But if they reject the teaching of his apostles about judgement and Hell and the cross, then, John says, they're fakes.

Those who truly know God listen to the teaching of the apostles contained in the pages of the Bible. They accept it, submit to it, and pass it on as truth.

Conclusion

The question then is this. When it comes to matters of faith, how do you decide who you listen to?

Most towns have several different churches of various styles and denominations. New books come out every week from a variety of authors claiming to be Christians. Radio shows trot out numerous speakers who have something to say about Jesus. And if you add in what's available on YouTube and TikTok and social media, your head starts spinning.

And, sadly, the reality is that there are nearly as many different versions of Christianity as there are people to listen to.

How do you decide?

We need to guard ourselves against being drawn in by those who have a false message.

False teachers can be passionate, charismatic speakers and gifted communicators. They often are.

They may be highly intelligent and well read.

They might be excellent writers.

But we *must* ask ourselves: What do they say about Jesus? Is their Jesus divine? Did their Jesus die on a cross in our place, to save us from our sins?

And: Do they listen to the apostles? Do they accept the apostles' teaching and submit to it? Or do they dismiss it as outdated, irrelevant and out of touch?

Be very careful, John says.

Don't believe everything you hear.

Let's pray.

Loving Father, thank you for all that you reveal to us in your word, the Bible. Thank you that we can all read the Bible for ourselves. Please help us to live in the light of its truth. And please guard us against believing what is false. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.