

Reflection

1 John 1:1-2:2
John 20:19-31

In the shops, Easter is over and the chocolate eggs are all packed away – or perhaps the last few are out on sale to create room for new stock. Decorations are taken down and the advertising is out for the next sale – I presume for Mother's Day, since that is only six weeks away. You could be forgiven for thinking that Easter is only a day, but it's not. Easter is the whole fifty days from last Sunday until Pentecost – which incidentally, this year is Mother's Day.

Over the next few weeks, the focus in the lectionary readings is about how the early church responded to the experience of Easter. And what a range of choices reflecting on this theme in today's readings! Some weeks I look at the readings and wonder what I'm going to talk about – nothing really connects. Other weeks, like this one, I look at the readings and wonder what I'm going to talk about – there are so many options!

The early church had a bit of a problem once the Gospel spread beyond Palestine. You see, Greek culture did not have a problem with multiple gods, nor did they have a problem with a god being born and present on this earth. What they did have a problem with was a god suffering... because suffering implied change and change implied imperfection. So there started a school of thought that did not have a problem with the idea of Christ being divine, but certainly had a problem with Jesus being truly human.

These early heretics, now known as the "Gnostics," argued that Jesus could not have *really* suffered. Some said it only *looked* like Jesus suffered. Others even suggested that it only *appeared* that Jesus was on earth, or there were elaborate stories of the human Jesus being swapped for someone else at last minute.

It is for this reason that we see an important feature in today's Epistle reading (and, incidentally, in also in our Gospel reading). There is a distinct emphasis on the senses:

We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life...

The author uses the senses – seeing, hearing, touching – to reinforce the reality of what he is about to tell them. This is an emphasis that Jesus was not a projection, a hologram as we might find in science fiction. Jesus was not a purely spiritual being, like the angels who could appear but not be touched. Jesus was fully human and could be seen, heard, and touched.

You might be wondering why this was so important, and it was important for several reasons, not all of which are apparent if we just focus on this reading without the rest of the context. One of the issues the church faced around the time this epistle was written was persecution by Rome. Take a moment to reflect on what it would mean to a church where people are dying for their faith if they accepted this idea that it only *appeared* that Jesus suffered.

Take a moment to also reflect on what "only appearing to suffer" might have meant for the early church; also reflect on what it might mean for our pastoral care today.

I hope the condemnation of Gnosticism becomes understandable as we start to explore its implications. In these early days, at least, such condemnation was not

about personality or politics, but rather the implications and what the first generations of the church knew about who Jesus was.

If our reading continued into the next chapter (that unfortunately does not appear in the lectionary) we would hear a further and important elaboration on this:

Now by this we know that we have come to know him, if we obey his commandments. Whoever says, "I have come to know him," but does not obey his commandments is a liar, and in such a person the truth does not exist; but whoever obeys his word, truly in this person the love of God has reached perfection.

And what is this command? Remember this is the same school of thought that wrote the Gospel of John and there is only one commandment in that Gospel [Anyone?]:

A new commandment I give to you, love one another.

For the author of this epistle, living a Christian life is not just about thoughts and ideas (which was another idea of the Gnostics) but had practical implications for how one lived. In saying that Jesus was truly human, the author also affirmed that God, embodied in Jesus, knew how hard it is to live by this commandment. It is not always an easy thing to love one another. It is easy to love people who are like us, but what about other people? The early church had one additional challenge that we do not have today – loving others included the people who were persecuting them. What a challenge that would be!

I think there is one more point that is worth drawing out from this reading, although it really would benefit from a whole study series on its own. At the end of our reading is a reference to the death of Jesus being the "atoning sacrifice." Over the years the church has explored how to make sense of Jesus' death and by the time our current popular theology emerged on this topic, the sacrificial system had been out of broader culture for almost 1,000 years. Sacrifices were not about purchasing forgiveness or to prevent retaliation, but rather as a ritual means of acknowledging the hurt that has been caused. The word that here is translated "atoning" is used in the Greek version of the Old Testament to describe the place in the temple where God was assumed to reside – which gives a different spin to the concept.

And so, the author of this epistle affirms with all the senses that Jesus knew what it was to be human, and could identify with the difficulty of loving one's enemies. In the death of Jesus we find reconciliation with God, not because his death has appeased an angry and violent being, but rather because as we participate in it we acknowledge the hurt caused and we look towards following more closely the one command given in the writings of the author: Love one another.