

WE MUST DISTINGUISH BETWEEN GOOD NEWS AND FAKE NEWS

Sermon for the 7th Sunday of Easter, 2021

1 John 5:9-15

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is our Second Reading from before, 1 John 5:9-15: ⁹ **If we receive the testimony of human beings, the testimony of God is greater, because this is the testimony of God, which He has given about His Son.** ¹⁰ **The person who believes in the Son of God has the testimony in himself. The person who does not believe God has made Him a liar, because he has not believed the testimony that God has given about His Son.** ¹¹ **This is the testimony: that God has given us eternal life and this life is in His Son.** ¹² **The person who has the Son has life. The person who does not have the Son of God does not have life.**

¹³ **I am writing these things to you that you, who believe in the name of the Son of God, may know that you have eternal life.** ¹⁴ **This is the confidence that we have in Him, that, if we ask for anything according to His will, He hears us.** ¹⁵ **If we know that He hears us in whatever we ask, we also know that we have from Him the requests that we have made.**

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

We have just observed Christ's ascension into heaven, trusting that He has given His people everything they need to rest secure in the ark of the Church until He comes again. There is great emphasis on the preservation of the saints and staying on course, as seen in our First Reading for today, where "*With one mind (the disciples) all kept praying together, along with the women, Mary the mother of Jesus and His brothers*" (Acts 1:14). Peter had directed them to regroup and choose a replacement for Judas so that they could continue to bear "*witness with us of His resurrection*" (1:22).

Our Gospel for today revealed Jesus as the great High Priest, who prayed that the Father would "*keep them from the Evil One,*" consecrating Himself for the sake of the disciples, "*that they also may be set apart as holy by the truth*" (John 17:15, 19). Therefore, it is appropriate, as we await the return of our Lord, to reject the testimony of human beings and look to the greater testimony of God. The testimony of God alone is to be trusted, for it declares, "**The person who has the Son has life.**" As we live, we have confidence toward Him that "**if we ask for anything according to His will, He hears us.**"

In speaking to his hearers, John had just mentioned the three witnesses - the water, and the blood and the Spirit.¹ Remember how John had wanted to encourage the believers to hold firm to the faith delivered to them because a challenge was now coming from false teachers whose one desire was to lead them astray. Remember how John had said to "*test the spirits to see whether they are from God!*" (1 John 4:1). It was vitally necessary for his hearers to examine the words and actions of these so-called teachers in light of the whole testimony of Scripture to distinguish between fake news and Good News.

In his Letter, John was refuting the Gnostic heretics of his day. The Gnostics had said that Jesus was fully human and that at His baptism, the "Eternal Christ" had descended and taken possession of a man named Jesus, making Him a great and wise teacher. They also taught that the Christ then left Jesus just before the passion, so that all Jesus suffered was merely one man's suffering, and that His death was merely the death of man and *not* the death of the Son of God for us. This idea would destroy the Gospel, of course. The Gnostics didn't mind because they believed it was knowing and understanding the true nature of the universe and of God - who they understood as someone other than the Creator of the world - that saved a person. They also denied resurrection because the material things were evil and undesirable to the Gnostic theology. To them, the resurrection of the body was bad.

John refuted this teaching by saying here that Jesus had indeed come as the Son of God, the Christ, not just by means of a baptism, but also to suffer and die. The water is not the only witness, nor the cause, but the blood shed on

¹ 1 John 5:6-8

the cross is the very blood of the only-begotten of the Father - the Son of God. He was Christ at His baptism, and He was Christ at His death - and the witness of the Spirit is added - the Holy Spirit of God. It is the Spirit who bears witness to Christ, and His witness is truth because the Spirit is Truth Himself. John answers the Gnostics, and he answers all of those who would cast doubt on the divinity of Jesus.

John explains, **“9 If we receive the testimony of human beings, the testimony of God is greater, because this is the testimony of God, which He has given about His Son. 10 The person who believes in the Son of God has the testimony in himself. The person who does not believe God has made Him a liar, because he has not believed the testimony that God has given about His Son.”** This is Good News versus fake news.

John realised the confusion that the Evil One relentlessly sows by various means, both then and now. Today fake news abounds, confusing so many. We perhaps see more of this around election time, when political parties all vie for our vote. Fake news can be a powerful ally. Modern campaigns firmly believe that if a false narrative - a lie - is repeated often enough, it will be believed by enough people to make an impact. People are often easily persuaded to believe anything they hear or read.

Of course, it isn't just politicians who sow doubt and confusion on purpose. It also happens in the media, in social relationships, and in religion. The Evil One is more than willing to share his tactics with all. They are time-tested, and they work!

In fact, they work so well that John urgently makes the distinction between the **“testimony of human beings”** and the **“testimony of God.”** On the one hand, the testimony of human beings says there is no God, that the Bible is just one big fairy tale made up by men, that abortion is not killing a human being, that marriage should be for couples of either sex who want to live together, that sin is simply an archaic idea that was introduced to control people. On the other hand, some try to pass off their testimony as being from God. One instance of this is the founder of the Mormon Church, Joseph Smith, who claimed that the angel Moroni had guided him to discover hidden golden plates to translate, and thus reform the church. We could go on and on. All of this goes against the greater **“testimony of God.”** The testimony of human beings calls God an outright liar and tries to confuse the casual observer and the weak in faith by either dismissing or twisting God's own Word. All who promote these falsehoods do not believe the **“testimony that God has given about His Son.”** But John reveals that **“the testimony of God is greater.”**

This greater testimony is the *direct opposite* of the testimony of human beings, which keeps us bound in confusion and darkness, bringing nothing but eternal death. John speaks of the truth of God's testimony that **“has given us eternal life and this life is in His Son.** **12 The person who has the Son has life. The person who does not have the Son of God does not have life.”** It is a matter of life-and-death importance that we fight the “fake news” of human beings with the “Good News” of God.

As believers in the Son of God, we have inside of us this testimony of life in Him. It was placed there in our baptism, and ever since that time, we bear His name. We, too, are God's children who possess eternal life by the work of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who has delivered us from death to life through His resurrection victory.

Does this necessarily mean that we won't get confused now and then with the testimony of human beings being forced upon us day and night? Unfortunately, no. Remember that the Evil One has enthusiastically franchised his methods of deception to the one in every aspect of this vale of tears **“who does not believe God,”** but instead, **“has made Him a liar.”**

Unfortunately, many Christians are reluctant to study the testimony of God or teach it to their children for a myriad of reasons. These reasons overlook a very dangerous situation. People say they don't have time or that they aren't knowledgeable enough to understand it and teach it to their children. It clashes with the culture that they've come to enjoy and would put them at odds with friends or co-workers. Rather than arguing or debating about religion, can't we just say, “I love Jesus” and glide through on the strength of what we remember being taught by the nice lady in Sunday School or the confirmation class we (reluctantly) went through? Of course, we are not implying that the teaching we received wasn't good and faithful; it's just that when we find ourselves up against the devil, the world, and our flesh, we're going to fall for the fake news delivered by enthusiastic unbelieving professors, media, Jehovah's Witnesses, people who are “spiritual but not religious,” Mormons, pop culture icons, and all our hip friends. We'll be like the seed

that grew up only to be choked by thorns.² More often than not, these people are much more willing to talk about what they believe than we are, and that is unfortunate.

We leave ourselves and our children vulnerable when we feel so uncomfortable about hearing or teaching the Good News that we do or say nothing. We're afraid that we may sound old-fashioned; we may not say the right things about what's going on in the world today; we may not even *know* what's going on in the world today. The chilling reality is that that is what we're up against when it comes to talking about, learning about, or teaching our children about the testimony of God. If we don't do it, somebody else is eager to engage them in the testimony of men - fake news.

Dear friends, we are blessed to have ready access to "**the testimony of God.**" We assemble here around God's Word and Sacrament to receive life, salvation, and the forgiveness of sins. Throughout his three epistles, John frequently and lovingly refers to his congregation as precious "children" - children of God whom he did not want to see misled by misinformation and falsehood. He says, "**I am writing these things to you that you, who believe in the name of the Son of God, may know that you have eternal life.**"

With this testimony inside us, "**This is the confidence that we have in Him, that, if we ask for anything according to His will, He hears us.**"¹⁵ **If we know that He hears us in whatever we ask, we also know that we have from Him the requests that we have made.**" God knows how to give good gifts to His children.³ We do not always know what to ask, but His will is always for our salvation and for the salvation of all. And it is God's will that the testimony we bear is a light, not only to our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ, but also to our neighbour who is lost in fake news. And the good news is "**The person who has the Son has life.**" Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

PRAYER FOR THE SEVENTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Almighty God, our light and our salvation, we praise You for Your love and pity to all people. But we praise You especially for giving us Your only Son Jesus Christ, who has ascended in triumph to Your right hand and sits at Your right hand with all other authority subordinated to Him. We thank You for crowning Him with glory and honour because of His obedient life, His innocent suffering, His redeeming death, and His resurrection. You have made Him king over all and Lord of all things for the benefit of the Church. Grant that we too may continue to confess Him as Lord of our hearts and our only Saviour.

Enable us through Your Holy Spirit to understand and know the things that belong to Your eternal kingdom. Comfort and strengthen us by Your heavenly truth. Stir our lives by Your Spirit, so that we may be ready to forgive others, love others as brothers and sisters, and be willing to help others generously and cheerfully. Keep us watchful and prayerful, so that we may not fall into temptation. If need be, give us the willingness to suffer for Jesus' sake. When testing comes, help us through Your Spirit to stand firm and steady, always busy in our work for You.

Renew all who serve in Your Church by Your gracious, powerful Spirit, that Christ may be consistent-ly confessed, His cross uplifted, and His Gospel proclaimed as the only power that saves. Give grace and power to all pastors and missionaries, and warm love to all Your people, so that all may use their varied gifts to Your praise, through Jesus Christ.

Bless all parents, that they may give a good example to their children and encourage them in faith, godly living, daily study of Your Word, and a life of service to You and to all people.

Pour out Your Spirit on our nation, that our people may live in peaceful and pious homes, and may serve You in all godliness and honour. Give Your blessing to all who work with mind or hand, that they may do their tasks honestly and conscientiously, and receive both satisfaction and a proper reward for their ser-vice. Give true wisdom to all in government, that they may perform their duties in ways that please You.

Hear the prayers of all in trouble and suffering. In the quiet hours of the night when there is no one to share their burdens of pain, loneliness, and worry, give them Your strength and hope, and assure them of Your love, power, and

² Matthew 13:7

³ Luke 11:13

constant presence.

We give to You, heavenly Father, and your Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ, and to the Spirit of glory and of peace, all the praise for ever and ever. Amen.

SEVENTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Acts 1:12-26

¹² Then they went back to Jerusalem from what was called “the Mount of Olives,” which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day’s journey away.

¹³ When they entered, they went to the second-floor room where they were staying. There were Peter, John, James, Andrew, Philip, Thomas, Bartholomew, Matthew; James, the son of Alphaeus, Simon the Zealot and Judas, the son of James. ¹⁴ With one mind these all kept praying together, along with the women, Mary the mother of Jesus and His brothers.

¹⁵ In those days Peter stood up among the disciples (the number of persons all together was about a hundred and twenty) and he said, ¹⁶ “Men, brothers, the passage of Scripture that the Holy Spirit spoke long ago through the mouth of David about Judas had to be fulfilled. He served as a guide for the men who arrested Jesus. ¹⁷ For Judas had been counted as one of us and had received his portion in this ministry. ¹⁸ With the reward that he got for his wickedness, Judas bought a field. He fell headlong and burst open in the middle and all his intestines poured out. ¹⁹ All those who live in Jerusalem have heard about it, and so that piece of land is called ‘Akel-Dama’ in their language, that is, ‘Field of Blood.’ ²⁰ For Scripture has said in the book of Psalms: ‘Let his home be deserted and let there be no one who lives in it!’ and ‘Let someone else take his position of oversight!’ ²¹ Therefore, there must be one of the men who have accompanied us all through the time when the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, ²² one of these men who have been with us, beginning with the baptism of John until the day when Jesus was taken up from us, to be a witness with us of His resurrection.”

²³ They proposed two men: Joseph, called “Barsabbas,” who was also known as “Justus,” and Matthias. ²⁴ Then they prayed, “Lord, You know the hearts of all. Show which of these two You have chosen ²⁵ to take over the position of this ministry and office of apostle, from which Judas has transgressed, to go to his own place!”

²⁶ They cast lots for them, and the lot fell to Matthias, and he was chosen by vote to be added to the eleven apostles.

1 John 5:9-15

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John 17:11b-19

^{11b} Holy Father, keep them in Your name, the name that You have given Me, that they may be one, as We are one! ¹² While I have been with them, I have kept them in Your name, which You have given Me. I have watched over them, and none of them has been lost except the one who will be lost, that the Scripture may be fulfilled. ¹³ Now I am coming to You and I say these things while I am in the world, that they may have a full measure of My joy in them. ¹⁴ I have given them Your Word, but the world has hated them, because they do not belong to the world, as I do not belong to the world. ¹⁵ I do not ask You to take them out of the world but to keep them from the Evil One. ¹⁶ They do not belong to the world, as I do not belong to the world. ¹⁷ Make them holy by the truth! Your Word is truth. ¹⁸ As You have sent Me into the world, I have also sent them into the world. ¹⁹ For their sakes I set Myself apart as holy, that they also may be set apart as holy by the truth.