

ST NINIAN'S POLLOKSHIELDS
LENT 2004
NEW TESTAMENT BASICS 4

OTHER EPISTLES

We are now more than half way through this course on New Testament basics, having so far looked at the birth of the NT, the Gospels and Acts, and the Pauline letters. This week we come to consider what I've rather ungenerously called "other epistles". What are they? Answer: Hebrews, James, 1 & 2 Peter, 1, 2 & 3 John and Jude, 8 writings in all.

Of these, Hebrews stands on its own, and the other 7 have, by long tradition in the church, been grouped together as the Catholic, or General, Epistles. You may remember that last week I posed the question of whether Paul's letters were to be thought of as literary compositions intended for publication or more as letters like you or I might write to individuals or organizations as need arose, and came down on the side of the latter. Well, this time the works we are looking at are more like the former, literary epistles, with the exception of 2 and 3 John which are short letters in the ordinary sense.

Hebrews reads very unlike the standard Pauline letters we considered last time. It does not have an opening formula, though there is a brief greeting section at the end. It is both a sustained piece of theological argument about the person and work of Christ and a series of exhortations to keep the faith in a time of fear and possible apostasy – in fact the writer calls it "a word of exhortation". 1 John lacks all elements of the letter form – no opening formula, no greetings at the end. It is more like a sermon. 1,2 & 3 John are very like the Gospel of John in vocabulary, literary style and theological ideas and clearly come

from the same stream of tradition and the same community that lie behind the gospel. James, 1 & 2 Peter and Jude are, in effect, homilies about right belief and right conduct cast in letter form. The Catholic Epistles are distinguished by the name of the writer rather than by the person or churches to whom or which they are written. The title “Catholic Epistle” was first used of 1 John at the end of the 2nd century and seems to have spread to the other six over time. Its meaning is debated – in the East “addressed to all the churches”, in the West “recognized by all the churches”. You take your pick, not least because 2 & 3 John and 1 Peter appear to be addressed to specific communities or groups of communities! However, the kind of material you find in them is of general application – encouragement to hold firm in face of persecution, warnings against false teachings, exhortation to hold to the true faith delivered by the apostles, in short defence and commendation of sound doctrine and morals. There were also differences between East and West in regard to estimates of their importance – in the East lists of the books of the NT put the Catholic Epistles after Acts and before the Pauline letters, probably because they are attributed to original apostles or members of the Jerusalem mother church. In Western, Latin lists, however, they followed Paul’s letters, which were perhaps considered more important. Their present order may depend on Gal 2.9 in which Paul tells us that *James, Peter and John, who were reputed to be pillars, gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship.* Once again, these writings are foundational. We believe that the Spirit has guided the church to regard them as scripture and uses them to build up the church and the faithful. However, it is worth remembering that such an estimate did not preclude Martin Luther from a very unfavourable estimate of James – an epistle of straw he called it, mainly because it appeared to criticize the Pauline doctrine of justification by faith alone which he thought was the core of the gospel! And perhaps it does not preclude us from admitting that we cannot relate to all of the NT writings in quite the same way or put them all on quite the same

level. But times change and tastes and needs change – what may not be popular in the church now, could speak volumes in a hundred years.

What about dating? Recent scholarship makes the following suggestions:

Hebrews	pre-70
James	60
1 Peter	64/65, just before Peter's death
2 Peter	c.100
1,2,3 John	c.100
Jude	late 1 st century

We are dealing here with a wide range of material and my plan this week is to talk, briefly, about each letter in turn, to give you a flavour of what is to be found in each.

Hebrews. As I said earlier, Hebrews is a wonderful mixture of theological exposition and exhortation to remain faithful to Jesus Christ, whose person and work it expounds. The people it addresses are facing persecution and trials of many kinds. It calls itself “a word of exhortation” (13.22). To my mind, for a work that, unlike the gospels, does not tell the story of Jesus, it has a remarkably firm grasp on the reality of his human nature and experience. This is even more remarkable when you consider that Hebrews describes Jesus as “the express image of God’s very being”. But the humanity is key to the central exposition of Jesus as our great high priest who offers himself for our salvation – to be priest he must be like us, to be the source of salvation he must be God. I like to sum up the teaching of Hebrews like this – *He is our brother who enters with sacrifice*. Because he has done this, we can hold firm in faith, for he has gone before us as pioneer. Three key passages from Hebrews which reflect the interplay of human and divine categories in its treatment of Jesus and its

exhortation to keep faithful: *He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature, upholding the universe by his word of power...because he himself has suffered and been tempted, he is able to help those who are tempted.....Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.*

James The contrast with Hebrews is dramatic. No overarching theological theme or image here – rather a series of reflections aimed to instil practical religion and a proper correspondence between faith and action – you might say that James is about practising what you preach. In 108 verses there are about 60 imperatives! Famously, James appears to criticize if not Paul’s teaching on justification by faith, at least some understandings of it. Some key passages to give you a flavour of its teaching...*You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness... be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves... Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world....You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone... For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead. ...no one can tame the tongue--a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so.*

1 Peter was written to Christians in northern Asia Minor (modern Turkey) who were suffering some kind of persecution to encourage them to remain faithful. Interestingly it consistently instructs them to be good and honest citizens and to honour the emperor and local magistrates – there is no sense here, as you get

in Revelation, of Roman power as either anti-God or anti-Christian. If we remember the fate of Peter at Rome in the fury of Nero's persecution of Christians in the city, this is even more interesting. To my mind the core of the letter is contained in the apostle's reminder to his readers of *what* God has done for them - *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time; and of who they really are: But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.*

2 Peter. It is addressed "to those who have obtained a faith of equal standing with ours in the righteousness of our God and Saviour Jesus Christ" – a pretty general address. The main aim of the letter is to encourage belief in the second coming of Christ in view of its delay and to warn in the strongest terms against false teachers. The former objective leads to a very famous passage - *First of all you must understand this, that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and indulging their own lusts and saying, "Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since our ancestors died, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation!" ... But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance.* The polemic against false teachers is very strong, maybe too strong for contemporary stomachs, but reminds us that controversy, even acute controversy, has always been part of church life, not least because people believe truth to be at stake in some arguments. Listen to this excoriating passage: *For they speak bombastic nonsense, and with licentious desires of the flesh they entice people*

who have just escaped from those who live in error. They promise them freedom, but they themselves are slaves of corruption; for people are slaves to whatever masters them. For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overpowered, the last state has become worse for them than the first. For it would have been better for them never to have known the way of righteousness than, after knowing it, to turn back from the holy commandment that was passed on to them. It has happened to them according to the true proverb, "The dog turns back to its own vomit," and, "The sow is washed only to wallow in the mud."

1,2,3 John One scholar has written of 1 John, very perceptively, as follows: *Doctrine and ethics, theology and behaviour, are inextricably woven together throughout the letter. The truth is not so much argued as affirmed. Though, in a broad sense, there is order and progression in the letter, yet the various themes are frequently reintroduced, and often blend into one another, like the leading refrains of a great musical composition.* It is likely that all three letters post date the gospel of John – they seem to reflect a period in the church behind the gospel when there are divisions and splits and their atmosphere is one of bitter conflict – 1 John claims that false teachers *have gone out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us they would have continued with us.* Theologically it is concerned to combat people who claimed that God had not really become man in Jesus – hence, like the Gospel, it insists on Jesus coming in the flesh – *every spirit which confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God.* 2 John says the same – *For many deceivers have gone out into the world, men who will not acknowledge the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh; such a one is the deceiver and the antichrist.* Once more we see that theology is forged in the attempt to distinguish true from false teaching, forged in controversy and conflict. 1 John is also important for its teaching on the nature of God as love, not least as an antidote to the divisions afflicting the church: *Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love ... God is love,*

and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them...We love because he first loved us. And this, as in James, is given practical application: Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also. 2 & 3 John reinforce the teaching of 1 John and also reflect conflict within the church community.

Jude This short letter is concerned with combating false teachers who have penetrated the church – and they are condemned in language just as severe as we found in 2 Peter. They are characterized as *grumblers and malcontents; they indulge their own lusts; they are bombastic in speech, flattering people to their own advantage.* It is, Jude says, *these worldly people, devoid of the Spirit, who are causing divisions.* To resist them the readers are famously urged *to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints.* The letter ends with a most beautiful doxology which has found its way into our modern funeral services and with which I want to end this talk - *Now to him who is able to keep you from falling, and to make you stand without blemish in the presence of his glory with rejoicing, to the only God our Saviour, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, power, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.*