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On the heels of scandals hounding Oxfam, football, gymnastics, film, music, the arts, corporate and business life and politics now that the Australian Prime Minister wants to ban romantic liaisons between ministers and staff, once again, this past week, the ugly and very frightening news of mass killings of school children has made the headlines, and that too, on the first day of Lent.

Not a day goes by when *mass* killings don't take place somewhere in the world. Not all make the headlines, but the ones which do, leave us stunned, unable to make sense, why someone would do such a thing.

Every time I hear news of children killed in schools, my heart goes out to those who mourn for a young life, cut short in its prime; a promising future, snuffed out in one second.

Mingled with this, my heart goes out to young people who survive such horrific tragedies. Not only must they confront their own fears and recurring nightmares, but the conversations around them to help guide them through their doubts and fears, become heated, leaving them unable to process their own thoughts: should they believe that the cause of such acts of random killing is "mental illness" among their peers? Should they believe, controlling access to, and controlling the sale of guns and weapons will solve the problem?

Not only are children confused, but so are adults. They don't know how to pray, and what to pray for!

In the midst of all this, is the condemnation of a nation by well-meaning evangelists, who offer a simplistic cause-and-effect diagnosis: the current situation is the result of prayer being taken out of schools and public places, the result of abortions being the highest in the world, because the nation has the largest nuclear arsenal in the world, and this list goes on. This kind of condemnation is not helpful at this time.

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Nor is it helpful **at this time**, to send out a rallying cry, inviting people to embrace the Gospel, to avoid such devastation, to which my question is, *Do people really know what **The Gospel** is, before we invite them into it? Have we made the effort to understand it ourselves, before we offer **The Gospel** as a solution to the ills of the world?*

Christian denominations cannot agree what **The Gospel** means and does to us. Some say, it is simply a collection of Jesus' teachings; others say **The Gospel** is to 'love God and to love your neighbour as yourself'. It is, but what does this mean in practice? How do we live this?

It is no wonder then, we find the generation younger than most of us here, have very little understanding of the meaning and need for repentance, and what conversion is all about.

John's letter is so very poignant and his message so very appropriate at this time. He is writing a personal letter of encouragement to individual members in his church, and being a circular letter going to other churches, he is addressing members who are at different stages of growth<sup>1</sup> in their Christian walk as a follower of Christ, their journey into a deeper relationship with God our Father.

- To those **new** in their faith, he reminds them, *Be rest assured, everything in your past life, God has forgiven and forgotten. Don't let anyone remind you, that you fall short of God's love and grace.*
- At the other end of the scale, are the **mature** in faith, whose trust in the Word of God has grown. To them John says, *You know Him well, who is from the beginning. Build on your relationship with Him.*
- And to those in between, who are **growing in their faith**, working their way through what it means to live as a follower of Christ, John reminds them, they are experiencing the love of God every day, they have the

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<sup>1</sup> 1 John 2:12-14

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strength and the power of God to overcome anything which distracts them, because the Word of God lives in them, always.

John's message is very apt and appropriate for our times. He provides a framework by which we can find a settled peace from the confusing and conflicting views we hear in the world around us, about right versus wrong, fake versus trusted, and the millions of individual opinions masquerading as **truth and fact**.

Last week we heard John's message about living in the light versus living in darkness. Our passage today and next week, John outlines **two great dangers** which threatens our relationship with God and with each other.

The first which we shall examine today, John says, *Never let your hearts fall in love with **this world** or any of the things of it. A person cannot love the Father and love the world at the same time, because all the world-systems, are driven by a passionate appetite for that which satisfies the body, that which gives pleasure through the eyes, and the glamour, satisfaction and public accolades of personal achievement, none of which come from the Father at all, but are driven by the world and its own values. All these are transient and will one day soon, disappear. But those who align themselves with God's plan and follow God's will, become part of what is permanent and eternal, which can never die.*<sup>2</sup>

John is drawing a clear line of demarcation: the world is poisoned by value systems which are not of God. Those who are driven by, who focus on the passionate pursuit of pleasure, to satisfy the cravings of the body, to satisfy the cravings of the mind fed through the eyes, and to satisfy the ego, those who pursue the goals of self gratification find themselves distanced from God.

How then do we guard against falling into the trap of world-systems? John uses the language of "family" to help us understand.

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<sup>2</sup> 1 John 2:15-17 (J. B. Philips New Testament)

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If God is to be your Father, then you must be His child; and if you are His son or daughter, then He must have given birth to you at some time.

We agree that all life is created by God. Each one of us is here today because God, "knit us in our mother's womb"<sup>3</sup> and breathes His spirit in us at birth. When we are fit to be responsible adults in this world, God presents us with a choice: do you want your life to be shaped by world-systems, values and standards which keep changing and will fade away, or will you be shaped by the values of my kingdom and find yourself at home in my eternal Kingdom?

*I won't force you to make a choice, says God. The decision is yours.*

*Should you decide to align your life with mine, says God, I will give you **new birth**; all trace of your former life will be wiped away, and I will not hold anything of your past against you.*

The closest thing we have to help us understand God's offer of new birth, is the "witness protection programme"<sup>4</sup>, which protects a witness from harm, during a trial, and at times proves the witness with a new identity for the rest of their lives.

This **new birth** is the same as being **born again**. I know its a phrase which does not not endear to us, mostly because it has been abused. We think its about saying a few words of commitment (although this is important); we think its about reciting a creed (although this helps us understand what we should believe); we think it's about being baptised, (although this helps us make a public commitment and makes us accountable to friends in the church).

The truth is, taking on **new birth** is about entering God's witness protection programme, to be protected against the accusations of the

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<sup>3</sup> Psalm 13:13-14

<sup>4</sup> also known as the UK Protected Persons Service (UKPPS)

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enemy who wants us to believe we are not worthy of God's love, because of our past. To take on **new birth** is to be given a new identity through Jesus Christ, and come under the protection of the Holy Spirit.

Now I am not going to ask you put up your hand while we are praying, nor am I going to ask you to come up to the front to make a visible commitment. I am only asking you to consider seriously what the Apostle John puts forward as a proposition, *whoever does the will of God, abides (lives) forever (with the Father, in eternity, for eternity).*

You owe it to yourself to consider seriously, the first and most powerful danger which challenges your relationship with God, and with those around you: the world and its systems of laws, its value attributes, its social customs and traditions, and its structure of relationships, are all being challenged and shaped by world systems.

The young girls and boys in the school in Florida are being blitzed and besieged with all kinds of conflicting messages, mostly from people pushing their own agenda.

There are times we feel like that, don't you agree? What and whom should I believe?

If you will be convinced that **God's witness protection programme** is worth enrolling in, because the protection provided by the Holy Spirit is real and unmatched, and the answers to life provided by Jesus' teaching are practical, then you are equipped to reach out to children, and people who are looking for answers, and offer them your first-hand experience of all that you have learned and benefitted from, personally.

**AMEN.**