I John5.

Last week, a member of our congregation, Helga Lane died after a long battle with cancer. She will be buried on Friday in the Taunusstein Freiwald cemetary on Friday at 13.30. She had been in a hospice, that is place where people can be cared for as they die. But Helga after a year of their care, death didn`t seem immanent and so she was asked to go into a care home. Gillian Süssner, who had visited her quite regularly was shocked by what happened there. Gillian who used to be a nurse, described to me in some detail, that basic care was lacking. So she did what she could to put things right there and then, and had a word with one of the care staff. The problem was not there lack of training or the attitude of the staff, there were simply not enough staff.

This is not only a problem in a single nursing home. The German government is aware of the problem and has promised to remedy the situation. But their programme will deliver an average of one worker for every old peoples home. It would be easy to blame the blindness of the political class, but politicians tend to reflect the priorities and hopes of the electorate. So if the old are not a high priority within society, they are ignored.

Now, some of you may be thinking, what has this to do with religion? Isn`t the Christian faith about how I can establish a personal relationship with god? Isn`t all this talk about the environment and social justice, a poor substitute for the Gospel of Jesus Christ?

Well, let`s look at what Jesus said about himself and our relationship to him and then let`s look at how the early church and in particular John saw this working out. So let’s look first at the reading from the book of Acts.

We only have a few verses here, so we cannot begin to understand it without looking at what has gone before it. It is a story about Peter preaching to a group of non Jews and how they respond positively to the message he gives. But by reading the whole of chapter 9 and 10, we discover that Peter has left Jerusalem and has been going around Judea, Galilee and Samaria telling people about Jesus. His hearers have been Jews. But then a man called Cornelius, a Roman centurion has a vision and is told to send for Peter and to invite him into his home. Normally, Peter would have ignored such a request. Jews did not go into the homes of non Jews. But Peter also has a vision that tells him to go and take the news a bout Jesus to the non- Jewish people, the so called gentiles. So Peter and a group of Jewish Christians take a two or three day walk up to coast to Caesarea to the house of Cornelius. He is described in this was, “He and his whole family were devout and God fearing he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly. “ So he was one of hundreds of thousands of people who had rejected the Greek and Roman gods and now believe in the Jewish God and showed it in their lives. So, when this family and its servants and slaves were baptized, we have something very significant. And this is why Luke records it in the book of the Acts of the Apostles. Christianity becomes a world religion.

What Luke also records is what Peter said to Cornelius and his family. Peter describes the work and the preaching of Jesus, his death and his resurrection. The significance of this is that Peter calls Jesus Lord and as one appointed by God to judge the living and the dead. Living almost 2000 years later, we cannot imagine how revolutionary this is. You see the word Lord in that time was used of only one person- the Roman Emperor. So Peter is making a political statement that is high treason. He is calling people to give their loyalty and service not to Caesar, but to Jesus. For only Jesus is the real power for at the end of time it is he that will be the judge of all the world.

Some time later, the gospel of John and the first letter of John were written. In the twenty or more years since the work of Peter and Paul, the Christian church is facing new challenges. A group within the church are saying that Jesus was not a human being, but a God like being who only looked lie a human being. They also teach that righteousness and love and unimportant to the followers of Christ. Commentators are not quite sure which of the rival groups that posed a threat to Christianity are being described here. The main thing is to see that John went to great lengths to emphasise the both the divinity and the humanity of Jesus. He says, “This is the one who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ, not with the water only but with the water and the blood. And the Spirit is the one that testifies, for the Spirit is the truth.”

The reference to water is to remind us of the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist in the River Jordan. As he came up out of the water, he saw the heavens opened and the spirit descending upon him like a dove ; and a voice came out of heaven, saying, “You are my beloved son, n whom I am well pleased.”

This voice confirms to us that Jesus is not just any Tom, Dick or Harry. He is no ordinary man, but the Son of God. That is not seen in one event alone. It is woven into every story in all the four gospels.

And the blood. In both the old and new testaments, the word blood is commonly used in the sense of death by violence. There is no doubt that the death of Jesus was very violent. It was final. Jesus died. Ideas that he did not die, but survived, fly in the face of the evidence. A severe flogging, followed by interrogation in depth, and then crucifixion are not conditions which men can survive. Jesus did not survive, he was a man. But John was equally certain that this man did indeed rise from the dead. This astonishing claim is at the heart of the Christian faith. It is a claim that is said to rest on the evidence on many and varied witnesses.

When Paul spoke about the resurrection in Athens, many scorned this assertion. Many still do. But there is are two ways in which philosophers say you can test the truth. They are know as the principles of cohesion and correlation. Being somewhat simple minded, I call them the jigsaw test and the cookbook test. The jigsaw test is to look at the evidence that is found in the Old and the New Testaments and to ask yourself. Does this give me an understanding of the world and the way people behave that rings true? That is an exercise for your mind and intellect.

The cook book test is to put into practice what Jesus says. Then to see if it works. John recommends both. The cook book test is to believe that Christ has been born of God and that he loves us. What we are asked to do is to love him in return and to follow his commandments, which are not burdensome. In other words to love the Lord, our God with all our heart , with all our mind and with all our strength and to love our neighbour as our self.

To love our neighbour is to follow the pattern of behaviour of Jesus, who Paul say did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage rather he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.

So I invite you as individuals and as a community to strive to be like Christ and to love and serve him and so that, as Jesus said, my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.”

But there is a reverse to this coin.

Two years ago I volunteered to become a safeguarding trainer for the Church of England Diocese in Europe. I had no idea what I was getting into or how much time it would eat up.

You see like most people in the church, I hadn`t really taken seriously the fact that the church is not just a great place full of Christians from all over the world- bound together in love and service. It is also a place where there are vulnerable people. It is not just people who are dying, it is not simply our children and youth, it can be people who live with domestic violence, it can be people who use their influence to seduce and abuse others sexually, it can be theft, it can be dominating and bullying behaviour. Evil has many faces in the church. It rarely begins with people making a conscious decision to destroy the lives of others. It begins when people think only of themselves and what they want, be it power, applause, personal satisfaction or material gain.

So we must in the first instance be vigilant and serious about **our obedience** and then take practical steps to protect and encourage those who are vulnerable within this community.

This is the dark side of our humanity. This takes us back to the Old peoples home I mentioned at the beginning. Where ever we find abuse, injustice and exploitation, we are called to fight it.

But John gives us good news. his commandments are not burdensome, for whatever is born of God conquers the world. And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith. Who is it that conquers the world but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?

#### John 15: 9 – 17

*People* Glory to you, Lord Christ!

Jesus said to his disciples, “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.”

“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.”

*People* Praise to you, Lord Christ!