

26<sup>th</sup> April

### Memory verse

If we confess our sins  
**he is faithful and just** to forgive us our sins  
and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

I John 1:9.

Very small children can learn the words in bold, and understand that “he” is God. Precise concepts of “faithful and just” may have to be left until they are older but they will understand that they are good attributes. Older children will find the whole chapter worth careful study. John, in language that is almost poetic, lays down philosophical propositions that are vital to understand. He begins before the dawn of time, “that which was in the beginning”, i.e. the eternal God, and explains the incarnation in terms of his personal experience as an apostle of having heard, seen, and even touched the incarnate son of God – who **was** in the beginning. This experience makes him a powerful witness and gives him, as it were, the right to tell us “God is light and in Him is no darkness at all” not because he has somehow deduced this for himself but because he has **heard** it from the very mouth of God Incarnate.

A thoughtful reader might wonder why John chooses the word “just” to describe God's forgiveness of sin. Surely justice requires punishment – why does John write “just” and not, for example, “merciful”? I think the answer is that since Jesus took His children's guilt on himself and has therefore paid the punishment, God therefore **justly** forgives them.

### Something to think about



Do you enjoy climbing mountains? If you are like me you think the view from the top of even a moderate hill is well worth the effort of the climb. On **26<sup>th</sup> April** 1336 the Italian poet Francesco Petrarca (1304-1374) climbed **Mont Ventoux** in France. Petrarca was a poet not a mountaineer but this ascent is often described as one of the most important mountain climbs ever. This is because Petrarca wrote about his experiences. He said “My only motive was the wish to see what so great an elevation had

to offer.” The idea is that in the middle ages, before Petrarca's time, people regarded mountains as an obstacle and certainly never climbed them just for the sake of the experience. Petrarca, it is claimed, was the first person who climbed a mountain *just because it was there*.

I think myself that it is impossible to find out whether this is really the case. Perhaps we do not have any record of those who climbed to see views before Petrarca. We can say, though, that Petrarca's climb is significant because of the record he left us of the event. Mont Ventoux is not a particularly difficult climb, it is more of a walk really, and nowadays there is actually a road to the top. But Petrarca found it a moving experience and one that made him think.

When Petrarca set off with his younger brother and a couple of servants it was a fine spring day and not too windy. Apparently Mont Ventoux is renowned for winds that can blow you off your feet! All went well until he decided that his brother and the servants were taking the hard route and he went off to look for an easier way. Alas, the route he chose was not just longer and less steep; it did not go the right way at all. Petrarca had to abandon his good idea and struggle up the steep path after the others. He did not learn his lesson though and repeated this fruitless experiment twice more

during the trip! At last he got the point and said to himself:

What thou hast repeatedly experienced to-day in the ascent of this mountain, happens to thee, as to many, in the journey toward the blessed life... Thou wouldst take a path which seems, at first thought, more easy, leading through low and worldly pleasures. But nevertheless in the end, after long wanderings, thou must perforce either climb the steeper path, under the burden of tasks foolishly deferred, to its blessed culmination, or lie down in the valley of thy sins, and (I shudder to think of it!), if the shadow of death overtake thee, spend an eternal night amid constant torments.

At first, these seem like Biblical ideas. Petrarch is counselling himself to avoid, “low and worldly pleasures” and warns himself of the dangers of spending eternity in hell. But as we read on we realise that Petrarch is not talking about repenting and trusting Christ's righteousness alone for salvation. He continues:

... I thought in silence of the lack of good counsel in us mortals, who neglect what is noblest in ourselves, scatter our energies in all directions, and waste ourselves in a vain show, because we look *about us* for what is to be found *only within*. I wondered at the *natural nobility of our soul*, save when it debases itself of its own free will, and deserts its original estate...<sup>1</sup>

Can you see that Petrarch considers that human beings have something naturally good in them? He thinks that if we would only work hard and take the steep path the *natural nobility of our soul* will lead us to what he calls the “journey toward the blessed life”. This is not the language of the Bible; it is the language of Renaissance Humanism.

Renaissance Humanism was a great movement beginning among scholars, intellectuals and rich people in Petrarch's day to study and revive the learning of the pagan Ancient Greeks. It carried on long after Petrarch's death and received a great impetus from the fall of Constantinople to the Muslims in 1453. We learned/will learn about this event in the lessons for 28 and 29<sup>th</sup> May. Greek speaking scholars fled to Western Europe, especially to Petrarch's homeland of Italy. They brought their precious Greek manuscripts with them and also their knowledge of classical Greek, which had more or less died out in Western Europe. This fuelled interest in ancient literature and thought. This movement, the Renaissance, aimed to put man at the centre of the universe. As we can see in this example of Petrarch's thinking, it was not that God's existence was denied. It was rather that man's innate or natural goodness was taught. This is why it is called *humanism*.

If you know your Bible you will see at once that the idea that man is innately good is opposite to what the Bible teaches. The Bible teaches that man is fallen. He cannot by his own efforts attain “the blessed life” or indeed any life after death. It is only through the death of Christ to atone for our sin that we can have eternal life.

### Some things to do

Older children can make a list of Bible passages that teach that man is fallen by nature.

Find Mount Ventoux on a map. Petrarch was born in **Arezzo**, Tuscany in Italy. How far was he from his birth place when he was on top of the mountain?

Find a book or junior encyclopaedia article about the Renaissance. Does it explain clearly the man-centred idea of Renaissance humanism?

Today would be a good day for a walk up a hill or mountain with a good view from the top. If you cannot go today, get out your map anyway and plan the trip for another day. Where is your nearest high point? What do you expect to be able to see? Take a camera if you have one and some paper and pencils for sketching. If the weather is fine, a picnic might be appropriate. Make sure you **walk** up the hill or mountain!

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1 Italics editorial.