

“A LETTER FROM JOHN – 2”

2 John 1-13

If you joined us last week, you’ll remember, I hope, that we looked at the first letter which John wrote to his Christian friends, towards the end of the first century. *1 John* is a letter which is quite familiar to many Christians as it has a lot to say about love and forgiveness and the five chapters of the letter have many oft-quoted phrases, not least the assertion that “*God is love*”. As well as the Gospel which bears his name, and the book of *Revelation*, John wrote a couple of other letters which we have in our New Testament, but which we don’t look at quite so often.

Whenever I’m preparing for a sermon, I look back through the things I’ve preached over the past fifty years or so to see if there are any insights that might still be useful. In the case of *2 John*, which we’re going to have a quick look at today, the last – indeed only – time I preached on it was so long ago that the only record I have is on this (1.44 MB floppy disk), which is pretty well inaccessible now! It’s a very short letter and, like John’s other two letters, it’s anonymous in that there is no mention of the author’s name – nor, in this case, the name of the recipient. *2 John* is written from “*The elder*” to “*the chosen lady*”, which makes it sound a bit like one of those anonymous Valentine messages you find in the small ads columns of newspapers in February – but maybe a bit posher.

Last week we said that it has been acknowledged since the second century that this is from John because of the clear similarities in style and vocabulary between this and the Gospel – and the John in question is the son of Zebedee, the brother of James, the cousin of Jesus and one of Jesus’ first group of disciples, the “*disciple Jesus loved*”. “*The chosen lady*”, on the other hand, is a bit of an enigma. It’s quite possible that she was actually a woman whom John had met and who had some position of influence in one of the churches with which he had links. The children mentioned in *v1,4* may well be her own children or, more likely, they may be members of her church. It’s also a possibility that that this is another way of referring to a church, in which case the “*children*” would definitely be members of that church.

The secrecy surrounding the author and the intended reader of the letter, as well as its brevity – it’s just long enough to fill a single sheet of parchment – could well be explained by the fact that, when John was writing his contributions to what we now call the New Testament, persecution of Christians was growing more intense and more widespread and it was unwise to give too many details in letters that could be intercepted by the wrong sort of people. Whatever the case, the message is the same and is pertinent both to them and to us.

The message contained in these few short verses is destined for those who are “*still walking in the truth*” (*v4*). There seems to be a clear implication that some of the church members had already wandered off the

path of truth, so John is naturally anxious that the rest of them should not be similarly misled. He stresses two main aspects of their Christian lives in what he says – love and truth – using those words over and over again. They are perhaps two of the most important things that we need to remember as followers of Jesus Christ, but two things that are constantly in tension.

I would seem that the need for this little letter has arisen over the question of hospitality for itinerant teachers. At this point in the history of the Christian Church, before the influence of printing and the written word – and long before the technology with which we are so familiar today: cassette tapes, CDs, podcasts, television, radio and the Internet – the message and teaching of the Church were communicated by travelling preachers and teachers. That was case well into mediaeval times as missionaries such as Columba, Cuthbert and Chad brought the message into our nation. And when these teachers arrived in a new community, it was the responsibility of any Christians already living there to provide board and lodging for them while they exercised their ministry. That explains the numerous references to hospitality in the New Testament and the mentions St Paul makes of what he felt he was entitled to as a minister of the Gospel.

Unfortunately, without the means of communication and church networks that we have today, and with the numerous young and inexperienced churches which were springing up all over the place, there was often the possibility of teachers turning up who weren't quite sound, who were spreading a message that was not really in tune with the truth of the Gospel. They had to do without the careful scrutiny that today's pulpit supply secretaries and conference committees exercise over the choice of speakers in our churches and on our platforms, so it was possible for some of these itinerant preachers to lead people off in the wrong direction with their sometimes heretical views. (Remember how Priscilla and Aquila had to have a quiet word with Apollos and put him right on a few things in *Acts 18*.) And don't forget that, at this time, the Church didn't even have the New Testament as a yardstick to measure the message against, as people like John were obviously still writing it.

So John emphasises here that the new churches are to demonstrate love, but also to stick closely to the truth. The two go firmly hand in hand. So often, though, Christians find themselves emphasising one at the expense of the other. They either go so overboard about truth that they become narrow and negative, refusing to have anything to do with those who do not think and behave exactly as they do: or, on the other hand – and perhaps more prevalent in the Church of today – they stress love to the extent that anything goes so that no-one could possibly be offended. One clear demonstration of that could be seen a few years ago now, when people were talking about the progress of ecumenism. One side was always going on about compromise and Babylon, having nothing whatsoever to do with anyone who deviated from a mythical standard of Christian experience – which usually included the Authorised Version of the Bible, blood and hellfire, and an unshakeable belief that the leader of any other denomination could clearly be identified as

the Antichrist; while the other side was warbling on about loving our neighbour and respecting their rights to worship Mary or Krishna or the Buddha or whatever, because it's loving them that really counts as far as the Gospel is concerned.

John's concern, though, is that we must not forget the basics of our Christian faith and he begins by reiterating the message that he has already made clear in his First Letter and which is a key aspect of his Gospel. This is, he writes in v5, "*not a new command but one which we have had from the beginning*". The command is that we love one another. That's the basis of the old Jewish law, as Jesus himself makes clear when he is asked what the greatest commandment is. And John goes on to state – as Jesus did in *John 14:15* – that real Christian love is founded on "*obedience to his commands*" (v6). Now, we looked at this last week as it is the great theme of John's First Letter – loving one another is a command from God, and from the earliest days of the Church the hallmark of Christian discipleship and the most eloquent form of witness to the world around us has been the way in which Christians love one another. It is expressed in the way we care for one another, the things we say to one another, the ways in which we relate to one another. But it is also expressed in the ways we care **about** one another, the things we say **about** one another, the ways we relate our common life here to the life of the wider community.

However, as we've already noted, there are things we need to be aware of as we express that love. Some of John's readers were identifying themselves too closely with the false teachers who were peddling an erroneous message about Jesus Christ. There was a distinct possibility, as John saw it, that some of the members of these new churches might "*lose what they had worked for*" and with that their eternal reward.

There is here a reminder that tradition is not the dirty word some people would make it out to be. True tradition, the handing on of the truth, is necessary for the survival of the Church. We need to ensure that what has been worked for by the men and women of God in the past, the things that are useful and, indeed, fundamental, are not thrown away in the search for something new, or in the rush to accommodate ourselves to the cultural norms in our society which are often completely at odds with the basic teaching of the Bible. Now John isn't talking here about the peripherals of Christianity – styles of music, modes of dress, methods of communication and so on – he is talking in this instance about "*acknowledging that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh*" (v7). He is talking about the very heart of our faith, without which we would not even be here – the person and work of Jesus Christ.

The trouble is, he writes, that there are those who "*run ahead*" (v9), who want to seem advanced and clever, who are constantly wanting to fall in with the new ideas and ways of thinking. The bounds of traditional doctrine are too narrow for them. His remark about Jesus "*coming in the flesh*" suggest that he is thinking

of the Docetists, who accepted Jesus only as divine, not as human – and possibly the newly emerging Gnostics, who believed that spirit was good and matter evil.

Today, the tables are turned somewhat. In our post-enlightenment, scientific, rationalistic worldview, the problem is not that Jesus was a human being, but that he was God as well. No-one in their right minds these days would seek to deny that Jesus lived as a human being in Palestine around 2000 years ago, but if you take out the divine element it means you can put Jesus in a little box with all the other teachers and philosophers, cut him down to size and control him and his teaching as you want. There are those – even within the churches – who want to convince us that Jesus could not have done half the things the Gospel writers tell us, because the miraculous cannot happen, can it?

The people who say such things are those who “*run ahead*”, who like to think that they are more advanced, more learned, more sophisticated than those of us who remain mired in superstition, who are wedded to old ways of doing things, who are too stupid – i.e. not scientific enough – to see the error of our ways. Virgin birth is a biological impossibility, therefore it could not have happened, so we probably can't rely on the rest of what the Gospel writers tell us. Resurrection cannot happen so here's no point basing your faith on a risen Jesus. The biblical writers didn't know anywhere as much as we do about the way the mind works, about the way the human body is put together, so what they say about sexual ethics cannot be taken seriously – all that kind of thing.

These are people who like to think they've got it sorted out because they're that much cleverer than you or I, people who are “*running ahead*” and, we have to say it because John says it here, if they are denying truths about Jesus Christ and his teaching they “*do not have God*” (v9). We need to beware of them and ensure that we are not taken in by them. We may not have quite the same problem with itinerant preachers these days, but there is an awful lot of rubbish that circulates even more widely on the Internet, and we need to ensure that what we read there is measured against the truth of the Bible and we don't swallow whole any of the flotsam and jetsam that's thrown up on the polluted beach of social media. Check what you read against the Bible. See how it fits in with the tried and tested traditions of church teaching. Ask other Christians about it if you are not sure.

Sadly, the only idea that many people beyond the churches have today about what Christians believe and do is what they read in the papers or see on mass media or social media about the sensational claims of so-called experts who are pulling Christianity apart at the seams. It is up to us to hold on to what we read in the Bible and ensure that we ourselves are not sucked into the kind of stuff that is simply fashionable or trendy. Hold on to the truth and don't compromise because of a misplaced sense of wanting to love everyone and offend no-one.

John says that those who follow Jesus must “*continue in [his] teaching*” (v9). Make the best possible use of the resources that you have for keeping close to God. Keep praying for the help of his Holy Spirit. Read and study the Bible and get all the sound teaching that you can. Share in fellowship with other Christians. John isn’t talking here about differences of interpretation, or minor issues of church order and ecclesiastical practice. He is concerned about the very bedrock of our faith – the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. Don’t swallow every new idea without thinking. Don’t just accept what others say because they seem to be cleverer than you. Stick to the truth of the Gospel and share it with love in every situation. Reach out to others with the love of Jesus Christ, but never, ever forget why you’re doing it.

This may be just a little letter, from one seemingly anonymous person to another, a book we rarely even look at, but it gives a vitally important warning to us as God’s people not to let slip the grasp that we have, by the power of God’s Holy Spirit, on the truths of his world. And it is an encouragement to us all to continue demonstrating the love and care which are the outward identifying marks of authentic and growing Christians.

For reflection and discussion

- 1) What do you understand by “truth”? How can we be sure something is “true”?
- 2) What would you say are the basic, non-negotiable truths of Christianity?
- 3) How can we ensure that we have the right balance between truth and love?
- 4) What do you think John means by “*running ahead*”? Can you give any examples?
- 5) Is there anything that has particularly struck you in the little letter? What will you do about it?