

## “A LETTER FROM JOHN – 3”

### *3 John 1-14*

We're turning this morning to the third of the short letters that we find towards the end of the New Testament by John – the John who was the son of Zebedee, the brother of James and “*the disciple whom Jesus loved*”, the writer of the Gospel that bears his name and of the weird and wonderful *Book of Revelation*, with which the Bible ends. Although he isn't named in any of these three letters, it has always been agreed that he is the writer because of the many similarities in style and wording between the letters and his other works. The other two letters are to anonymous recipients, but this one is actually to a named individual – someone called Gaius. If you ever did any Latin or classical history at school, you'll know that Gaius was a pretty common name around the Roman Empire – a bit like John might be today – so it's pretty unlikely that this Gaius could actually be identified now, and he is almost certainly not one of the Gaiuses mentioned elsewhere in the New Testament.

John's first two letters dealt with the topic of **love** and **truth**, the two things which are most important for the followers of Jesus to show in their lives, but this letter is concerned with something that crops up in several of Paul's letters as well – it's about a difficulty in the church. We often have a very rose-tinted view of life in the Early Church, don't we, coloured very much by the description we have of it in the first few chapters of *Acts*. But it didn't take long for the theological fur to start flying and Paul has to address problems of division, immorality, false teaching, power struggles and all the rest in his letters: his two letters to the church in Corinth are probably the most obvious examples of that. By the time John was writing his letters towards the end of the first century, there were all sorts of difficulties facing the church – internally and externally. In the Second Letter, which we looked at last week, there was a problem with the itinerant preachers who were bringing wrong ideas into the churches and we may well have concluded that such things don't really happen today. Heresy will not be preached from this pulpit – there are too many retired ministers and Bible scholars in the congregation for one thing!

But the problem John is addressing here is one which might come a bit closer to home for us in the church of today – there was a difficulty with a particular personality in the church. He was upsetting people and throwing his weight around in an unnecessarily insensitive way. Word had clearly reached John about this, so he writes to one of the people connected with the church whom he clearly trusts and offers him some advice.

However, it's not all doom and gloom, as the other characters who feature in the letter prove, and we'll have a look at it this morning through the three men who are mentioned by name in this letter – Gaius himself; Diotrephes, the cause of the problem; and Demetrius, the postman – The Good, The Bad and The Pretty Good Really. Although this is a very short letter (just the one side of parchment again) and there is

little in the way of description, we can still learn something about and from each of these three characters because of what John writes here. Let's have a look.

## 1 GAIUS

Gaius was the recipient of the letter and that seems to indicate that John trusted him and was willing to confide in him his thoughts about the state of the church. It's quite likely that he was a member of the church who lived a bit of a distance away or who wasn't able to attend very frequently because John seems to think that he isn't completely aware of everything that is going on in terms of church politics. We can discover three things about Gaius in this letter.

### **He was orthodox in his belief.**

John makes a point of saying that he has heard of Gaius's "*faithfulness to the truth*" and how he continues to walk in that truth (v3). Truth, as we saw last week, is one of John's great concerns. Whatever else may be happening in the church – and in the culture around us – it is vital that we stick to the truth in all that we do, realising, of course, that truth is embodied in the Bible, in the teaching of Jesus and in the way that has been communicated through the historic teaching of the Church. Things only start to go awry in church life when we begin to neglect the truths that remind us why we're here, what our task is to be, and how we are to relate to each other and to the world around.

### **He was loving in his actions.**

As we have noted many times before, strict adherence to dogma can often lead to an outlook that is narrow and unloving. But Gaius's faithfulness to the truth meant that he was able to demonstrate his love for other Christians – both those he knew and those who were strangers – in hospitality and generosity. We spoke last time about the need for hospitality for itinerant preachers at this point in the story of the Church, and here we learn of Gaius's efforts on that score. Indeed, he was so good at it that word got back to John about it. One writer on this letter suggests that Gaius was well off which is why he could entertain people in this way, but I don't think that need necessarily be the case and we would all do well, whatever our circumstances, to follow this example of hospitality and love in action.

### **He was respected in his circle and beyond.**

As we've already said, word had got back to John of Gaius's faithfulness to the truth and also of his generosity in hospitality, and this was something that was obviously well known. This man lived a life that was talked about by others for the quality of his beliefs and actions. Time and time again in the New Testament we are reminded that we need to be careful about our reputation as followers of Jesus – and that's not out of selfish pride, about what people will think of us, but because of the way it points others towards Jesus. Peter and John himself were obviously "*companions of Jesus*" when they stood in front of

the magistrates in *Acts 4*. The earliest Christians “*enjoyed the favour of the people*”, Luke tells us. Paul makes “*a good reputation with outsiders*” one of the criteria for selecting elders and deacons. Would word get around about our good deeds and loving concern for community as individuals and as a church? Yes, I think it would here in Lichfield, but we need to keep working at it and not rest on past experience. Remember Jesus’ words in The Sermon on the Mount: “*Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven*”.

## **2 DIOTREPHES**

This particular gentleman is the main reason for John’s writing this letter. There is no doubt, really, that this man was a leader, if not *the* leader in the church, and it seems as if the idea of being in charge had gone to his head a bit. I don’t think there’s any question that he was orthodox in his belief – such is John’s concern with correct teaching that I’m sure he would have mentioned it if Diotrephes had been teaching or supporting error. Maybe he was a bit over-zealous, or had lost his perspective on things, but it’s very clear that John sees him as the villain of the piece. Let’s just look at the things John notes about him as a warning to us not to start sliding down the same slippery slope.

### **He was egotistical.**

John tells Gaius that Diotrephes “*loves to be first*” – and I suspect that wasn’t just first to the hatch for coffee after the service! The root of the word that is translated by that phrase is found in only one other place in the New Testament, in *Colossians 1:18*, talking about Jesus: “*And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything **he might have the supremacy.***” Diotrephes loves “*to have the supremacy*”, he likes to be top dog. That is always a temptation in church life, especially when you can play on many Christians’ unwillingness to be involved in confrontation. Those who have any position of leadership within church life, in whatever area, need constantly to be aware of that temptation.

### **He was a malicious gossip.**

Part of the trouble with Diotrephes was that he didn’t like John, it seems. Maybe he was jealous of John’s position, maybe he had had some dispute with him, maybe it was just a personality clash: whatever it was, he was going to make sure that other people knew about John and what an awful man he was (*v10*). There are always people in churches – however small, however large – who like to gossip. Most of the time it isn’t actually malicious – although it can be just as damaging. But when it is malicious it can divide churches more effectively than arguments about spiritual gifts, women’s ordination or the choice of a new logo. And the devil knows it. If he wants to split a church, there’s no need to go to all the trouble of planting heresy – just get a couple of people who want to talk about others and the cracks will start to appear. Let’s pray fervently that we will not fall into that trap here.

## **He was inhospitable.**

Now, as we saw last week, John has had to speak to some churches about not offering hospitality to false preachers, but the people he is talking about here are “*the brothers*”, those who are sound in their teaching and who are part of the necessary structure of the church. But this embittered church leader, Diotrephes, is refusing to offer them a welcome, let alone hospitality. This may be because he sees them as representatives of John, or, probably more likely, because he can tolerate no rival to his own ministry. It’s always a temptation to a minister or church leader to want to control the pulpit as far as possible, not wanting anyone to come and spoil things with a different point of view. And it’s a temptation to all of us to be a bit slow on welcoming and hospitality because we just can’t be bothered.

But Diotrephes was adding to his fault by actually stopping others from showing hospitality (v10c). He was somehow forbidding other people to welcome the travelling preachers and those who disobeyed him were thrown out of membership. Perhaps we go to the other extreme in church discipline these days, but there are times when our zeal and insensitivity can hound people out of church, and I have had to deal with that in other churches. We must all be careful that our own way of looking at things does not exclude others from being part of the community of the church.

## **3 DEMETRIUS**

Demetrius gets a brief mention by John here too. He was very probably the person who delivered this letter to Gaius and so John just takes a couple of sentences to commend Demetrius to him. What he has to say really follows on from what was said about Gaius’s reputation. This man was well spoken of by everyone (v12): he was obviously respected for his sincerity and reliability. John also says that he regards him very highly and reminds Gaius that he can trust John’s word on that account.

But he also says that this messenger is well spoken of “*even by the truth itself*”. There are various ways that people have suggested that that phrase could be interpreted, but I would suggest that what John is saying here is that Demetrius’s life measures up well against the truth of God’s word: he lives out what he believes and that is obvious to everyone. Our goal as followers of Jesus must surely be that such a thing could be said of us.

So, there we have the three characters whose descriptions take up most of this little letter. The best advice we can take from it is contained in v11, where John counsels Gaius and us to “*imitate what is good*”. We have two good examples here to imitate and one that we must at all costs steer clear of. Let’s take to heart the simple lessons that John has to teach us and pray that, if John were ever to write to us, he would be able to say that same things about us that he says of Gaius.

### **For reflection and discussion**

- 1) How would you understand "*faithfulness to the truth*"? How do we decide how that is shown?
- 2) How important is reputation for followers of Jesus – personally and corporately?
- 3) Why is gossip so damaging? What can we do to guard against it?
- 4) John tells us to imitate good rather than evil. How do we identify the good?
- 5) What have you learned from John's three letters? What effect will that have on the way you behave day by day?