**2 John 1-13**

**Truth and Love – the basis of the Christian Faith**

This week and next week, we are going to be studying the two shortest letters in the New Testament - 2 John and 3 John. In total, 2 John and 3 John each contain less than 300 Greek words – really short letters. We can’t be absolutely sure who wrote them: there were a couple of people called John who were involved in the church at Ephesus. There was John the Apostle, who was the Bishop of Ephesus, and there was John the Elder, who was a local church leader. These letters could have been written by either of them, we don’t really know.

This morning, we are focusing on 2 John, which you can follow on page 261 in the New Testament, the second half, of the pew Bibles.

And the message in 2 John revolves a round a simple issue: how should we respond to those people who teach and practice Christianity in a different way from ourselves? We want to celebrate difference – we think about that idea a lot at St. Andrew’s now…but are there boundaries to how much difference we should celebrate? Is there a limit to what we should accept as truly ‘Christian’ or should we just rejoice wherever we hear the Gospel being preached?

This is a really important question for us, because we live in an age and a city where there are literally dozens of different types of churches: Anglican, Baptist, Methodist, Pentecostal, Catholic and so on…

So what constitutes the type of church we can work alongside and what constitutes the type of church we should reject as ‘not being proper’?

As well as being a key question for us, it was a crucial question that was being asked when this letter from John was written at the tail end of the first century. The letter was written at a time when it was becoming increasingly easy to travel around and share the Gospel of Christ. One of the things that the Romans had done as they established their widespread Empire was to build better roads and use better seaways and they created market towns at various points along these mammoth routes that became trading centres of Ideas just as much as Goods to buy. So the early Church was taking full advantage of this and, as we know from Acts of the Apostles and Paul’s letters, there was plenty of travel happening and the Gospel was spreading across the Empire.

So with all these missionaries on the road, they would inevitably want a place to stay on their travels and local church congregations would be the obvious place to look. But in seeking sanctuary and rest with local Christians, there was the possibility of abuse because some of these missionaries were bringing a Gospel different from that which the apostles had been preaching. So the question was, what are the boundaries of hospitality? Who should they show hospitality to and who should be rejected?

The problem, in a nutshell, is finding an answer to the question, “What is authentic Christianity?” because John argues here that we should welcome those who preach the authentic faith but not those who teach a Gospel different to that which is considered orthodox.

Now, we need to be careful here, because John is not saying that we are to reject those who church differently from us: this is not an issue about personal preference. John is absolutely clear in verse 7 that he is referring only to teachers who “do not confess that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh”. This is solely an issue to do with false teaching about the person of Jesus Christ: it has nothing to do with whether we should use liturgy or not, or whether babies can be baptised or only adults, or whether we should have female Bishops or gay clergy, or whether we all need to speak in tongues as a sign of the baptism of the Holy Spirit, or any other such doctrinal issue. None of these things should be enough for us to withdraw hospitality because even though we may have doctrinal differences, we still fundamentally believe in and teach the same Lord – Jesus Christ.

The issue John addresses here, the people who are to be firmly rejected, are those who do not teach that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh; those who deny that the incarnation – God become man – is the heart of the Christian faith.

This heresy can come in many different forms. In some ways, it is really subtle: teachings that Jesus was a just a good man, a moral example for us to live by, sent by God. John is categorical that the people to be rejected were the teachers – not the followers – who were seeking to undermine the church of God by bringing in false teaching about the nature of Jesus Christ.

I think that this is the nuance that John is working with here and we need to be absolutely clear about that and not allow this letter to become an opportunity for religious bigotry or intolerance.

So let’s first look at a bit of background to the letter before going into the specifics.

At the time, the church was struggling with a dilemma: on the one hand, there were the received teachings of the apostles about the nature of Jesus Christ. But on the other hand, there was another type of Christianity on the rise heavily influenced by Greek philosophy, and these people peddled a new style of faith that welded Christian teaching to unChristian practices to develop a new form of spirituality. And the church wrote to John because they were confused: they didn’t know who was right, they didn’t know whether to stick to the old faith system or take on the new ideas. And 2 John is the letter he sent in response.

Now it’s interesting that John doesn’t tackle the problem head-on. He doesn’t talk about Jewish heritage or Greek philosophy because, for John, the nature of true Christianity is much simpler than that. What John’s letter shows us is that being a Christian in the proper sense is not a matter of the old versus the new, but something much more fundamental than that. John tells us that adherence to the Christian faith hinges on our acceptance of two foundational principles: Truth and Love.

So that now brings us to the content of this brief letter.

His letter is addressed to ‘the elect lady’. It is likely that the Elect Lady is a church, or a group of churches, because churches were personified as females in those days in the same way that Britannia is personified as a woman now. And certainly John had a very close relationship with the church because he refers to it in verse 1 as the elect lady “whom I love in the truth”. And the way John phrases this is very emphatic: “whom *I* love in the truth” - presumably in contrast to the false teachers who do not love them in truth but are motivated differently. So at the heart of John’s letter is the idea of the importance of truth.

Truth is an unpopular concept these days. If we claim to know truth, people think we are arrogant or bigots. A claim to truth is seen as fundamentalism gone mad. We are almost apologetic about holding to truth these days…

Now, I would agree that no one grouping in society can claim to have all the truth. But the church must not be ashamed of its basic calling, which is to proclaim that Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life. Jesus Christ – the Son of God - is the truth with which every person needs to grapple. Jesus says, “I am THE truth…” - the truth by which humanity is saved.

And so John’s letter is filled throughout with this word, ‘Truth’. 5 times in the first 4 verses he brings it to mind, impressing on them the need to abide in the Truth, which is Jesus Christ.

And abiding in the truth of Christ is not just about assenting to some concepts or doctrines; acknowledging in our heads that something is true and accurate. To abide in truth as a Christian is a way of life. It underpins our relationships: John says, “I love you in the truth”. It gives us hope for the future: John says, “The truth lives in us and will be with us for ever”. It gives us comfort in our darkest hours: John says, “Grace, mercy and peace…will be with us in truth and love”. It is the foundation of our obedience: John says, “It has given me great joy to find some of your children walking in the truth.”

Truth is the cornerstone of our Christian faith because Jesus Christ is the truth and he is the rock on which we build. So to reject the truth of Christ is not to move away from Christianity as a religious movement but to move outside of Christ - the source of good relationships, hope, comfort and right living. If we do not abide in truth, we do not abide in Christ, which is why John issues a warning to his hearers in verse 7: “Many deceivers, who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh, have gone out into the world. Any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist.” As John goes on to say in verse 9, “Everyone who does not abide in the teachings of Christ, but goes beyond it, does not have God.” Our calling as Christians is to make the Truth of Christ known in this community. But truth is just one side of the coin, there is another aspect to Christian practice which John outlines in this letter.

**2. The Notion of Love**

As Christians, we think about love a lot: in our sermons, our prayers, our hymns, in our Bible readings. But in this letter, John brings out three specific points about Love…

First, that Christian love is most properly Love for God. In verse 6, he writes, “And this is love, that we walk according to his commandments.” Christian love is first and foremost obedience to God. Love is not passive, not primarily an emotion we feel, love is something we *do* – obey God. Of course, when John says this, he is reminding us of the teachings of Jesus about love for the Lord our God being the greatest commandment. If we love God, we will obey him and the depth of our obedience is the mark by which we know our love.

Second, Christian love means to love others. In verse 5, John simply writes, “Love one another”, which echoes Paul’s teaching in Romans 8:8, “He who loves his neighbour has fulfilled the law”. “Love one another” – it is such a simple command…

There is a lovely story told about John the apostle who was the only disciple to live into old age. As the Bishop of Ephesus, he lived a long time and had an active ministry to the day he died. But shortly before he died, he grew so frail that he had to be carried everywhere and he had little breath to preach for long. And time and time again, he would preach the same sermon; a sermon that was only 5 words long: “Little children, love one another”. Five small words that, for John, encapsulated the Christian message.

Loving God and loving others – two practical outworkings of the Christian faith.

But for John, in this letter, there is one more: something we may find hardest of all - and that is – to receive love. In verse 13, John writes, “The children of your elect sister send you their greetings.” The elect sister is this other church we thought about earlier and they were sending their love and support to the church to whom John writes. So often, we find it difficult to accept help and support from others. It’s almost as if acknowledging and receiving support from others is a sign of weakness and vulnerability. Giving is easy – because we still retain power over the one to whom we give. Receiving is much harder, because it means we might have to humble ourselves in the act.

As disciples of Christ, we need to learn how to receive love as well as give love.

So, in this one simple letter, John outlines the twin foundations on which the Christian life is built: Truth and Love. An acceptance of the Truth – which is Jesus Christ, our Lord. And developing a love, which is obedient to God, unswerving in its dedication to the well-being of others and able to receive from others as well as give. As we do that, we hold fast both to Truth and Love.

And we finish with one last word of comfort and assurance from this letter of John: “Whoever continues in the teaching has both the Father and the Son”. And that, of course, is all we can ever want as Christians.