

St John's, 10am, 12/1/20
2 John 1-3
Truth, Love and God

Gracious Father, grant that I might not "conceal your love and your truth from [this] great assembly. Do not withhold your mercy from [us], O LORD; may your love and your truth always protect [us]." For we ask it in the name of your Son Jesus Christ, Amen.

Well do please be seated; you'll find it helpful to have your Bible open to p1229.

As we begin, I want you to come with me in your mind's eye on a little journey. This morning we begin a new series in a frankly obscure and tiny letter of the New Testament, John's second epistle, and I want to try and sketch the scene into which it was written – just to find out if there are any points of contact with our own situation.

John – the aged apostle – presides over a group of churches in Asia Minor, modern day Turkey. The churches are self-consciously linked to one another through his ministry – perhaps we might say they form a denomination, and he is the archbishop – though both words would be anachronistic.

But within these churches, despite their solid foundation in apostolic teaching, false teachers have arisen. With persuasive words, they try to move the believers on to – what they say – are fresh insights and deeper understandings and more profound experiences of the good news about Jesus; a superior version to apostolic Christianity.

John's description of such people in v9 is revealing: he speaks ironically of such people as "running ahead" – running so far ahead that they leave God behind. His language about such people in v7 is blunt: their novel teachings reveal them to be deceivers and antichrists. They claim to be Christian teachers, but their message is bogus, counterfeit.

And local congregations within John's denomination – if I might continue to use that word – are confused and divided.

Some, it seems, have become so concerned with the truth of the apostolic gospel and its preservation that they have forgotten that same gospel makes love the primary command.

But of greater concern to John – and the heart of this letter – are those who are so concerned to love and show hospitality that they are in danger of parting company from the truth itself. We see that in two weeks time, from v7-end.

Well, imagine that: a denomination that is tearing itself apart over a dispute which pits traditionalists over against progressives; one side saying, "but the apostles say", the other side saying, "but the modern world demands". And in all of this, I have simply been describing – as best as we can discern – the situation that led John to write his second letter.

It doesn't take much, does it, to map that onto the reality of the Church of England, or more broadly the church in England? And everywhere else too – in the church news this week was the story of the splitting in half of the second largest protestant denomination in North America, the (ironically named) United Methodist Church.

Unsurprisingly, the split was over questions of human sexuality – one portion wanted to run ahead with the modern world in rejecting gender as binary and given, and marriage as

heterosexual and lifelong; the other half insisted that the church of Christ must remain faithful to the teaching of Christ. There is nothing new under the sun.

One of the most disorienting experiences for a Christian believer, especially one who is new to the faith, is the reality, variety and popularity of versions of Christianity that cast aside elements of the biblical gospel and put something different in its place – and inevitably that “something different” appeals to the present cultural mood, and to our sinful and selfish instincts.

I don't know about you, but I roll around between anger and despair and frustration and grief both for the church for whom Christ died, and the witness to a watching world.

Well, I trust that God's word will encourage us. You see, if the technology had been there 2000 years ago and the Ephesian Broadcasting Corporation had a news website, the headlines from the network of John's churches would have been very similar to the ones we hear with their stories of rift and division; conservatives and radicals.

So what does John say to us? In the midst of confusion and division, they establish three great truths about the church – truths which we need to lay hold of in our generation, and in our crisis. First, we see the privileged character of the local church. Second, we identify the authenticating hallmarks of the church. And third, we see and lay hold of the glorious Lord of the church, full of grace and truth.

So, first, the privileged character of the local church.

V1 begins, “**The elder, To the chosen lady and her children ...**”. It's a curious opening, and needs explaining. Technically, what we call the gospel and letters of John are all anonymous. I won't take time over the reasons, but there is ample evidence that the gospel, letters and Revelation were all written by John the apostle. That evidence has to do with internal evidence and similarities, and external, early testimony.

Like his brother apostle Peter, John is happy to call himself an “elder” – literally, a “presbyter”. But the word literally means “old man” and so there may well be a hint that John is well advanced in years. Perhaps, too, in calling himself “*the* elder” he is hinting at the fact that he is the last surviving apostle of Christ. Certainly, he writes with self-conscious apostolic authority.

But look who he writes to: “**the chosen lady and her children**”. If you look at v13, you'll see that he is writing from the home of this “chosen lady”'s “**chosen sister**” and her “**children**”.

Some commentators, both ancient and modern, have argued that John was writing to a flesh and blood woman from the home of her sister. But if so, it's very curious he didn't name her – as he names Gaius at the start of the start of his clearly personal third letter. It would also be a curious picture given that he is clearly writing to a congregation that would entirely consist of the actual children of this “chosen lady”

No, John is picking up a common theme in both testaments where the people of God are described in female terms. Paul, for example, describes the church as the bride of Christ in one place, and as our mother elsewhere.

So here for John. The “**chosen lady**” is a congregation of Christian believers, and those believers are the children of this lady. She is not a person so much as a personification. And she personifies the local congregation – not the universal one – because John is writing his

letter while currently based in another fellowship, which is why in v13, he send greetings from the children or members of that church. She too is a chosen lady.

But now think what this means. Who are we, as Christians, and as members of St John's? The language is not typical for us, but if we're trusting Christ and we belong to this congregation, then St John's is a "chosen lady", and we are her children.

To be a Christian is to be born again and to become one of the children of God – that is gloriously true. But John teaches us that when God the Father brings us to birth into his eternal family – through faith in his Son and by the Holy Spirit, he gives his children a mother, too – the church. We are children of a "chosen lady". As both Cyprian the church father and Calvin the reformer put it "You cannot have God for your Father unless you have the church for your Mother."

Do you think of yourself, and of this church, that way? St John's Hartford is chosen by God in Christ, and precious to him – and she is our mother. And in times of discontent and division; and especially against a prevailing culture that values casual association rather than committed belonging, we need to hear that.

Because you don't – or shouldn't – have a shallow or callous or disrespectful or unkind or uncommitted heart towards your mother. You should love her, honour her, serve her, cherish her. She's your mother.

To belong to Christ is enormously precious; but belonging to him means belonging to his church – and not merely in abstract terms, it means actually being a member of a local church, and seeing that congregation as God does – a lady he has chosen, with you as her child.

So don't ever think that being a member of a local church is a small thing. It is a great privilege, and it brings great responsibilities – not least of mutual care and protection of one another, and the gospel that makes us the church.

Of course the church isn't perfect. Is your mother perfect? We live in a fallen world, and we long for a glorified church. But until the Lord Jesus comes, we and all the children of God have been placed, by his choice and calling, into "chosen ladies", local congregations that are precious to him, and must be to us too.

Second, the two authenticating hallmarks of the church.

Listen again to John – and spot the word he uses three times. ***"To the chosen lady and her children whom I love in the truth – and not I only, but also all who know the truth – ² because of the truth, which lives in us and will be with us for ever:"***

Hard to miss, isn't it? Love *in the truth*; know *the truth*; because *of the truth*. The first authenticating hallmark of the church is that she is the place of truth. And the second hallmark is that which flows from it: love – love from John to the church and her members to whom he is writing; a love that is shared by all who know the truth.

These are the marks by which you recognise a genuine Christian community – walking in truth, and living in love. These are the hallmarks.

Now John's focus here is on the first – truth. We'll focus more on the second – love – next week.

And by truth John doesn't simply mean we should be honest with each other – though of course we should, and times of stress and division are certainly occasions when we are tempted not to use our words in a godly way.

No, John means something more. He loves these Christians, he says, “in the truth”. In other words, the truth he's speaking of is the foundation and the incentive and the means of his affection for them. Indeed, all who know this truth feel the same way. There is a family bond between Christian believers because of this truth.

And more, from v2, this truth is personal – it, or rather, *he* lives; this truth is within the believer – he lives in us. He lives eternally – this truth “will be with us for ever”.

So what – or who – does John mean when he says, “the truth”? I take it his ambiguity is deliberate, and yet not at all unclear. For in his gospel, he records Jesus saying, “**I am the truth**”. He also records Jesus promising the gift of the one he calls, “**The Spirit of truth**”. He also records Jesus praying to his Father, “**Your word is truth**”.

God's word in the gospel and the Scriptures; God's Son; God's Holy Spirit – all are the truth, and all are foundational for our personal faith and our common life. Did not Jesus say, “**You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free?**” Did he not say, “**God is spirit, and his worshippers must worship in spirit and in truth.**”

We are not bound together on the basis of a common, man-made religious tradition. If we are, I – for one – am off. No, John was bound in love to his fellow believers because his heart and mind had been captured by the living God of truth – the God who had made himself known in his Son, Jesus Christ, who is the truth; the God who introduced himself to every generation through his living and abiding word in the unchanging Scriptures – the word of truth; the God who bring us to new birth by the Spirit of truth as we receive Christ as our Lord and our Saviour.

Let's boil that down. What makes a real church? When we started Christ Church, a number of people I remember speaking to were cautious about coming in because the building didn't have a pointy roof and stained glass windows. It didn't look like a church. Now you don't need convincing that the church is the people and not the building, so let me ask the question in a more pointed way.

Is it possible for a group of people to come together for a religious purpose, and to use Christ's name, and not be a church? It seems to me that John's emphasis makes precisely that point. For the one thing he stresses as essential for authentic Christianity is the one thing that the false teachers – both then and now – have abandoned.

Perhaps they still use the name of Jesus, but glad submission to the revealed truth of God's word; genuine worship of the fully divine person of God's Son; evidence of the illuminating, regenerating, transforming work of God's Spirit is far, far gone. In its place, human reason, a cut down Jesus, a worldly agenda. Not the Spirit of truth, but the spirit of Pontius Pilate, justifying his sin under the apparently noble question, “What is truth?”

What makes the church, the church? God's truth: revealed, living, eternal – and transforming us into loving brothers.

Third, we see and lay hold of the glorious Lord of the church, full of grace and truth.

V3: “Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and from Jesus Christ, the Father's Son, will be with us in truth and love.”

The three wonderful words at the start of the verse testify that however woeful a state the church may descend to, the Lord of the church is unchangingly magnificent. Grace and mercy are both words that essentially describe God's love towards sinners. But the nuance of each is important.

Do you know yourself to be guilty before God? Does your conscience condemn you as someone who could never earn your ticket to heaven? Do you realise how utterly undeserving you are of God's favour? If you don't, you haven't understood either God or your own sin. But if you do, then grace is a wonderful gospel word. We sometimes sing, "*Grace, grace, grace paid for my sins and brought me to life; grace, grace, grace will lead me to heav'n where I'll see Your face*".

Grace is God's love towards the guilty. We stand rightly condemned, and the gospel brings us undeserved pardon. Grace is what stands behind forgiveness. If someone does us harm, grace is what enables us to forgive. It is love to the guilty.

Mercy is similar, but distinct. Do you know yourself to be in terrible spiritual need? Do you have that right sense that time is short, and there is no-one to help, and you cannot help yourself? Then mercy, too, is a powerful gospel word.

Because mercy described God's love towards the needy. Spiritually, we stand naked before God, and the gospel clothes us in righteousness. The human parallel is perhaps this: if we see someone hungry, and take them into the Seafarer and buy them fish and chips, we have shown mercy. It's love to the needy.

Grace and mercy, says John, come from God to us. His love to us who are guilty and needy means peace. There is no longer any condemnation – for grace has fully met our guilt; there is no more spiritual emptiness and exclusion – for mercy has abundantly met our need.

We have peace: peace with God – the Father and the Son – the emphasis here on Father and Son is perhaps due to the specific nature of the teaching of the intruders. But positively, we have peace with our Triune God, our Trinitarian God, "**in truth and love**".

Now what does that last phrase mean? Does John mean, this grace, mercy and peace come from the God who is in himself "truth and love"?

That would make sense: in the Old Testament, God is the one who "**[abounds] in love and faithfulness**". In the New Testament, Jesus, God in the flesh, comes "**full of grace and truth**". Truth and love lie at the heart of God's nature.

Or does John mean, the person who truly knows God's grace and mercy and peace is the person whose faith bears the fruit of truth and love – a tenacious faithfulness to God's revealed truth, and a powerful demonstration of God's transforming love?

Well, John loves ambiguity! I think the answer is yes to both. Perhaps I can put it like this: just as in the heart of God there is no separation of love and truth, so in the Christian believer and in the Christian congregation, there must be no separation of love and truth.

Perhaps you've met people go one way or the other. Let me illustrate and slightly caricature them in terms of the current mess in our own denomination as Mr Angry Anglican, and Ms Aimless Anglican.

Mr Angry knows the truth, especially about gender and sexuality: gender is binary and given, and marriage is heterosexual and lifelong. He knows what God's word says, and he misses no opportunity to say so.

Sadly, though, his language is so intemperate and merciless that the real believer who struggles, for example, with same-sex attraction would be terrified of Mr Angry finding out. They suspect, probably rightly, that rejection and condemnation would follow if they knew his inclination. Mr Angry needs to see that love like the Lord's towards him – full of grace and mercy – is the indispensable companion of truth, and indeed its fruit. His own gender and sexuality stand just as much in need of redeeming as any other sinner's, and he needs the humility and contrition to recognise that.

Ms Aimless doesn't read her Bible much, and thinks the whole debate is rather silly. After all, we've liberated women, so why shouldn't we liberate gays? You can't take everything the Bible says as gospel. We've moved on. What's important is love and acceptance. After all didn't John and Paul say, "All you need is love"? Or was that George and Ringo?

Ms Aimless needs to see that revealed truth of God – in his Word and his Son and his Spirit – is the only authentic foundation for real love; indeed, it is the only way to come to God at all. For without the supremacy of this revealed truth, there is no church; there is no knowledge of God; there is no grace, mercy and peace.

A commitment to truth cannot be at the expense of love. A commitment to love must not mean the embrace of error. Mr Angry and Ms Aimless both have some repenting to do.

We live in troubled times. But we aren't the first, and – barring the return of Christ – we won't be the last.

In the midst of it, let's not lose sight of the privilege of belonging to this chosen lady; of the twin hallmarks of truth and love in Christ's church; and, above all, let us worship in spirit and truth the Father and the Son in whom are grace, mercy and peace, and in whom we find love and truth in perfect harmony. Amen.