

# St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

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3 JOHN

29<sup>th</sup> October 2017

3 John 1:1-15  
Matthew 25:31-40

With Jennifer coming back from Ghana and preparing for her next trip, with Alan going off to visit Libis, passports have been in use at the manse recently. For the Czech Republic you just need your passport, which tells the Czech authorities that the British government has agreed that you are who you say you are and that you have a right to belong here. With that assurance you can go freely to the Czech Republic, and, importantly, return freely here again. When Jennifer went to Ghana she had to have a visa, as she will for South Africa – the latter a most complicated process. A visa authorises you in a different way. It says that the authorities of Ghana who live and work in the UK have agreed that you are who you say you are, that your purpose in visiting their country has been agreed by them and that they recommend to their countrymen that they allow you to pass over the border into their land. In some ways the third letter of John is a bit like a passport or a visa.

When John wrote his little letter to Gaius, I don't suppose he thought for a minute that we would still be reading it almost two thousand years later. It is just a short letter, really not more than a note, written for a couple of purposes, one of which was to encourage Gaius – whoever he was – and tell him that John knows that he is doing a good job at serving his Lord.

We all need encouragement, and sometimes we are better at seeking it for ourselves than giving it to others. Wouldn't you like to have been Gaius, and received a letter telling you that "I was overjoyed when some of the brothers arrived and testified to your faithfulness to the truth." Gaius, it seems has been opening his home most hospitably, and he may have thought that this was something he just did quietly, but it has been noticed and so he is praised for it. Hospitality was an important part of the early church. They were so few, and they were so suspect by most of the people, that when they were travelling, there were not many places which would receive them, or be safe for them. John lived long enough to live into times which were very dangerous for Christians, and even this short note is veiled in its allusions to the faith – lest it fall into the wrong hands. John talks about the brothers and the gathering (which word we translate as church) and any Roman official who had got hold of it could have thought that it referred to some large family gathering, a family of which Gaius and Diotrophes and Demetrius were all members.

And, of course, so it is and so they were. Because it is not just a metaphor to say that the church is a family. It is not just a picturesque way of speaking to say that we who are here today are brothers and sisters. If we are born anew into God's family, then we are brothers and sisters of Jesus and so of each other as well. We may not be family by the laws of the land, but our membership of God's family is a tie stronger than any biology. One of the ways that the early church demonstrated this close tie, was the giving of hospitality. If a Christian arrived at your door, saying he or she

was travelling, they could expect a welcome. In the second century there was a document, known as the Didache or “the Teaching” drawn up which includes some rules of thumb for such visits. Ordinary Christians could expect to be welcome for up to three days, and apostles, those who were travelling on the Church’s business, for two (which is interesting – maybe the thought was that you don’t want the Church’s messengers to get side-tracked, but to get on with what they are sent to do!).

So John writes to his brother Gaius to encourage him and tell him how happy he is to hear of the way his hospitality has been given to their brothers and sisters. He has a shrewd suspicion that Gaius may need some encouragement, because those same friends who brought news of Gaius’ welcome, also brought news of what Diotrophes was up to. It seems that in the dangerous times in which they lived, Diotrophes had set himself up as the person who would draw the boundaries around the little church in whatever town it was that they lived in. Diotrophes had decided that Gaius was being too trusting, too hospitable, and he refused to allow those brothers and sisters, who stayed with Gaius to attend the worship and the gatherings of the church. John says that he refuses to welcome them, and the Greek word that he uses for “welcome” is *epidechomai*, which means to extend the right hand to.

If John is pleased to hear of Gaius’ hospitable love, he is distressed to hear of Diotrophes’ influence in the church. And yet, there have always been people like Diotrophes. There have always been people who want to draw the lines, who want to keep their own church purer than any other. These Christians who were travelling would come with a letter in their hand from the church gathering they were part of, saying so. This very letter we have read also functioned as Demetrius’ testimonial. This was good enough for Gaius, but not for Diotrophes. “How do we know that this other church is sound? How do we know that they are not heretical? And John? Well, how do we know we can trust him? He may have been an apostle, but he’s an old man now, a back number.” Goodness knows how Diotrophes decided who he might admit to the fellowship, but the normal assurances were not good enough for him.

And there are churches like that. Churches which are afraid of people they don’t know coming, in case they should upset the equilibrium, or in case they pollute the purity. A few weeks ago, when I was attending a gathering of people from the Highland presbyteries, one of the people there talked of the difficulty experienced when there is a healthy and lively church, who won’t help a more struggling church in case they lose some of their strength. And we all knew what she meant. But, as was said, if that is the attitude of a church, then no matter what it looks like, it may be lively, but it is not healthy. The good news of God’s love in Jesus is not about drawing lines in the sand. It is about living out God’s love in welcome and hospitality.

After all, when Jesus told the parable of the last judgement and the people being separated like the sheep and the goats, for what were those on his right hand commended? For what were they called the “Beloved of my Father”? It was for being open-handed, trusting and hospitable. It was for giving where there was need: food, water, shelter, clothing and care. It was for treating others like beloved members of the family, for showing them that they matter, they are valuable to God and to his children.

If someone were writing a letter which mentioned me and which for some reason was going to be read for generations, then I would hope that I was spoken of like Gaius and like Demetrius. Gaius is a giver, and Demetrius is a trusted messenger. It is probably he who has brought this letter to Gaius, from John. As I said, this letter

may even be his credentials, the excuse for writing a letter which deals with more than testifying to Demetrius' reliability. I would rather be remembered as a Gaius or a Demetrius than a Diotrophes. It may be that Diotrophes meant well: I am sure he thought that he did, though John saw his actions as being based on self-importance.

But Jesus was not one who wanted to keep people away. It is a natural human instinct – to keep things or even people for oneself. But when the human disciples tried to keep away from Jesus the “unimportant” mothers and children, they were the ones who got a flea in their ears. Jesus was never about making barriers. He talked to the unimportant, and the women, to the crippled and leprous and tax-collecting outcasts, to the religious leaders and to high ranking Romans who sought him out.

All were welcome around him, and those who were rebuked were those – usually the disciples - who did not understand that, or who wanted to re-think his mission in their own terms. They were rebuked if they wanted to keep the children from him. They were rebuked when James and John – yes, this John – wanted to call down fire from heaven on a Samaritan village which did not want to receive Jesus and the entourage. They were rebuked when James and John – yes, this John – wanted to stop people who were not of the inner circle casting out demons in Jesus' name. They were rebuked when they suggested that his talk of being put to death was just impossible. John had enough rebukes, to learn his lesson. Jesus knew what he was doing and he knew who he was for, and he was for all the people who you might not expect, and he was going to do his work in ways that human ingenuity would never consider.

Some people have a special talent for hospitality. I think perhaps Gaius was one of these. To some people there is nothing better than throwing open their home and welcoming in those whom they have never met before. And that is great, and I am sure that such people are delightful to God. But some of us have to think about this and to work at it. We have to remember that Christ's welcome is more than just words but is shown in action. What our readings this morning tell us is that if we find it harder to do that, and have to work at it, we should make the effort. Because giving a welcome and caring for others and showing that even those who have no place in the world are welcome to us because we are children of God is exactly what in Jesus we are called to do. They are welcome in our churches, they are welcome in our communities and they are welcome in our lives. Just as God has welcomed us into his family and into his community, his Kingdom, and yes, even into his life. Amen.

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