**3 John**

**Learning by Example**

Last week, we looked at 2 John and considered the importance of truth and love and the hospitality that we are called to offer as Christians. 2 John was written by John – but we are not sure which John: possibly John the Apostle or possibly John the Elder. But what we can be sure of is that 2 John and 3 John were written by the same person, whichever John it was. And again, we have a very short letter here, possibly the shortest in the New Testament. But in a very few words and verses, there are some important spiritual lessons for us to learn.

And at the heart of this brief letter is the idea that each one of us learns by example. Whatever we do in life, we tend to learn by the example of others. It’s in our DNA, of course: from birth through to death, we are constantly watching others and assessing our environment and learning how to be.

It is no different spiritually, of course. Our greatest role model of all is Jesus Christ, of course, and certainly on that first Palm Sunday, which we are celebrating today the crowds recognised Jesus for being the extraordinary man that he was: the Messiah of God, who had come to liberate them - and they wanted to honour Jesus as their leader, their inspiration and their role model.

But Jesus is not our only role model in the faith, of course: we learn how to live the Christian faith by watching others and trying to emulate their deep spirituality in our lives. And, of course, each one of us needs to remember that other people are watching us to see what difference being a Christian makes in our lives. And so each one of us are role models to others, whether we realise that or not.

We all learn by example and we are constantly searching for spiritual role models so that we can develop in our discipleship of Jesus.

But the flip side of that coin is that occasionally we come across people who offer a poor example to follow. And sometimes we can pick up bad spiritual habits - unhelpful ways of doing things, unhelpful beliefs - by what we are told and have seen in others.

In this letter written by John, both good examples and bad examples are addressed and he focuses on three individuals. So let’s have a look at these examples to us and you can follow this on page 262 in the second half of the pew Bibles.

**1. Gaius – vs. 1-8:**

We don’t know anything about Gaius except what is written here. Apparently, if you live in Africa, the most popular name for a man is Mohamed. If you live in Belgium, it is Noah. If you live in France it is Nathan. If you live in the UK it is…Oliver. If you lived in the Roman Empire in the first century, the most popular name for a man was Gaius. So, we don’t really know who this Gaius is that John mentions here. But, as we might expect, there is some speculation. Three Gaius’ are mentioned in the New Testament: Gaius of Corinth, who hosted the apostle Paul, Gaius of Macedonia, who was one of Paul’s companions, and Gaius of Derbe, who accompanied Paul on his last missionary journey. We just don’t know…

But whoever this Gaius was, John obviously had a great love for him and considered him to be like a son. The Greeting in verse 1 is quite different from most others in the New Testament because it is so short: “The elder to the beloved Gaius, whom I love in truth”. When you think about how long the greetings of Paul and Peter are in their letters, this is really succinct.

And there’s a sense in which John offers us an example of Christian love here, what it means to love other people, because you’ll notice he is concerned for the whole person. In verse 2, he says: “I pray that all may go well with you and that you may be in good health, just as it is well with your soul”. The phrase that John uses here is interesting because the word for ‘go well with you’ is one that is often used in Greek to refer to public and social works; community activities, if you like. And the reference to being in health suggests that perhaps Gaius had been suffering some sort of illness.

And here’s such an important thing to hold onto - that God loves us body, mind and spirit. He is not only concerned for our eternal salvation but he shows concern for every aspect of our lives: our work, our community engagement, who we are as individuals and our health.

And if we are to reflect the love of God to others in our lives, we are to care for the whole person too; in our prayers and just as much through our mission activities, we are to care for the needs of the whole person. Mission is not just about evangelism: it is a holistic approach to loving the whole person and loving the whole of God’s creation, which is why we are committed to the 5 Marks of Mission approach here at St. Andrew’s.

So John has a deep interest in Gaius’ health and prosperity. Not exclusively though because in verse 3, he rejoices in the fact that Gaius walks in the truth. He rejoices that not only is Gaius physically healthy, he is spiritually healthy too. In a sense, it’s like a see-saw - in our love for others, in our concern for them, we need to hold the two in tension: physical needs and spiritual needs, they cannot be separated.

And Gaius’ own life reflected that too, because in the next few verses we are told of Gaius’ commitment to Christian missionaries; that he would care for them physically, offering them hospitality and food and money for their journey. But also receiving them, as it says in verse 8, as co-workers in the truth - meeting them on a spiritual level too.

The example of Gaius to us is to offer a love to the world that is complete: a concern for individuals both in body as well as in soul.

There is a story of a lady once, who was homeless and she turned up on her Vicar’s doorstep for help and the Vicar said, “I’ll pray for you”. Yes, of course we need to pray. But that can never be an excuse for inactivity when faced with injustice and need. That lady wrote a poem and it goes like this:

“I was hungry

and you formed a humanities group to discuss my hunger.

I was imprisoned

and you crept off quietly to your chapel and prayed for my release.

I was naked

and in your mind you debated the morality of my appearance.

I was sick

and you knelt and thanked God for your health.

I was homeless

and you preached to me of the spiritual shelter of the love of God.

I was lonely

and you left me alone to pray for me.

You seem so holy, so close to God

But I am still very hungry – and lonely – and cold.”

The example of Gaius is that the wholeness of Christian love focuses on the whole person - and it is not enough for us just to pray for people’s eternal salvation but that we are to actively engage in social action that works for transformation of people’s lives.

As Christians, we are called to meet people in their practical needs and make an appropriate response to that.

**2. Diotrephes – vs. 9,10:**

John then moves on to talk about Diotrephes - and this man is a different kettle of fish altogether because Diotrephes is a man of unhelpful spiritual habits.

It seems that John had written to the church before about this issue. In verse 9, he says, “I have written something to the church”. The phrase he uses for ‘something’ indicates that it was not a major letter but something short and not of huge importance. So I don’t think we are talking here about a lost epistle from John but more like a note or short instruction to the church that has been lost in the mists of time.

If John was the Bishop, Diotrephes may have been a churchwarden, or something similar. And his problem, according to John, was his arrogance. In verse 9, John tells us that Diotrephes loves to be first. He loves to be considered the most important person of all.

This is a different issue than that which John addressed in his second letter that we looked at last time. In that letter, John was warning of people who held false doctrines and were undermining the truth. But here, John is warning not so much about the danger of false doctrine so much as the danger of arrogance and pride and the pursuit of personal authority. At the heart of Diotrephes’ attitutde, it seems, is that he thought he was always right; that he was doctrinally pure and everyone else was a heretic. So his way of dealing with others was to refuse to let them into his church. He didn’t want other preachers to come because their sermons wouldn’t be doctrinally correct. He didn’t want to be in fellowship with other churches because his church might be contaminated by them. He didn’t want to welcome Christians into his home because they weren’t as pure as he was. And in verse 9 we’re told that he even banned Bishop John from visiting the church! Probably, he felt threatened by John’s authority and believed that letting John into the church would diminish him in the eyes of the congregation.

There is something quite childish about Diotrephes because he lacks so much confidence in his own identity. He is so unsure of who he is that he ends up alienating others and getting locked into some sort of self-fulfilling prophecy.

Perhaps we have all come across people in our churches who are constantly trying to show others how important they are, how wise they are, how learned they are, and how much authority they have. These are people who often resort either to passive-aggressive behaviour or even outright bullying because they are so desperate for others to think of them as important. But actually, they lack self-awareness and even any deep sense of security in themselves and perhaps rather than being despised, they are to be pitied - because they haven’t really got a real sense of what it means to be a child of God; free in Christ and created in the image of God.

So how does John comment on Diotrephes’ actions? Verse 11: “Do not imitate what is evil…” In pursuit of respect, in pursuit of wanting to look so important in the eyes of others, Diotrephes was undermining others and destroying the local church and causing division and bad feeling amongst the Christians.

The witness of Scripture to us is that the breaking of the unity of Christians is one of the most evil things we can do. In John 17, Jesus’ prayed in the Garden before he died. He didn’t pray for doctrinal purity, he didn’t pray that Christians would set themselves against each other in pursuit of doctrinal purity. His prayer was for Christian unity: “Father, make them one, just as you and I are one”.

Of course, we need to seek true doctrine - we talked about that last week. But most important is that we learn to love, even if people do things differently from us, even if their way of worship may seem strange to us, even if they hold different views on certain issues. We are still brothers and sisters together: members of one body.

We won’t tolerate heresy in our congregations, of course. But the differences of opinions that churches hold are not heresy - they are merely either different priorities or a different way of viewing things and that’s OK. Most important of all is the pursuit of unity and love - and we must do everything we can to protect that and enhance that across the churches.

Gaius, then, is a good example of Christian love. Diotrephes is an example of unhelpful arrogance and divisive behaviour.

**3. Demetrius – vs.11-14**

Finally, John calls on the example of Demetrius, a wonderful Christian man who had John’s absolute respect. We don’t really know who Demetrius was - but he is possibly the same man that we read of in Acts 19: the man who had made shrines in Artemis and had cut short Paul’s ministry there. Well, if it is that same Demetrius and he had been converted, what a wonderful testimony to the power of God! One thing that is fairly likely, though, from the way this is phrased, is that Demetrius was probably the person who brought John’s letter to the church.

Whether it was him or not, the one thing we do know about Demetrius is that his lifestyle was a wonderful example of Christian living. The way he lived his life spoke volumes about his faith, as John says in verse 12: “Everyone has testified favourably about Demetrius”: he was renowned for his holiness. And John sets him up in contrast to the arrogant Diotrephes.

We know the well-known phrase, “Actions speak louder than words”. And that was true for both Diotrephes and Demetrius - but only one had the respect of the people and of Bishop John

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So, in conclusion, then, we see that this letter from John is very brief. It’s simple and down to earth. There isn’t a single direct reference to Christ. But it’s a wonderful book of the Bible, which teaches us a very simple and very profound Christian truth: that our lives are so often shaped by the people whose example we follow. Good examples like Gaius and Demetrius will lead us closer to God. Bad examples like Diotrephes will lead us into unhelpful and destructive ways of behaving.

The challenge which John lays before each of us is to follow the example of godliness, which we see in the lives of so many around us, which we read about in the pages of the Scriptures.

But most of all, we are to follow the example of Jesus Christ, who is the way, the truth and the life.