

Imitate what is good not evil

10/5/20 dkm

Read: 2Timothy 2:1-3:5, 3John

Text: 3John

Psalms: 103:1-7 & 19-22, 1, 67, 72

In a society afflicted with coronavirus, hospitality in the sense of welcoming anyone to stay in your house is restricted by law. Even having someone come for a meal is difficult. But what was it like before this? Societies differ, and they change over time. Modern Australian families rarely have visitors stay with them; they are put up at a motel or 'air bnb'. But in some societies even strangers are welcomed to stay. We have had strangers stay, as in the friend of a friend. In fact our neighbour took in a friend of ours who had come unannounced from India. We were away at the time and this neighbour saw him outside our place. He took him in, and the next day put him on a bus to Grafton where we were staying. Do you have rules about people staying at your place? Do your visitors or relatives sometimes outstay their welcome? Do you say one week free and after that make a contribution if you are able?

Hospitality was an important matter in the early church because evangelists were on the road preaching and teaching the gospel, and places offering accommodation were generally of ill repute. John writes his letters within this context. An extra-biblical document called the Didache, dating back to the second century, was discovered in Constantinople in 1875. It is a book of church order which includes rules about welcoming prophets and teachers. If the teacher 'is perverse and teaches another doctrine' he was not to be welcomed. But if he taught the truth he was to be 'received as the Lord'. He could stay one or two nights, but if three he was a false prophet! If he asked for money he was a false prophet. He was to be given only bread and sent on his way. There was provision for allowing him to stay longer if he was a craftsman who contributed towards his upkeep. You will recall the apostle Paul and his tent making. A true teacher who settled among them was 'worthy of his food' or maintenance.

John's second letter was a warning to the church not to welcome or receive anyone who came along teaching heresy regarding the Trinity, particularly the permanent union of two natures in Christ. His third letter gives us further insight into the practice of hosting itinerant preachers in the church. The apostles were the first to hit the road as it were, with the message of the gospel. They went out with apostolic authority, having been with Jesus for three years and having witnessed his resurrection. John was probably the last living apostle, but they had mentored men to continue evangelism and ministry of the word.

John's third letter expresses dismay that a man who exercised undue power within a church was refusing to welcome evangelists sent by John, and was also stopping others from showing the expected hospitality. He did this not because of their doctrine but because he was a bully. Churches need strong leaders but not bullies like this man called Diotrephes. Unfortunately, men like Diotrephes are all too common in the church, and many, if not most, church splits are about ego, not doctrine or church practice.

John refers to three men in this letter so our subjects will be these men, and a fourth who is John himself. Our sermon title directs us to consider which of these men we should imitate. The apostle Paul wrote to the church at Corinth saying, 'Imitate me as I also imitate Christ' (1Cor 11:1). We are to imitate Christ or God (Eph 5:1) but it is natural for us to imitate people around us. In doing this however, we must be discerning. 'Beloved, do not imitate what is evil, but what is good' (v 11). This imitating extends to how we react to people around us. If evil is done to us, do we react in like manner? Not if we are listening to what Jesus says about turning the other cheek (Mat 5:39, Rom 12:17), and not if we are imitating the apostle John and his fellow servant in the gospel, Demetrius.

1. John

John and his brother James were fishermen who followed Jesus and whom Jesus appointed his apostles. Mark tells us that Jesus called them 'Sons of thunder'. On one occasion they wanted to call down fire from heaven on a village that rejected Jesus, but Jesus rebuked them (Luke 9:54). Thankfully, John was not about to call down fire from heaven on this man Diotrephes who rejected him or his emissaries. John firmly denounced men preaching 'another gospel' calling them deceivers and antichrists (2John 7), but he did not denounce Diotrephes in the same way. It was his conduct that was in question because it was not that of a man walking in the truth; his creed and conduct were not consistent, assuming his creed was 'in the truth' as John would say.

While not referring directly to this bully in the church, John does state that 'he who does evil has not seen God' (v 11). Creed and conduct must be in accord. As Jesus said, 'out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, false witness and blasphemies' (Mat 15:19). John would question the heart of this man rejecting brothers in Christ and removing believers from the church. He would do so gently but firmly. There is no mention of him using his apostolic authority because it was not a matter of doctrine but of living according to accepted doctrine. John, who called himself 'the elder', would come and hopefully lead this man to repentance; in the words of the apostle Paul, 'that he may come to his senses and escape the snare of the devil' (2Tim 2:24-26). Today we have church courts to deal with matters of discipline like this (Mat 18:17).

2. Gaius

John's letter is addressed to Gaius, presumably a member of this particular church. Gaius was a common Roman name so there is no point in trying to link this man with others of the same name at Corinth or Macedonia or Derbe (Acts 18:7,19:29,20:4). Gaius was a man John could confide in regarding the troublesome character, Diotrephes. John expresses brotherly love towards Gaius, even fatherly love; he may have led Gaius to the Lord (v1, 4). Pastors are

concerned for all believers, for all in their flock, but especially for those whom they have seen come to believe in Jesus. Brothers who came to John reported of the truth that was in Gaius and was being displayed in his life (v 3). The truth is Jesus Christ, so Jesus was abiding in the heart of Gaius, and he was obeying the commands of Christ, including the command to 'love one another' (2John 5).

John's greeting includes a prayer that Gaius 'may prosper in all things and be in health' (v 2). This is the only place that we find the word 'health' in the NT; yet today we see this word emblazoned on billboards everywhere. Growing up I never saw or heard of a gym but now they more common than churches. Health and the physical body have become the new god. That said, God gave us a physical body and we are to care for it with good food and exercise (Eph 5:28). John wanted Gaius to be fit and healthy as a servant of the Lord. At the same time he wanted his soul to prosper; he wanted him to prosper in body and soul. We are not just a body like animals but are made with a body and a soul. This is where the evolutionists have failed us, and left a generation filled with problems of the soul. Sellers of mind, body and soul therapies have sprung up, but the problem continues. Let us pray for healthy bodies and healthy souls.

Gaius was welcoming brethren and even strangers into his house; he had an open home (v 5). This does not mean he welcomed self-confessed heretics, as in people who denied the humanity or divinity of Jesus (2John 7). Travelling evangelists often carried letters of commendation by which 'strangers' were welcomed (1Cor 16:3, 2Cor 3:1). We have welcomed unknown Christians but usually on the basis of another Christian's recommendation. I recall our children asking, 'Dad, who is the man staying at your place', and answering, 'I don't really know, but so-and-so asked us to take him in'. I am also reminded of what is written in Hebrews 13: 'Do not forget to entertain strangers, for in so doing some have unwittingly entertained angels'. And also of what Jesus said to the apostles when

he sent them out: 'He who receives you receives me' (Mat 10:40, 25:40).

In welcoming missionaries, Gaius was joining in gospel ministry; he was becoming a fellow worker for the truth (v 8). The work of preaching and teaching is a shared ministry. Some have the gift of preaching and teaching, and others the gift of hospitality or giving. How shall they preach unless they are sent? (Rom 10:15). And when they are sent they need support. Gaius was to be discerning of heretics and 'free-loaders', what the Didache calls 'Christmongers', but evangelists whose creed and conduct were true and consistent were worthy of hospitality and support. Such men did not ask for or receive support from pagans but came to the church expecting support for ministry 'for His names sake' (v 7). As someone who has been on the receiving end of such support, let me urge you to support the work of true Christian mission as the Lord enables you.

The brothers Gaius welcomed told the church about his love (v 6). This was part of the testimony that was brought to John from the church where Gaius worshipped, part of his walking in the truth (v 3). Gaius stands beside Samuel, and Jesus himself, as one who enjoyed favour both with the Lord and with men (1Sam 2:26, Luke 2:52). Elders must have a good testimony among those outside as well as inside the church (1Tim 3:2, 7). In contrast to Diotrephes, Gaius was hospitable. And John urged him to complete the good work he had begun by taking in the servants of the Lord and by sending them on their way with his blessing. That blessing included food and supplies for the journey, and maybe a bus or train ticket!

3. Diotrephes

The next character we meet in this letter is the complete opposite of Gaius. If the truth was in him, he certainly was not walking in the truth as he lorded it over everyone in the church. Diotrephes was proud and arrogant, a man who 'loves to have the pre-eminence' (v 9) - they probably called him 'Diotrephes the dictator'! His name was

not common, maybe because it belonged to the nobility. In the church Christ must have the pre-eminence, but this man 'loves to have the pre-eminence' says John (v 9, Col 1:18).

It appears that John had written to the church but the carriers of his letter were not received by this seemingly self-appointed leader. He not only rejected John's men but John himself, and his authority in the church. To add to this rejection he started gossiping maliciously about John and the brothers he sent. He was a man of many words with nothing to say. A friend told me that he was looking forward to a meeting on 'zoom' because he could mute a person who loves to prate. Diotrephes was more interested in politics and power than he was in imitating Christ and serving the Lord. He did not stop with rejecting believers and slandering the apostle, he bullied other members of the church into doing the same thing. Not content with refusing to welcome brothers himself, 'he also stops those who want to do so, and puts them out of the church' (10 NIV).

This man had a lot to answer for, if not to John and the church then certainly to the Lord. It is a wonder that anyone was left in the church! John was hoping to come and deal with this bully in the church. If he refused to repent he would no doubt be put out of the church himself. Sadly, such men continue to be found in the church. A promising young preacher in an American church refused to listen to the elders of the church- or anyone for that matter. Eventually the church had to sack him because of his arrogant behaviour. He was a bully just like Diotrephes. I see signs outside schools declaring, 'No bullies here' and your workplace does not tolerate bullies. The church should not tolerate bullies either!

4. Demetrius

If you imitate anyone in the church let it not be Diotrephes or his likeness. Imitate what is good not evil, says John. His final character, like Gaius, is the exact opposite of Diotrephes the dictator. All we are told about Demetrius is that he has 'a good testimony from all and

from the truth itself' (v 12). That is all, but it is all we need to know. If pagans, and even Christians, cannot say a bad word about you then what is the Lord going to say? Demetrius had a good testimony from truth itself, meaning from the Lord himself.

Demetrius may have been the brother rejected by Diotrephes when he came with John's first letter, which we do not have (v 9). If so, he acted with grace, refusing to enter in the power game that Diotrephes was focussed on. John testified to the faith and character of Demetrius and knew that Gaius would agree with him; Demetrius was probably carrying this second letter from John to Gaius and the church that was suffering at the hands of this arrogant and malicious bully.

This letter is brief, like that of 2John, because John wanted to come and speak face to face with Gaius, and with Diotrephes- and his sheet of papyrus was finished. John sends greetings from his friends to the friends of Gaius whom John knew but had no space to write their names (v 14). He closes with words he heard from the risen Jesus: 'Peace to you' (John 20:19, 21, and 26). And I shall close with the same words: 'Peace to you'.