

Sunday, 13th of October 2019.

Sermon: Generous Living – Using Our Power Wisely

Lord, we come this morning to You, to seek Your face. Wash us, we pray, in your mercy and through Your Word. Set us free from the things that bind us, so that we might more fully live into the identity of the dearly loved children, You have made us to be, through Your Son, Jesus. Amen.

Well, on the back of recently concluding our five-week series, 'Creative Generosity', in these 'school holiday weeks' we've had an opportunity to explore, by way of an 'epilogue', some of the themes that can stop us from living more generous lives. Last week, Eamon Butler from our 10.45am service, shared a message about forgiveness from one of the shortest letters in the New Testament; from St. Paul's letter to a Christian slave-master called '*Philemon*' and his run-away slave Onesimus...

This week, we switch focus to an even shorter letter, the Third Letter of John, which addresses another theme that can prevent us from generous living, and that's the theme of '*power*'. Richard Foster introduces this theme in his masterpiece, '*Money, Sex and Power*' by saying: "*Power profoundly impacts our inter-personal relationships, our social relationships, and our relationship with God. Nothing touches us more profoundly for good or for ill, than power.*"

That we have the capacity to use our power and influence for good or otherwise, was something brought home to me painfully as a young boy. One of my earliest memories was having a dispute at home with my brother over who got to keep my sister's straw handbag that we'd put all our matchbox cars in. As the argument grew at the top of the stairs, over who was having it, I managed to use all my three-year-old physical powers to wrench the bag out of my older brother's hands...

Victory was sweet... until I lost my balance, and fell backwards down a full flight of stairs, and gashed my head on the steel gas radiator below... Head bleeding, my Dad did what any self-respecting father would do, he wrapped a tea-towel round my head and plopped me on the kitchen bench to feed me a Saturday lunch of sausages, chips and tinned tomatoes before driving me to hospital.

I had used my power foolishly. Dad, God bless Him, used it more wisely to get me stitched up. But the point, became clear early on; we can use power for good or ill. The question for us, is how do we use it?

In this brief letter from John, the Apostle provides two, alternate pictures of how '*power*' as followers of Jesus is used:

The first picture of how power can be *graciously used*, emerges in the life of a first-century house church leader to which John writes - a guy called Gaius, who is believed to have lived in Pergamum, modern Turkey. In the first half of the letter, John 'the Elder' (verse 1), commends Gaius for the way he uses his influence and power in the church for the good of others... This power, though, importantly comes to Gaius not as some 'super-human' fireball sent by the sky, but seems to develop out of a living relationship that Gaius has with Christ and the twin-gifts of Christ's '*truth and love*'. Like the oars that keep a rowing boat straight and true, this truth and love seems to imbue Gaius' life and leadership among the church, with a humble power and influence that is a blessing to everyone... In verse 3 and 4 we read, how John commends Gaius' witness of how he uses his power and influence:

"It gave me great joy, to have some brothers come and tell me about your faithfulness *to the truth* and how you continue *to walk in the truth*. I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are *walking in the truth*."

To see Gaius, being shaped by the '*truth*' it's clear brings John no greater encouragement... . But the question remains what, of course, does John mean by '*the truth*'? It's easy when we hear the words like 'truth' to seize up, to breathe a heavy sigh, and like Pilate before Jesus, exclaim, 'Ha! What is Truth?' Or in today's sceptical age, "Whose truth'? When we think about 'truth' these days, we can often think of it as some narrow-minded concept, that like a long-boney finger, keeps us pinned to what we should and shouldn't do... But John's vision of 'truth' is far more life-giving.. It seems that both John and Gaius agree, and see 'truth' as centred on the exquisite person of Jesus, the Son of God.

Borrowed from the Hebrew idea of truth, they think of *truth* as being that which is 'dependable, truthful and upright in character', which applies to the very core of who God is. This of course, is embodied by Jesus the Living Truth, the absolute sense of what is real and complete as opposed to what is false and found wanting. In this sense, Gaius has encountered this truth in Jesus, who is truth personified. Jesus is the one who embodies the truth, and by His Spirit reveals it to us...

But there's something else in view. Also included in this idea of Jesus being the truth, is that Jesus as the truth is profoundly 'real'. Jesus is no mirage, photocopy of a photocopy, no empty replica of a pagan god, a stone statue found in a household shrine. No, Jesus is the One, true Vine; He is the true bread. He is the One who is really real and can be related to.... Through the Holy Spirit, just in the same way he made Himself known to people like John and Gaius and millions of people down through history.

Can I say, this collection of ideas about truth is important for John, for Gaius, because it was the Living Truth of Jesus that gave direction and a deep sense of hope to them. Many of us here this morning, are people who have had the real experience of encountering something of Jesus the Living Truth. And it's clear that this revelation of Christ the One True Vine, gave these early Christians a firm place to stand. We see it in Jesus' encounter again through the Gospels. The man with the shrivelled hand, the Woman at the Well, who has five husbands, the thief on the Cross... Jesus, the living Truth, brings a Christ-like power to us that can be the real difference we need. The question, is do you know it for yourself? Are you in a place yet who are yet that you'd like to say yes to a relationship with Jesus the Living Truth.

That the 'truth' of Jesus was something that powered Gaius' life, was something that filtered back to John, from missionary 'brothers' that had been hosted by Gaius.

Their witness was that Gaius was not just '*believing the right things about Jesus*' or clinging in some disembodied way to a set of doctrines, but we hear in verses 5 through 8, that he was using his power and influence to for love, and especially by showing generous hospitality to visiting missionaries:

Verse 5: "Dear friend, you are faithful in what you are doing for the brothers, even though they are strangers to you. They have told the church about your love."

This combination of truth and love is a powerful testimony to Christ's power at work in and through Gaius. Scholar David Jackman writes: "Truth and love are inseparable when they are genuine. Gaius was a man whose whole life was shaped by God's truth. Not only did he faithfully believe it, he continually practiced." Gaius earnestly used his influence to bring Christ's love to others, by humbly serving and supporting others: As scholars tell us:

"Doubtless this would include not only food and accommodation while they were with him, but also the provision of money or supplies to help them on their way, when they left." (p.194)

One of the ways which we aim to imitate this kind of love, is through the excellent work here, of our own Overseas Mission Team, faithfully lead by Hillary and Ruth, Sally and John, David and Marianne, who on the back of our generosity are able to give support to our mission partners, on our behalf. Many times, our overseas missionaries are one of us, but more recently we've supported people commended to us by NZCMS like Dallas Patten and Miriam Tillman. We offer them both prayer and financial support, because just like we read in these verses, we want to use what power and influence we have, to see that the Gospel is shared freely by those on the receiving end. As John says in verse 7: "It was for the sake of

the Name that they (the missionaries) went out, receiving no help from the pagans..." It's an incredible thing that the Gospel is free. But that's the way in which so much of the Kingdom works... The most precious thing in many of our lives is our relationship with Christ, and it comes to us completely and utterly free. We want to be people, just as John and Gaius were, in ensuring that whether we be overseas missionaries or sharing our faith in our own backyard, we share the truth and love of by Christ, freely empowered by His truth and His great love. Is there someone, that the Spirit is prompting you, to freely get alongside and share something of what you yourself have received? May the Lord bless you as you do, and feel free to invite them along to St George's, where they will find a ready welcome.

But it's important to say, that this generous 'picture' that John offers us of someone like Gaius using his power and influence for Kingdom ends, was sadly not entirely shared. In Diotrophes, we have a second picture of what corrupted '*power*' can look like. We are not sure who Diotrophes is; possibly as John Stott contends, his rare name, which means "nourished by Jupiter" belonged to a noble Greek family from Pergamum... Nevertheless, Diotrophes, whoever he was, used his power for anything but life-giving generosity. Verse 9 reveals that '*Diotrophes will have nothing to do with us.*' But there was worse up ahead. In verse 10, we read that Diotrophes was 'gossiping maliciously about [them] and in verse 11, not only refuses to welcome the missionary brothers, but also stops those who wish to, by putting them outside the church. This is pretty serious stuff. Diotrophes is using his influence and power to block John, by spreading what scholars describe literally as 'foolish talk, by blocking the progress of the missionaries AND excluding anyone wanting to support them...

In truth we don't know why Diotrophes is behaving badly. Some scholars think that this letter falls into the awkward transition in Church history, where the direct influence of the Apostles is dying out, and there is a conflict with the rise of bishops over jurisdiction...

But more likely, this falling out was based along theological lines, as it seems to be the case in the Second Letter of John. As David Jackman asserts, "The gospel was continuing to spread rapidly. House churches were springing up throughout the Graeco-Roman world.... The careful oversight of the Church depicted in the Acts of the Apostles was no longer possible. At the same time travelling preachers and missionaries were increasing. But the message did not always ring true to the gospel the Apostles had preached. Some claimed new insights, taking them beyond the apostolic testimony...' John had already warned in his Second Letter, that 'deceivers' were going out, and were either Judaizing Christians who wanted to return the Faithful to circumcision and other Jewish

observances; while others still - like the Gnostics, couldn't believe that Jesus being God, could have possibly come in the flesh - because all matter, they thought was evil, and therefore, Jesus must have been a disembodied 'Spirit' only. Did Diotrophes belong to one of these two camps and was he using his position of power to lead people astray from the truth and love revealed in Christ? Could have been.

Whatever the reason for Diotrophes' resistance, the motive that trumped them all was Diotrophes love of 'self'. Verse 9 tell us: "I wrote to the church, but Diotrophes, *who loves to be first*, will have nothing to do with us."

It's clear from what follows in verse 11 and 12 that John squarely believes that this kind of behavior does not come from God:

"Dear friend, do not imitate what is evil but what is good. Anyone who does what is good is from God. Anyone who does what is evil has not seen God."

This seems a bit harsh, but it seems that judging by Diotrophes' unChristlike behavior, he 'has not seen God...' John here is echoing for us, only what Jesus says in Matthew's Sermon on the Mount, in his warning about false teachers:

"¹⁶ By their fruit you will recognise them. Do people pick grapes from thorn-bushes, or figs from thistles? ¹⁷ Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit...."

John is saying precisely the same thing; one of the measures of a person's relationship with God, is just how a person uses their power for good or for evil.

David Jackman warns:

"Whenever we start to serve ourselves rather than Christ, or to use our fellow Christians for our own ego trip, or to become concerned about our own status within the church, we need to recognise the Diotrophes syndrome. To behave as he did is neither faithful to the truth nor faithful to one's fellow Christians."

In his insightful book *"Money, Sex, and Power"*, Richard Foster does a brilliant job of 'unmasking' the powers that lie behind these kinds of self-serving expressions of power... Whenever power is used, to either 'steal, kill or destroy,' Jesus made it clear that this kind of doing was, at its root, 'the work of the Devil'. Not in some caricature, of 'fork-tailed demons in red pyjamas', but as Foster puts it, as '*spiritual realities that play a definite role in human affairs.*' (p.581, 'Money, Sex and Power'). These powers do not just influence individuals, but as Foster goes on to say, these kinds of evil powers can affect 'organisations and whole structures of society'. As St Paul wisely said, our battle is not against 'flesh and blood' but against the principalities and powers of this dark world..." These powers can inhabit not only people, but positions of power and places... That evil powers that

work against God, can energise an organisation, an ideology even a nation, is something we don't need to look too far back for... the rise of Nazi Germany, Cambodia's Killing Fields, and the Rwandan genocide all point to the devastating consequences of powers that influence for evil... It's something we need to be prayerfully aware of and to wisely guard against, in Christ, who has ultimately defeated these dark powers through the Cross and Rising again.

But to finish, on a more positive note, it's important to re-state as St John does, that life-giving power, looks entirely different and is not only found in Gaius, but is evident in Demetrius, in verse 12. In just the same way Diotrophes, was a rare name, Demetrius was as common as John is today, and could have been the person who carried John's letter to Gaius. Whatever his background, Demetrius was well-known, and more importantly, was 'well spoken of by everyone – and even by the truth itself'. Demetrius stacked up as someone who, like Gaius used his power and influence to honour God, and to honour others... though how he did it is lost to the mists of time.

The question to finish, that we're asked this morning, is 'How about us?' How will we be remembered? Are we more like Gaius and Demetrius or are we suffering from the Diotrophes Effect? You know in the day to day, squeeze of living life, we can simply live reactively to life's circumstances. We can be so harried by what is on our plate, that we can use and misuse our power, without any real thought of its implications. What we see however, in Jesus life, and I have a hunch in Gaius and John the Apostle, who are people who rather than living reactionally, took time out each day to prayerfully ask God as to how he was going to use the day in front of them? When Peter comes to Jesus at the beginning of Mark's Gospel and says where on earth have you been? Everyone is looking for you! Jesus is unflustered! Why? Because He spent some time each day in a quiet place, where He could work through with His Father and the Holy Spirit what were the Kingdom priorities for the day. The invitation is the same for us. Will you do one thing for me this week... no, for yourself! Will you take some time out with the Lord, to sit with Him... to hand yourself over, along with all your priorities, and ask for His presence, His guidance and power to be your as you move through the week... As you do, it will be enormous clarity. It does for me.

As we do we will find ourselves, using our God-given power, as his co-workers, in small or large ways to bring Christ's love, light, as we seek to serve and support the work of the Kingdom; using it lovingly, humbly, in service of others, to bring Christ, His truth and His love to others... Whether it be William Wilberforce using his voice to speak up about the abolition of slavery; like the young Maori children from Parihaka who used their gifts of bread and singing songs to expose the misuse of power by 1,600 armed militia to close down the non-violent resistance of Parihaka

to land confiscation in Taranaki, or using our musical creativity to point others to the way of Christ... How will we use our power for God's good Kingdom... as we are shaped by Christ and fueled by His truth and love?