

SYNOD BIBLE STUDIES 2

Titus 3:1-11

Yesterday we began by reminding ourselves of Bishop Mark's charge where he said that in our pluralistic world, we both differ *from* each other and we differ *with* each other. He has encouraged us to reach across this divide, by discerning what matters to God, and bringing those insights to our interactions with those outside our own 'tribes'.

I also said yesterday, that quite often these same divides exist *within* the body of Christ, and such divides serve to not only cripple our own spiritual growth and understanding, but sully the impact of any overtures we make to reach out to a world singularly different from our own.

I suggested that the way forward to restore our credibility in the eyes of a world disillusioned with the church, lies in the pursuit of holiness, both personally and communally.

Today I want to look at the 3rd chapter of Titus, where Paul speaks about holiness in the context of a Christian's civic responsibility, and then moves on to a particular issue that was plaguing the church in Crete - that of the conflict and disunity brought about by false teachers.

Commentator William Barclay notes that the Cretans were notoriously turbulent and quarrelsome and impatient with all authority. He quotes Polybius, the Greek historian, who said of them that they were constantly involved in "insurrections, murders and internecine (inter-nee-syne) wars."¹ - I had to look up the word 'internecine' - it means destructive to both sides.

I spent some time in Syria in 2016 and saw a country that fit that description entirely. While the ordinary people of Syria were on the whole, peaceable and devout, the country had become the battle ground of numerous violently opposing forces, constantly erupting in both petty and major conflicts. A week after we flew out, the airport was shelled.... But it was heartening to see the local Christians working together, making every effort to be love-bringers and peace-makers in that unsettled and ravaged place.

Paul instructed Titus to lay down the public responsibility of the Christian within the equally unsettled landscape of Crete.

V1 is about the believers' action towards the government. Paul says, "Remind them to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work,"

¹ William Barclay, <https://www.studydrive.org/commentaries/dsb/titus-3.html>

Paul's strategy was for the believers to set an example of good citizenship, so the young church would not be drawn into political agitation. This would be contrary to the way most Cretans approached life, and would set the Christians apart, 'allowing their light to shine.'

I don't believe Paul was advocating blind obedience to unjust and ungodly directives - rather by being 'ready for every good work' Paul was advising conduct that would cause the church to be respected and thought well of.

What does Paul mean by "every good work"? If we look at **Romans 13:3**, we read, 'For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you wish to have no fear of the one in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval.'

We have some pretty ferocious speed traps on the coast and speeding motorists are mercilessly fined. I've heard people venting loudly about this and the number of speeding fines they've accrued in a short space of time. There's a simple solution. Don't speed. Put your cruise control on. Paul is saying, 'obey the law, and you will have nothing to fear from the authorities.' More than that, he was saying, if people proactively 'do good' - they will receive approval from the authorities.

V2 speaks about the believers' attitude to the government - so often reflected in conversation. Paul exhorted the believers 'to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show every courtesy to everyone.' They were to reign in any tendency to be slanderous and argumentative over political issues, they were to avoid stirring people up, and to be deliberately courteous and reasonable towards one another - even those they disagreed with.

In an environment where everyone else was arguing about politics, taking sides and being aggressive towards one's opponents, it would have been a revolutionary concept for these new Christians to realise that Jesus called them to live differently.

Paul backs up his words by linking duty to doctrine, and in vs 3-7, he reminds Titus that all of them were once as godless as the people that surrounded them. He includes himself, saying : 'For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, despicable, hating one another.' No

doubt in Paul's mind was his own conduct in having believers arrested and imprisoned in the not so distant past.

Paul had of course experienced a dramatic conversion² and transformation, and reminded the believers that they were all recipients of God's saving grace, not because they were worthy, but because of his mercy, and that through the Holy Spirit, they would inherit eternal life.

They had every reason, then to devote themselves to holy conduct.

Paul then moves on to the subject of the dissention, or conflict that was plaguing the church as a result of the false teaching.

The impact of the false teachers on the church had been on Paul's mind from the beginning of his letter:

In ch 1:10 Paul warns Titus about 'rebellious people, idle talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision';

in 1:13-14 he instructs Titus to rebuke them, and to not pay any attention to Jewish myths or the commandments of those who reject the truth.

and in 1:16 Paul really sounds off 'They profess to know God, but they deny him by their actions. They are detestable, disobedient, unfit for any good work.'

Now in chapter 3, Paul lays out a strategy to deal with these false teachers in an effort to mitigate the damage to the church. If this situation wasn't dealt with, Paul knew that the young church would be seriously at risk. The advice he gives was a last resort, but completely necessary, if the false teachers would not be silent.

In v9, he tells Titus to 'avoid stupid controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels about the law, for they are unprofitable and worthless'.

Becoming involved in these irrelevant arguments was a distraction, and not something Titus should waste time on. Rather, continues Paul,

'After a first and second admonition, have nothing more to do with anyone who causes divisions, since you know that such a person is perverted and sinful, being self-condemned.'

² Acts 9:1-19

Paul tells Titus to warn them, twice if necessary, and then if there is no response, he is to have nothing more to do with them. To shun them. There is an English phrase my dad explained to me once. The phrase was “Sending a person to Coventry”. He said it was something that happened in his English school when the class wanted a rogue student to know that his actions were unacceptable. It meant pretending that the shunned person, although conspicuously present, couldn’t be seen or heard. Paul was advocating this sort of action towards a person who would not stop his divisive behaviour.

The phrase translated in the NRSV as ‘anyone who causes divisions’ in other versions is translated ‘heretic’ - though not our current understanding of heretic. The word only occurs here. The term “heresies” occurs twice (1Corinthians 11:19; Galatians 5:20). However, in both instances, the word doesn’t refer to a doctrinal error. Ellicott’s commentary suggests that the ‘heretic’ of the Church in Crete appears to have been a person who, dissatisfied with the organisation and discipline introduced by Titus into the Christian community...withdrew himself from the common body, and gathering round him other discontented spirits, established...a rival Church in Crete.³

Heretics in that early sense, abound in our own time. I mentioned yesterday that my husband and I had been members of a church that had been infiltrated by a false teacher. It was a small but wonderful rural church - we felt privileged to be part of it. It was warm and caring, the teaching was great, and people shared their lives and their gifts with one another.

We moved away, and some years later we were deeply saddened to hear what had happened to our beloved church. A new person had come to the church who was very impressive. He was intelligent, charming, knowledgeable, a great communicator and a leader. And he’d done some theological study. It wasn’t long before he was sharing in the preaching. However, it soon became evident that his theology was a little off. He was challenged, and asked to stick to the truth of the Scriptures. But this man firmly believed what he was teaching, and wasn’t going to give an inch. He managed to persuade a good number of the congregation that he was right and the rector and leadership of the church were wrong.

Sadly, the problem wasn’t resolved. He left the church, taking more than a third of the congregation with him. They started an independent church a

³ Ellicott’s Commentary for English Readers <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/titus/3-10.htm>

few kilometres down the road. Within ten years, that 'new' church had folded. The small Anglican Church it split from never really recovered.

Dissent and division was a serious problem for the church in Crete. It's just as serious a problem today. I was amazed to learn that in 2017, the Baptist World Alliance listed 239 different Baptist denominations. There aren't just Baptists, as opposed to Anglicans and Catholics, and so on - there are more than 239 different TYPES of Baptists! Each one is a split from another church, over an issue of doctrine or practice. So many amputations!

A baptist believer relates this story...

'I was walking across a bridge one day, and I saw a man standing on the edge, about to jump off. So I ran over and said, "stop! don't do it!"

"Why shouldn't I?" he said.

I said, "Well, there's so much to live for!"

He said, "Like what?" I said,

"Well...are you religious or atheist?"

He said, "Religious."

I said, "Me too! Are you Christian or Buddhist?"

He said, "Christian."

I said, "Me too! Are you Catholic or Protestant?"

He said, "Protestant."

I said, "Me too! Are you Anglican or Baptist?"

He said, "Baptist!"

I said, "Wow! Me too! Are you Baptist Church of God or Baptist Church of the Lord?"

He said, "Baptist Church of God!"

I said, "Me too! Are you Original Baptist Church of God, or are you Reformed Baptist Church of God?"

He said, "Oh, Reformed Baptist Church of God!"

I said, "Me too! Are you Reformed Baptist Church of God, Reformation of 1879, or Reformed Baptist Church of God, Reformation of 1915?"

He said, "Reformed Baptist Church of God, Reformation of 1915!"

I said, "Die, you rotten heretic!" and pushed him off.'

As an archdeacon, I spend a lot of time dealing with conflict in churches. It seems to happen when priorities become skewed. It happens when in a church, it becomes more important for someone to be right, than to be kind or patient, or forbearing. It happens when someone needs to get their own way, rather than to allow someone else to have their way. It happens when people misunderstand each other, or don't listen to each other. It happens

when God's people start to operate out of their earthly, carnal nature, rather than being led by the Spirit of God.

Is that too harsh? In v11, speaking of the dissenters, Paul says, 'such a person is perverted and sinful, being self-condemned.' It seems Paul was over it.

I can't help thinking that if we aren't able to keep our own house in order, how on earth can we have something to offer a broken and divided world?

If we want to contribute to bringing together the disparate parts of this world that stretch across the divide Mark spoke of; if we want to show them the transforming love of Christ, and invite them to participate in his kingdom - then we need to be transformed ourselves. Where necessary, we need to rediscover what it means to be holy, and to reach out to love our world, from that place of holiness.

Diana Butler Bass, in her book *Christianity after Religion*, writes, *What will make a difference to the future is awakening to a faith that fully communicates God's love—a love that transforms how we believe, what we do, and who we are in the world.* ⁴

That's our call as Christians in this time and this situation - to live our lives in the love of God - a love that transforms our heart, our behaviour, and flows out to our broken world.

Amen

⁴ Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity After Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening* (HarperOne: 2013), 37.