

From the second chapter of the First Letter of John:

Beloved, I am writing you no new commandment, but an old commandment which you had from the beginning. (1 Jn. 2:7)

*May the words of my lips and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.*

According to a second-century Christian tradition, at some point after the Ascension of Jesus Saint John<sup>1</sup> left Palestine for Ephesus in Asia Minor. There he is described as having established the church and having lived until extreme old age. The tradition records that in the last years of his life John was apparently so frail that he could not usually muster the strength to speak, but when he was able he typically said only "Little children, love one another". While I am sure that the congregation at Ephesus did truly revere their saintly Elder, we can imagine that hearing this again and again would eventually become at least a little tedious.

Indeed, the fourth century theologian, Saint Jerome,<sup>2</sup> records that on one occasion

The disciples and brothers in attendance, annoyed because they always heard the same words, finally said, "Teacher, why do you always say this?"

To which Saint John replied

"Because it is the Lord's commandment and if it alone is kept, it is sufficient."

While I can only speak for myself, I find this story to be quite moving. To me, it indicates that the words of Jesus at the last supper (Jn. 13:34) had such a profound and cataclysmic effect on Saint John that from that moment everything else paled in significance. If this is the case, it is easy to see why the biblical scholar Robert Culpepper calls Jesus' commandment to love one another the 'foundation of Christian ethics'.<sup>3</sup>

How then do we reconcile this tradition with the fact that the Letters of John seem so concerned with matters of doctrine?<sup>4</sup> In the second lesson this evening we heard Saint John set down some very rigorous standards of Christian belief and behaviour. John makes clear both that to know Christ we must keep his commandments (1 Jn. 2:4) and that anyone who hates their brother or sister is still in the darkness of sin and not in the light of Christ (1 Jn. 2:9-11). But, like all Biblical law codes from the very beginning of Israel's story, there is sometimes a tension between a person's responsibility to God and their responsibility to their fellow believer.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> There is some debate as to which John is meant by these early traditions. While scholars such as J.B. Lightfoot and B.F. Westcott identified St John as John the son of Zebedee (i.e. the Apostle John), Richard Bauckham suggests in his *The Testimony of the Beloved Disciple* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007) that the John who lived at Ephesus is the 'Beloved Disciple' (i.e. a disciple not of the Twelve), referred to in the Gospel of John, who was responsible for authorship of both the Gospel of John and at least the First Epistle.

<sup>2</sup> See Saint Jerome, *Commentary on Galatians*, trans. A. Cain (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 260

<sup>3</sup> R.A. Culpepper, "An Introduction to the Johannine Writings" in B. Lindars, R.B. Edwards, and J.M. Court, *The Johannine Literature* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000)

<sup>4</sup> See introduction to J.L. Houlden, *The Johannine Epistles*, 2nd edn. (London: A&C Black, 1993)

<sup>5</sup> See J.D. Levenson, *Sinai and Zion* (New York: Harper Collins, 1985)

The concerns of first-century Ephesus are obviously not the concerns of 21st century Australia, but we would be deceiving ourselves if we were to believe that the Church in this part of world is not also grappling with significant issues of doctrine and theological ethics. Especially relevant at this time is the issue of human sexuality and, in particular, the current debate surrounding marriage equality in Australia.

When I survey the vast breadth of material relating to this issue in the public domain, it seems to me that no group of people is so divided by the particular question which has been posed by the Australian Marriage Law Postal Survey than the Christian Church. Leaders and theologians of all denominations are arguing the case on both sides of the divide. And what I see, by and large, are not the caricatures of narrow-minded conservatives versus wishy-washy liberals. What I see is Christian people who, like the church at Ephesus, are wrestling with what it means to both keep the commandments of Christ and to love one another.

While each of us is likely to have decided on our personal position, I think that there are a range of authentically Christian perspectives on this particular issue. For my part, I think that the issue is infinitely more complex than can be adequately represented by a simple “yes” or “no”. I also think that no matter how passionately we may hold our own personal view, we must acknowledge that, of the choices available, both conclusions have merit, and that both conclusions are worthy of our respect. Furthermore, we ought to be generous enough to presume that those who come to a conclusion different to our own have done so according to authentic convictions, and with an effort to reconcile keeping the commandments of Christ with the principle of neighbourly love.

As a church we need to acknowledge that whatever the outcome of this survey, and whatever legislation is enacted as the result, the debate will leave a deep wound within the Australian church which, like Christ, will transcend denominational boundaries. And, whatever the result, we will need to again get on with the business of loving one another. This will require the grace of God in abundance, but it will also require a great deal of personal forgiveness.

While it might go without saying that, as Christians, we believe in the forgiveness of sins, we would do well to keep in mind C.S. Lewis’s observation that to believe in the forgiveness of sins is not nearly as easy as we might think. Belief in the forgiveness of sins is no passive activity, it requires sincere and continuous effort on our part. But, if we are to follow Christ, we have no choice.

Lewis reminds us that Christ’s teaching on forgiveness is clear:

If you don’t forgive, you will not be forgiven. No part of His teaching is clearer, and there are no exceptions to it.<sup>6</sup>

Of course, people must be held accountable for their actions. I am not proposing that we excuse any instances of bigotry, hatred, or deliberate misrepresentation. But, we are required to forgive people their sins against us or against our family and friends, ‘however spiteful, however mean, however often they have been repeated.’<sup>7</sup>

Despite my week of work experience alongside the full-time clergy of this parish, I don’t have all the answers – at least, not yet anyway. So, I certainly do not wish anybody to change their position on marriage equality based on the ponderings of a mere theological student.

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<sup>6</sup> C.S. Lewis, “On Forgiveness” in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (London: William Collins, 2013), 177f.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 178

Rather, my hope is that we will all resolve to walk in the light of Christ, determined not to stumble, but with the sure and certain knowledge that if we do, forgiveness is available. Hear again the teaching of Saint John the Elder:

Little children, love one another. It is the Lord's commandment and if it alone is kept, it is sufficient.

*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*