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There was a time when I would stay up to watch events like the Oscars, coming up on 4th March. It is **THE** big award and an occasion for speeches. Actors receive awards and thank people. We know what to expect: most will thank a member of their family, then thank the director, producer and the entire cast and crew by name. There are very few speeches which are memorable, and whether you like her or not, Oprah Winfrey's was one such at the Golden Globe Awards last month.

What makes a speech memorable is that it comes from the heart, is genuine and makes the speaker vulnerable to their audience, talking about things which are deeply personal.

Over the next two months, we are going to explore a small collection of three letters towards the end of the Bible, written by John, which are memorable, for the very same reason: it is genuine, he speaks from his heart and makes himself vulnerable to his audience, talking about issues which are deeply personal, drawn from a life of rich experience.

Over the past eight years, between Christmas and Easter, we have explored one of the Gospels, in sequence. Last year, we had covered all four Gospels, twice! I asked the Deacons if we might continue from the Gospel account by John, and explore three short *letters* authored by him, and they were very encouraging.

The author of these three letters is indeed the author of the Gospel by his name, John the disciple. Together with his brother James, both sons of Zebedee, both recruited by Jesus and re-named by Him as the "Sons of Thunder"¹: they possessed thunder-like qualities. Once while travelling through Samaria on their way to Jerusalem, they ran into trouble. Jesus attempted to find a place for them to rest for the night, but was met with opposition from the villagers.

¹ Mark 3:17

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Luke tells us, "When the disciples James and John saw this, they asked, '**Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?**'"². No wonder Jesus re-named them "Sons of Thunder"!

James and John were two of Jesus' closest friends, being two of three disciples in the inner circle³. At the start of the church age, James was the first apostle to be killed⁴, and John was the last to die, the only Apostle to die of old age. John's epistles, written late in his life when he was an old man around 85-90, show he still possessed a fiery spirit, which by then, was moderated by love.

Such is the transforming power of Jesus that this "Son of Thunder" John, earned a new nickname: the "Apostle of Love." In fact, in 1 John the word "love" occurs over 40 times.

If we think such transformation happens today, did you catch the news item on Thursday, about a church in Southwark (London), where the Pastor invites former gang members to come up to the altar and surrender their weapons, knives, guns, and drugs. The programme has seen remarkable results. In Croydon, a former leader of Croydon's largest criminal gangs, is now keen to pray with people on the streets.

Having spent three years with Jesus as His disciple, John's life is changed. The fiery hot-tempered fisherman is transformed into Jesus' "beloved disciple", to whom Jesus entrusted His mother, while He hung dying on the cross⁵.

Like many others, John would have joined the migration of Christians out of Jerusalem a few years before the Romans destroyed it in 70 AD.

² Luke 9:54

³ Matthew 17:1

⁴ Acts 12:2

⁵ John 19:26-27

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We know that John settled down and resumed his apostolic ministry, having taken Mary with him, in and around the bustling city of Ephesus. By the time of writing these three *letters*, John was regarded as an elder statesman, a father-figure who was consulted on all matters of faith.⁶

Letters are the most intimate form of communication. Of course, when I say the word *intimate*, our mind thinks, "he is talking about love letters", and indeed letters between two people in love are intimate. But think of this, a letter from an employer commending an employee, or even dismissing an employee is also an intimate letter; it is written with certain emotions and read by the employee with certain emotions, albeit different emotions!

Today we communicate very differently. Letters are out. We use a very few words, and more abbreviations (c u l*8 - *see you later*); we would rather send photos on Instagram and hide behind emoticons to convey our emotions, real or otherwise.

On the face of it, John's three letters do not read as proper letters: they do not have a proper introduction, nor are they addressed to anyone in particular, nor does he sign off with a personal message, like Paul's letters - *Dear Beloved Saints of God...*, but these three letters are so intensely personal, John doesn't feel the need to mention his name to those to whom he is writing. He knows they will recognise his writing as he bares his pastoral heart of compassion and love for them, calling them '**My beloved**', or '**My little children**'.

John is a very old man. Picture him; he might have been sitting with a quill and a piece of parchment, or dictating to an eager young disciple as he reminisced his exciting life, three years of which he lived with Christ, first as a disciple which changed and transformed him, then as an apostle,

⁶ Early Church leaders like Polycarp and Papias refer to and acknowledge these three *letters* of John.

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then as an evangelist and as a missionary. What would his thoughts have been?

I don't know about you, but I find talking with old men and women, fascinating. Yes, I know, they repeat themselves, **a lot!** If you meet them regularly, they will insist they have not told you the story about the time when..., which they have, every time you visited!

Our children do this to me, even though I am not old! *Dad! You told us about that every time we meet!* - *No I have haven't!* - *Yes you have!*

But if we forget their forgetfulness (it will happen to us sometime), old people have fascinating stories about their lives. We tend to be impatient with people with Alzheimer's and other memory-robbing diseases because they cannot remember what happened in the last five minutes, or the last hour, or day, **but** they do remember very clearly, and in vivid detail, what happened *when they were young* !

We should not make the mistake of ascribing dementia to this old man of God, John, who because of his personal relationship with Jesus the Christ, was inspired by the Spirit of the Living God, to comment on the need of the hour - what these Christians in Ephesus needed most!

Most scholars agree, one of the difficulties in analysing this little book is that John doesn't really develop an argument in any order, the way Paul does to the churches in Rome and Ephesus.

In these five chapters, John repeats prominent themes that are in his mind and heart, and every time he repeats a theme, he tends to add a little bit more to it in repetition. He is, after all, an old man!

Jerome, an early Christian whose prolific writings are very descriptive and attested to by others who were not followers of Christ, says that when the aged apostle was so weak that he could no longer preach, he used to be carried into the congregation at Ephesus to whom he would utter a

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simple word of encouragement: '*Little children*', he would always say, '*Love one another*'. '*Little children, love one another*'. When the hearers grew tired of the same message over and over again, they asked him why he so frequently repeated it. He responded: '*Because it is the Lord's command, and if that is all that you do, it is enough!*'.

So, why did John write *this* letter? In chapter 5 and verse 13, John says: '*I have written like this to **you who already believe** in the name of God's Son Jesus, that you will know beyond the shadow of a doubt, that you have eternal life, the reality and not the illusion.*'

John is writing to those who believe Jesus is the Son of God who defeated death, assuring them of God's promised gift of eternal life, which is theirs to have and enjoy.

So why did John write the Gospel? Turn to John chapter 20, verse 30 where he says, '*Jesus provided far more God-revealing signs than are written down in this book. These are written down so **you will believe** that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and in the act of believing, have real and eternal life, in the way he personally revealed it.*' John wrote the gospel for those who want to believe and need the evidence and the teaching, but the three letters we will examine, were written to those who already believe, to encourage them in their faith and their hope.

As we go through this lovely little letter written by a wise, loving, grandfatherly man, we will discover John's real message: we live in a world where doctrinal, moral and social confusion prevents us from living the life God wants for us. Imagine, it existed in John's day for him to warn the readers of his day, and in our world we continue to face confusion about the same:

- **Doctrine** - Did Jesus really exist? Was He truly the Son of God? What does this mean?

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- **Moral** - How do we live a moral life? Over the past 150 years ago, the human race has grappled with **morality** and found it was too restrictive and prescriptive, denying them the freedom to live life as they want; we ditched a moral framework for **ethics** which provided large areas of grey which offered choices to live life; now the human race has ditched ethics because it does not have enough grey areas to provide **all** the choices they want to indulge in, and have moved to **spirituality** where each person defines God for themselves, and does what **they** think God wants them to do.

There is no **Truth**. You have your truth, I have my personal truth.

People cannot agree there is **ONE** Truth, 'The Truth', because it denies them choice.

- **Social** - In this melee of confused doctrine and confused morality and distorted Truth, how do we live life with those around us? How do life with all these bothersome people around us, many of whom refuse to think like we do, many of whom irritate us with the minutiae of their lives, as revealed on Facebook and Instagram and other social media!

In the next two months before Easter, as we delve into John's mind, grapple with his reflection of life around him, which frankly, minus all the modernity and technology, is no different to ours today, let me leave you with this:

John Newton, a captain of slave ships, who through a dramatic conversion was ordained as an Anglican cleric, wrote hymns we cherish, "*Amazing Grace*" and "*Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken*", also wrote a hymn titled "*What do you think of Christ?*", sung to the tune of *Greensleeves*, the first four-line stanza reads as follows:

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*"What think you of Christ?, is the test
To try both, your state and your scheme;
You cannot be right in the rest,
Unless you think rightly of Him'.*

Unless we think *rightly* of Christ, doctrinal, moral and social issues will confound us, and the answers we think we have discovered for ourselves, will confuse us even more.

*"What think you of Christ?, is the question to ponder as we delve into this lovely little letter in the next two months. **AMEN.***