

## *Whatever is good*

Sunday 2 November 2008 – Rev Lance Thomas  
Titus 3:1-11

I recently did a mental check of movies I have enjoyed and I was surprised to notice how many of them have friendship as an integral part of the story.

The Shawshank Redemption, Beaches, As good as it gets, Forest Gump, Fried Green Tomatoes, Lion King, Babe, Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure ... and the list could go on. My most recent addition which I can recommend is Lars and the Real Girl. Its different and delightful.

I was thinking about all of this because tonight I get to speak at Satellite and the theme they have given me is 'Best Supporting Actor'. I realised that the best supporting actors in movies are often loyal friends of the leading actor. These friendships are often characterised by a mutual willingness to take on the battle for the other. The best supporting actor I have chosen to look at tonight is Titus. We don't know a lot about Titus but what we do know fits the best supporting actor characterisation very well.

Titus is Paul's friend. Paul call him 'Titus my true son in our common faith'. That's a bit of jargon which indicates that Titus was brought to faith in Christ by Paul. Titus was a Gentile, a non Jew.

The Christian Church began as something of a Jewish sect, the first followers of Christ were predominantly Jewish, the centre of the Church was Jerusalem and the growth of the Church outside of Israel was channelled through the Jewish synagogues located in virtually all the cities of the known world. It would appear that in its early years those preaching the gospel of Jesus were welcomed into the synagogues and given freedom to speak. As the message went out beyond Israel more and more non-Jews began to respond to the Gospel call. This generated the first major controversy in the Christian Church and the controversy was believe it or not about circumcision. Judaism had its fair share of people who became Jews as adults, not born into the faith and the rite of passage into Judaism included circumcision. The Jerusalem based early church were strongly of a view that males who became Christian should also be circumcised according to Jewish practice.

The Apostle Paul, himself a Jew, was the undoubted leader of the growing movement of Christianity outside of Israel. And he argued against the Church in Jerusalem in their insistence on circumcision and in doing so he took on Peter, James the brother of Jesus, even his friend Barnabas.

Paul took with him when he went up to Jerusalem to argue his case, Titus. A Greek believer in Jesus, clearly a good example of a follower of Christ. At stake here was a lot more than the practice of circumcision, it was the issue as to whether Christianity was a Jewish offshoot or whether it was to be understood as a new work of God, not just for the Jewish people, but for the whole world. God had made it clear to Paul God's gift to the world in Christ, was a gift intended to go way beyond Judaism. Paul's arguments won the day and the support of the Jerusalem Church. No doubt Titus understood the larger significance of Paul's arguments but I believe he had a very personal reason for wanting Paul to succeed. I can see him at the end of the day saying 'I owe you one, mate'. Paul was never one to miss an opportunity. Paul used Titus to go to Corinth for him when the Corinthian church was reported as going against Paul's leading. Titus went and he sorted it out for Paul. Very happily by the sound of it.

But the payback for Paul came when he and Titus visited Crete with the gospel and then Paul left Titus on the island to further the work of the Gospel. Leaving Titus in Crete would have Titus saying, 'we are even, mate'. No people had a worse reputation than the Cretins. The Cretins were famous for being drunken, insolent, untrustworthy, lying, gluttonous people. So notorious were the Cretins that the Greeks actually formed a word Kretizein which means to lie and cheat.

Interestingly Paul doesn't say to Titus, leave them be. Living with them for a time, knowing what they were like, experiencing it, Paul says to Titus, go and convert them. What we see

here is the divine optimism of the Christian evangelist who refuses to regard any person as hopeless. Paul says, 'even one of their own prophets has said "Cretins are always liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons", this testimony is true'. But then he goes on to say, 'to the pure, all things are pure', the Christian must believe there is hope in the Gospel even for Cretins. So Paul leaves Titus to work among the Cretins. And this is the setting in which we get the short letter called Titus, which is a letter of encouragement and instruction to Titus from Paul, as Titus endeavours to work among the Cretins.

The central premise of the letter as I read it is that a Christian attitude and action that is exemplary, is the light in the darkness that will witness to the Cretins.

So Paul outlines the qualities necessary in a leader, for example, husband of one wife, obedient children, blameless, not overbearing, not quick tempered, not given to drunkenness, not violent not pursuing dishonest gain. Rather he must be hospitable, one who loves what is good, self controlled, upright, holy, disciplined. Obviously these things are desirable in a Christian leader anywhere, but in the hell hole that is Crete, such behaviour contrasts so directly with commonly accepted behaviour that the differences of the Gospel will stand out, an obvious alternative way of being, of living.

Paul goes on to instruct various groups who make up the church with the same thinking in mind, the older men, the older women, the younger men, younger women, even slaves. 'For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say 'No' to ungodliness and worldly passions and to live self controlled, upright and godly lives.'

We don't necessarily live among a bunch of Cretins, liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons, although if you watch too much of the news on TV you might wonder. But Paul's message to Titus and the Christian Church in Crete, does speak directly to us. It is the way we live, the way we treat each, the way our actions and values contrast with the accepted actions and values of the culture in which we live, it is these things that speak the gospel to the world.

And it is the responsibility of all of us to live this difference. We are able to do that of course because we are superior people to those among who we live. 'No!' says Paul. 'We too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another.'

The starting place of Christian living is not pride and superiority, but humility and gratitude.

The rest of the world looked at the Cretins with contempt, the Christians looked at the Cretins and saw themselves. 'There but for the grace of God go I.' Christian living has nothing to do with us, but everything to do with what God has done for us in Christ.

Again Paul says, 'But when kindness and the love of God appeared he saved us, not because of righteous things we have done, but because of his mercy.' The Cretins, many in our world and some of us, have grown up with an idea of God who is demanding, asking hard, almost impossible things of us and is at his creative best in finding ways to punish us for failure. The Cretins and many others give up on even trying to live up to such a God. Jesus came to tell humankind, not of a God of justice who would pursue them for ever, but of a God of love who would never let them go.

The love of God is a gift we can never earn, only accept in trust. God loves us, even the cretin in us, because that's the way he is. How can I love even the cretin? Because I am loved. Just as I am.

God chose to express this love to humankind through the church. The attractiveness of the church, the alternative life that Paul calls for, the living expressions of love for each other and the world, doesn't come out of our human nature, it comes out of our Christ nature.

That's why baptism was/is such a central part of the choice for a new life. Baptism in the early church was very much the expression of men and women deliberately leaving one way of life and entering upon another. Baptism speaks of rebirth, when baptised people were often treated as if they were little children, as if they had been reborn and life began all over again. But Paul also speaks of renewal. Like in the days when we used to retread car tyres, or recondition motors, a return to newness in faith.

'But when kindness and love of God our Saviour appeared he saved us, not because of righteous things we have done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal, by the Holy Spirit whom he poured out on us generously.'

All the work of the church, all the words of the church, all the baptisms, are of no value unless the power of the Holy Spirit is there. God seeks to pour out his Holy Spirit generously on us. In baptism we are reborn and renewed, in receiving the Holy Spirit we are empowered, to be that community, to be that group of people, who can live among the cretins, who can love the cretins, who can genuinely demonstrate God's alternative. We are forgiven for the past, we are blessed in the present and we have the hope of eternal life. With all of this how can we not live the amazing difference.

It was a tough call asked of Titus. Live among the Cretins, love the Cretins, demonstrate to the Cretins a contrasting way of living.

It's a tough call Christ asks of us, live in a world of indifference, live in a world that values its independence from God and live in a way that demonstrates the alternative Gospel world view.

In fact it's such a tough call we can't do it. But Christ can. God knows, we know, sometimes the world knows that in ourselves we are cretins, no different, but through the kindness of God, we are reborn, renewed and empowered to live the alternative.

I have hardly touched on the guidance to Christian living and relationships that are outlined in this little book. That's the first challenge I want to make to you today. Go to the little book of Titus and read it for yourself. It's only a few pages. But they are a challenging few pages.

This is the difference we are called to live. My second challenge is to ask, do I need, is God calling me to, a baptism of rebirth or renewal. A class begins this afternoon at 2:30pm. You are invited.

My third challenge is to be a part of opening up yourself and this Church to the power of the Holy Spirit.

Because it is a baptised, reborn, renewed, Holy Spirit empowered, humble and hopeful Church who can demonstrate to this generation of a Cretin world, the difference that is possible in Christ.