

GOOD ADVICE: LOVE ONE ANOTHER

Good Advice: love one another.

An extract from the diary of Adrian Plass, written just as he was leaving Australia: *Anne, Gerald, Leonard and I were entertained before leaving for the airport by the perfect loving Christian family. Father warm and loving yet balanced and strong, mother clearly a perfect manager, yet flexible and fully involved with her children's lives, two beautiful teenage daughters alive and vibrant, yet sensible and self-disciplined, small boy endearingly mischievous, yet obviously good-hearted.... Everyone helped quite spontaneously with anything that had to be done, and there was not a single hissed threat, warning, bribe or entreaty from parents to offspring. To top all this, when we'd finished our snacks and drinks (prepared willingly by one daughter, served with humble elegance by the other, and passed assiduously by the little brother) the whole family sang Christian choruses in harmony to us! A disgusting display altogether, in fact. We felt obliged to role-play bubbling joy to match theirs. Very wearying. Tempted to pinch the small boy hard to make him swear or something. He'd probably have forgiven me, though.....*

I have to admit that that advice to "love one another" conjures up in my mind a vision of nauseatingly sweet people hugging one another, beaming widely at each other, pouring out their souls and receiving extravagant sympathy from each other, while I stand on the outskirts, forced smile on my face, feeling inadequate in love, trying to control the urge to empty a bowl of custard over someone's head, then feeling horrendously guilty, wondering what on earth I am doing in the ministry. You cannot imagine my relief when I read that Adrian Plass obviously felt the same.

"Love" can have something of a "fluffy bunny" image- all sweet smiles and sentimental songs; warm hugs and kind words. For the perfect Christian church it would mean no tension in the Elders' Meetings, no raised voices at the Church Meeting, never a rude word spoken in the Ministers' Vestry, unremitting pastoral care of people having a bad time and warm, sympathetic smiles whenever you encountered a difficult person, no matter how much you wanted to tell them to "bog off." And let's be honest: in the first place, we cannot achieve that level of perfection. And in the second place, deep down we don't want to. It is, as Adrian Plass said, "very wearying."

These last letters to young churches written by Peter and John were actually composed when Christian congregations had settled down a bit. A lot of the initial teething problems, which always happen when new communities set up, were over. Power-struggles and personality clashes had calmed down because churches now had systems of good order. They had elected leaders- known as Elders. They had recognised standards of appropriate behaviour in church meetings and people were feeling far more secure about their churches. Of course they still had differences of opinion and made mistakes and hurt one another- they were only human- but bonds of real comradeship had been formed which would take more than a few divided votes at a Church Meeting to break.

So this urgent advice to "*love one another*" was not, in fact, yet another lecture about being "nice", being "kind," being sweet-tempered- thank goodness. John was actually a very worried man because fundamental truths of Christianity were under threat.

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It has been an uphill struggle. Christianity has always had to grapple with human selfishness because we are all human. There have been Christians who have trampled on the thoughts and questions of others because they have felt threatened by freedom of belief; there have been Christians who have excluded or even killed those whom they have seen as trespassers on their territory; there have been Christians who have “walled up” their local churches to create a safe space for them to feel powerful and secure; there have been Christians who have gone totally over the top in sickly sweetness and light because they are desperately trying to impress God and the world with their good behaviour.

But there have also been Christians who have listened without fear to the questions and challenges raised by new generations of people and so have made the Gospel speak more powerfully than ever; there have been Christians who have been so secure in their own faith that they have been able to enter into dialogue with those of other traditions, other faiths or none at all and so have created new faith communities with a new freshness and spirit of common comradeship; there have been Christians who have turned their local churches into centres of communal life, friendship, help and welcome; there have been Christians who have faced up to the evil in the world and in the human race and gone out to do battle with it in the name of Jesus Christ. Once you have accepted that you are loved, loved with a divine love, there is not much you cannot do because your love is now being fed by the bottomless well of God’s love.

And so, at the end of the New Testament, the “Story of a Church,” the apostle Peter joins John in writing both a warning and a promise to Christian men and women. Peter had learned the hard way that God’s love was not something you could earn. Despite his best efforts he had failed his Lord Jesus over and over again and could not forgive himself. Only when he could set aside his personal pride and receive Jesus’ free love and forgiveness was he able to find his true vocation in life: to lead, to love and to care for God’s people.

Be alert then and of sober mind, he warned. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. And doesn’t he just?

But cast all your anxiety on God because He cares for you.

Amen