**5th June 2016**

**2 Timothy 1.3-10; 3.14-17**

If you had a break over the bank holiday and half term I hope it was refreshing. I too had time off but it seemed like I spent most of it travelling. A trip to London, then picking my daughter up from university, a trip to the Cotswolds, then to visit my mother in Burnley and also to Heathrow airport in the early hours of Tuesday morning to put my daughter, Jo on a flight to Denver where she is now in a Camp America. It’s a Salvation Army camp which has kids from the ages of 7 to 18 coming for numerous weeks of activities and faith building. These kids are usually from deprived backgrounds. It will be a great experience for her and she is already loving being high up in the Rockies; although she got told off for going running first thing in the morning because that is the time when the mountain bears and lions are out and about.

It is her birthday tomorrow and we packed her a card and book to encourage her in her time away. It is always a challenge what to write to someone. Knowing I was preaching on Paul’s letters to Timothy this Sunday I chose a quote from 1 Timothy 4 verse 12: ‘Do not let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity.

The apostle Paul in the New Testament was the one who founded many of the first churches. Initially in his missionary journeys he took with him a friend Barnabas but they fell out over whether to have a man called John Mark as their assistant. Paul couldn’t get on with him and instead took Timothy with him as an assistant in these missionary journeys. Timothy had probably become a Christian after Pauls’ first missionary journey to Lystra. He already had strong Jewish training in the scriptures and faith from his mother and grandmother – underlining the importance of family upbringing and encouragement. By the time of Paul’s second journey Timothy had grown into a respected dispel of Jesus and he joined Paul on his journeys. He was even willing to be circumcised as an adult as a mark of his commitment because otherwise his mixed racial background between being Greek and Jewish could have caused problems in going into synagogues, which was Pula’s usual strategy when visiting a new town.

Timothy seemed to struggle with a timid and reserved nature and allowed others to look down on his youthfulness. We can all too quickly write people off as too great a risk to deserve too much responsibility. By God’s grace Paul saw great potential in Timothy and entrusted him with important responsibilities.

The first letter to Timothy is Paul giving advice to Timothy about how to lead a church: how to guard against heresy and false teachers, how to care for the vulnerable, how to conduct worship and keep order ion church meetings, and what qualities do you look for in leaders, and how to stand firm in your faith and minister faithfully.

The second letter to Timothy is more a personal letter. Although there are scholarly questions about how authentic these letters are, the traditional view is that this is Paul’s last letter and it reveals his last words to a friend. It reveals his heart and his priorities.

The final words of Jesus before his death of course are so important such as: father forgive them they do not know what they ae doing: Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit.

George Orwell’s last written words were, “At fifty, everyone has the face he deserves.” He died at age 46.

Sir Winston Churchill’s last words were, “I’m bored with it all.”

Murderer James W. Rodgers was put in front of a firing squad in Utah and asked if he had a last request. He replied, “Bring me a bullet-proof vest.”

And according to Steve Jobs' sister Mona, the Apple founder's last words were, "Oh wow. Oh wow. Oh wow."

We don’t know what Muhammed Ali’s last words were but we know he had plenty to say when he was alive and well.

Paul’s last words reveal his heart and priorities for sound doctrine, steadfast faith, and confident endurance.

Let’s look at these priorities:

**First of all Sound doctrine:**

***13****What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus.****14****Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you – guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us.*

False teachers were a problem in the early churches, especially in Timothy’s church. At the heart of the false teaching was an incorrect view of Jesus Christ. In Timothy’s day many asserted that Jesus was totally divine but not human – God but not man. In the first letter to Timothy Paul spells out the further consequences of this view – that these teachers believed the body was evil and that only the soul mattered and that people shouldn’t marry or eat certain foods. There Paul says don’t be impressed by the teacher’s style or credentials but look at his teaching about Jesus Christ. A teacher’s conclusions about Christ show the source of their message.

These days we often hear that Jesus was human and not divine – man but not God. Either view destroys the good news that Jesus has taken our sins on himself and has reconciled us to God. Paul reminds Timothy of his teaching and to remain grounded on that sound teaching.

It is one of the most difficult things in Christian ministry to receive opposition from people who believe you are teaching the wrong things. One of the hardest parts of course is the nagging thought that the people who disagree with you might be right and that they are finding it just as awkward as you are to come to terms that you are disagreeing with them as much as they are disagreeing with you. Whenever we find ourselves confronted by someone who disagrees with us we need to remind ourselves that they probably feel that we are confronting them.

This humility, which is normally necessary and healthy doesn’t’ always apply. When the Confessing Church in Germany in the 1930s stood up to Adolf Hitler, in the name of Jesus Christ, there wasn’t’ room to say, as we should in day to day disagreements, ‘well, you may be right; let’s go away and think about it some more’. The Confessing Church simply had to say to Hitler and those churches who supported him, ‘No: you are wrong, you are leading people astray from God’s way and the love of Christ for all’. The same was true, as we now see, with those who were opposing apartheid in South Africa. There wasn’t room for anyone to say ‘well, some of us think black people are different and inferior, and some of us think all people are equal in the eyes of God; let’s agree to differ’. Muhammed Ali took his stand on these issues and paid a price for his opposition to racism. We now see that shrugging our shoulders on issues like that was intolerable. At the time, however many were anxious about taking a hard line stance, especially when it carried serious political, social and personal consequences.

We need to remind ourselves of this when we are tempted, as we surely are, to find Paul a bit too hard edged, a bit too dogmatic. It is hugely important what you believe. Your eternal destiny, the Christian faith has taught down the centuries, depends on Jesus Christ. I am the resurrection and the life, the one who believes in me shall live even though they die’ said Jesus. (John 11.25).

When I die I hope I can with Paul say ‘I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him until that day.’

Paul knows the importance of sound doctrine and urges Timothy to keep to it. May that sound doctrine be shaped by the faith and love of Jesus Christ and guarded with the help of the Holy Spirit, he urges.

In doctrinal debates there is always the temptation to be a straight literalist: the bible says this… Instead I would suggest, and believe Paul commends, read the Bible through the lenses of the faith and love of Jesus and be open to the guiding of the Holy Spirit – who Jesus promised guides us into all truth. There is a dynamic there for working out faith and belief and disagreement over doctrine. But the core of a test for sound doctrine is your view of Jesus Christ.

In our sceptical society there are so many challenges to our faith. Many dismiss it as superstitious nonsense. It is important to guard that good deposit of sound doctrine. The best way to guard it in my view is to honestly face the questions and challenges that the world asks of that belief. There is a whole library of arguments and defences and evidences for the Christian faith. Pester your minister if you have questions or are looking for answers. Don’t give up without a fight. ‘Keep the faith’ is Paul’s advice. The question is do we have the will to keep the faith?

So Paul’s second priority for Timothy is to have a **steadfast faith.**

*For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands.****7****For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline.****8****So do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner. Rather, join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God*

One of the joys about our new manse is the open fire we have. In those cold winter evenings I can light a fire and the flickering flames just make you feel warmer even if they don’t actually put out that much more heat. The trick is to keep the fire going and whether when it is dying down you can rekindle it. You can see a still glowing coal and if you get the right amount of kindling wood and newspaper and blow on it – then whoosh you have fanned the fire back into flame.

Paul senses that Timothy is at a bit of a low ebb and encourages him to fan into flame the gift God has given him. Sometimes our faith may be at a low ebb. What do we need to do, what metaphorically speaking, do we need to put on what is still glowing embers of our faith to try and revive it?

Timothy was encouraged to revive the gift God had given him. What gift was that? The following verse gives a clue I suspect: *For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline*. It is probably gifts of leadership.

First of all power. People are suspicious of power, quite rightly. Politicians get a lot of flak and both sides of the EU Debate have been criticised for scaremongering. We’ve all heard the famous saying that ‘power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely’. Power can be bad for those who exercise it, as much, if not more, as for those over whom it is exercised. The argument is that the EU has got too big it is unaccountable and is becoming corrupt. The counter argument is that the dangerous power of nationalism and patriotism, the stuff that can cause wars, is held in check by the joining together in co-operation of nations in the EU. We will make our choice in a couple of weeks which of those arguments is more convincing for us.

And yet power is inevitable and necessary with human relationships. Someone has to make decisions. Someone has to protect the weak and vulnerable. Someone has to regulate the common life of a complex society. Someone has to give other people a sense of direction. This is just as true for the church as it is for the world around us. The New Testament insists that God intends human authorities to bring order and harmony to the world. God gives some people gifts to make things happen within the life of the church. Timothy clearly has been given gifts in this direction and Paul is encouraging him not to be so timid but to get using them.

As he does so he must also act in love. Power divorced from love is dangerous and destructive. Love without power can degenerate into wishy washy sentimentality. But when the person exercising power is known and perceived to be someone who’s all direction of life is generous, self-giving love, people are more inclined to follow the lead they give.

Think about those at work or school who are in positions of power. Some rule through fear and intimidation. They may get results but they are not loved and respected. Some will try to please everyone and end up pleasing no one and become a bit of a pushover. Some will have the balance between power and love and hopefully have respect of those they have responsibility for.

All that needs self-discipline. Don’t let your passions and desires run away with you. Particularly when you have a position of responsibility you always have to be measured in what you say and do, lest you look back and regret things said or things done.

Those sitting exams at the moment know all about self-discipline. Resisting the desire to go out and play football or watch the telly or lie in when you know there is revision to do. Those who learn self-discipline are usually the ones who succeed in life.

**Finally Paul urges Confident endurance.**

Paul doesn’t want Timothy to be ashamed of the gospel of our Lord nor of him, a prisoner in Christ’s name. There are many things which are embarrassing about being a Christian. Let me tell you as a Christian minster who has to stand up in front of people and share the Christian message you are always one step away from embarrassment and putting your foot in it. There are many stories I could tell: like the time when I did the funeral of a lady whose favourite hobby was line dancing. Except I kept referring to how she enjoyed lap dancing. Or the time when I started preaching and a bout of diarrhoea came upon me. There are many different levels of shame and embarrassment. Every society has it hidden codes and assumptions.

Paul is challenging Timothy on the most important one. Is he ashamed of the Lord? Paul is in prison awaiting execution. You can imagine that being associated with Paul and his Lord was a dangerous thing. It’s a real test for Timothy.

We may not be in danger of execution, at least not in this country, but there is a stigma attached to being associated with a church, confessing Christ, being a Christian. The antidote to this temptation to be embarrassed about faith in Christ is to recognize and celebrate all the more the power that Paul speaks of in this passage. God’s power – brought to light through the resurrection of Jesus, God’s power that overrides all earthly power that is still at work in the world today. Paul’s argument is that if Timothy, if we, really understand the nature of God’s power we will learn to line up our sense of true honour and shame in relation to God himself, instead of in relationship to the fickle, shifting and a best secondary earthly powers. When the gospel is preached, when Jesus is proclaimed people are summoned to believe, trust and obey God rather than anyone or anything else. That’s what Paul means by calling in verse 9. *He has saved us and called us to a holy life*

Not because we are special but because of God’s goodness and love. When you realize what the gospel is all about – the resurrection of Jesus as the unveiling of God’s power – then your entire world of values is turned upside down. You will be ashamed of some of the things you were formerly proud of and proud of some things which you were previously ashamed of.

Christians commit themselves to God; like someone putting their most precious possession into safe keeping in a bank or secure vault. But at the same time God commits to us a particular calling, a new set of responsibilities and desires, ultimately a new life and vision to strive for. Our task is to be faithful.

As Paul urges Timothy, so he urges us, with his dying breath: guard your sound doctrine, have a steadfast faith and confident endurance.

Reference: Tom Wright: Paul for everyone: the Pastoral letters, SPCK 2004