



Revd Ro's Reflection on The 16th Sunday after Trinity Proper 22 Year C

2 Timothy 1.1-14

Luke 17.5-10

This week we move to Paul's second letter to Timothy. As I have said before many biblical scholars doubt that Paul was the author of the letter but for these Reflections I will refer to Paul as the writer. Our reading begins at the first verse but to understand this epistle we need to put it in context. It is believed that this was the last epistle of Paul. He is now an old man and he is imprisoned in Rome following his fourth missionary journey. It will not be long before he is executed in around 67 AD. Paul knows that things are coming to a close, as he says in 2 Timothy Chapter 4, but he has no doubt in his reward.

⁶ 'As for me, I am already being poured out as a libation, and the time of my departure has come.

⁷ I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. ⁸ From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give to me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing.'

Paul will ask Timothy to come to him soon. Timothy, who has followed Paul loyally, is in Ephesus and there he is seeking to spread the gospel and follow in Paul's footsteps. It is not easy, there is great opposition and Timothy has already been imprisoned. We remember Paul's greeting in his first epistle.

¹ 'Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the command of God our Saviour and of Christ Jesus our hope,

² To Timothy, my loyal child in the faith: Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord. ³ I urge you, as I did when I was on my way to Macedonia, to remain in Ephesus so that you may instruct certain people not to teach any different doctrine, ⁴ and not to occupy themselves with myths and endless genealogies that promote speculations rather than the divine training that is known by faith. ⁵ But the aim of such instruction is love that comes from a pure heart, a good conscience, and sincere faith.'

Timothy is leading the church in Ephesus and there are people who are challenging and changing the true teaching of Jesus and Paul to promote their own ideas. Paul knows that Timothy will lead

the church by teaching the 'true faith,' but he also knows that he will have a difficult time. This letter seeks to instruct but also to encourage him to have confidence in himself and the power of God working within him.

There is obviously a great fondness between Paul and the young man Timothy. At the opening of the letter Paul calls him, 'Timothy, my beloved child:' we think of Paul calling the slave Onesimus, 'my heart. This bond of love is very important and references to the tears shed by Timothy at their parting make this a very vivid and human passage. Paul centres everything in prayer and he prays constantly for Timothy and the church.

³ 'I am grateful to God—whom I worship with a clear conscience, as my ancestors did—when I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day. ⁴Recalling your tears, I long to see you so that I may be filled with joy.'

We are told that Timothy's family are Christians. ⁵ 'I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you.' Yet it seems Timothy has been challenged, not just by the difficult situation but by something in himself, ⁶ 'For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands; ⁷for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.'

The laying on of hands is the gift of the Spirit, the gift of authorisation to go forward and to do God's work spreading his gospel. Paul the apostle has laid hands on Timothy; he has the authorisation of one who met with the Lord on the Damascus Road. Paul, the greatest evangelist is nearing his end now and others like Timothy must continue the work of teaching the faith if the gospel is to spread. It is a huge commission, but it is his task. Paul's instruction to Timothy to 'rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands' is still a mystery. Was it some gift from God given through Paul, maybe tongues or was it the power to speak, to teach, to witness and to inspire people to turn to Jesus. That is indeed a gift. People can talk about Jesus but it is a God given gift to draw others to him. I remember mentioning the words of the bishop in a T.V series when he said, 'You can only win anyone lastingly to anything by love.' That is true, if people are coerced or forced the result is usually catastrophic. They may do what is wanted but they will not stick to it and they will resent it. Paul is talking about the use of a special gift or power that has been given to Timothy from the Spirit via the laying on of hands; this will enable Timothy who has to be the leader of a church, responsible not just for its growth but its well-being, its organisation and its people.

There is a lesson for us all here. Every organisation whether it is a, church, school, factory or whatever needs a head, a leader if it is not to descend into chaos. The challenge for those in positions of leadership is to use power responsibly and for the good. Sadly we have only to look around us to see the misery that results from corrupt power and tyranny. Those who have leadership roles within the church must remember that they are servants of the servant. That they must act in love and care for all people. It is a huge commission but without it people will lose heart. People need to follow in love, because they are inspired, because they want to, because they feel valued. Paul knows that the message of Jesus turns lives around. He knows that lives lived in Jesus way; lives guided by God's kingdom values will change the world and church leaders must inspire people to live in this way by example.

Timothy is a leader and he has a heavy task to perform for Christ. All around him there is persecution, anyone coming to Jesus, being baptised into the Church of God must confess Jesus as Lord. That is dangerous because it is counter-cultural. In the Roman Empire there is, as far as they

are concerned, one lord and that is Caesar, and he is above all. He is a god and Emperor Worship is the order of the day. Anyone one refusing to acknowledge this or worse still denying it and saying 'Jesus is Lord' risks arrest and possible death. So then people have to be prepared to risk everything for their faith, for their love of Jesus. If that is to happen the truth about Jesus and God's new creation must be proclaimed in love. People must be drawn to the wonderful gospel of Christ, 7 'for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.'

Paul reminds Timothy he is not acting through his own weak spirit but that he acts through the power of God. God's Holy Spirit is within him and will strengthen and sustain him. Not only will it embolden him to act without trepidation but with boldness. He will be given the words which will attract people lastingly to Jesus; he will inspire them with love for their Lord.

⁸ 'Do not be ashamed, then, of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel, relying on the power of God, ⁹who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works but according to his own purpose and grace.'

We are all weak and unworthy humans but God calls us by his grace freely given. He empowers all who truly love him. We can do things we never believed possible in the strength of God. Jesus takes lives and turns them around. So often those he calls are the last people we would think of, Paul himself, former persecutor in chief, Matthew collaborator and tax gatherer; the list is endless. If we are called we must not fear because the Holy Spirit will strengthen us.

'This grace was given to us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, ¹⁰but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Saviour Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.'

Everything centres on Jesus Christ who was with God in the beginning co-creator of all. He came to earth fully human and divine to live with humans. He taught the way of love and brought the saving message of God. Jesus gave his life for humanity at Calvary; he lived out his teaching of love and forgiveness there. He won salvation for us and renewed our relationship with God. As he promised, on that first Easter morning he rose from the dead and conquered death forever. He returned to his Father, 'taking our humanity to the heights of his throne.' He is immortal, he sent his Holy Spirit to be with us and the Holy Spirit dwells with humanity now. The promise of God is life eternal with him, new life in the newly created order of heaven and earth. The kingdom values will become earthly ones. We pray every day, 'Thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven,' this is God's promise to us. All who believe and try to live in his way will be united with him. Jesus will return to rule God's kingdom. This is Paul's faith this is our faith,

¹¹ 'For this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher, ¹²and for this reason I suffer as I do. But I am not ashamed, for I know the one in whom I have put my trust, and I am sure that he is able to guard until that day what I have entrusted to him. ¹³ Hold to the standard of sound teaching that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. ¹⁴Guard the good treasure entrusted to you, with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us.'

This faith enables him, this faith is central to his life. He has given the message faithfully and in love, he knows the time of his death cannot be long but he holds fast to the promises of God. He beseeches Timothy to have courage, yes he is young, yes he is persecuted, yes he will meet all kinds of opposition but he must never be cowed. Timothy and those followers hold the message and the commission of Jesus now. They go out not in their strength alone but in the power of the Spirit. Paul does not doubt Timothy, he cares deeply for him, he knows the gifts of teaching and courage within

him and he knows God will strengthen him. Importantly he knows Timothy will witness to the true teaching of Jesus entrusted to him by Paul himself. His desire is to see his young friend once again before his execution. He knows Timothy has safe hands and that all he needs is confidence. Timothy needs to know that actually it is God's hands that guide him and that God's strengthening love is with him.

As we read this and think of Paul and Timothy almost 2000 years ago we must think of our own lives, our own faith. If we are in positions of responsibility there is a lot to learn here and to pray about. If we are in positions of authority how do we use power; for ourselves or for Jesus? If we are not in a leadership role we all need to live our lives in the way of Jesus, and to think about Paul's teaching. The emphasis on the power of the Holy Spirit is so important, as is the centrality and power of prayer. The Lord is very near to us, in times of joy, in times of trouble all we need to do is turn to him and he will strengthen us in love.

The epistle reading is about faith in Jesus Christ and his wonderful message, God's grace and the victories Jesus won for us. These things are the mortar that links our gospel and epistle readings. The gospel reading is not easy and of course is open to interpretation, in these reflections I just offer my thoughts. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem and the disciples suddenly say, 'Increase our faith!' The first thing we ask is what provoked that, why did they suddenly say that out of the blue? The truth is that nothing really ever comes out of the blue. There is always a reason; to find that reason we have to go back a few verses. Jesus has just said this,

'Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to anyone by whom they come! ²It would be better for you if a millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea than for you to cause one of these little ones to stumble.'

Jesus is always truthful to his followers. To be a Christian is not easy, there will be opposition, difficulties, persecution and so on but Jesus warns anyone who deliberately is the cause of it; anyone who puts obstacles in the way of the gospel. He refers to 'these little ones' often this is thought to refer to children but it could just as easily be the poor, the needy, the oppressed. The Pharisees and ruling classes are the ones who make burdens for people, who put stumbling blocks in their way. No one should get in the way of a person's path to God. God loves us all equally, there is no status with God, and the apostles must do as Jesus does; draw people to God, make straight the paths for them. Jesus follows with these words,

³ 'Be on your guard! If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive. ⁴And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, "I repent", you must forgive.'

These are some of the most difficult words for us all. A Christian must forgive, says Jesus and he lived it out. Even at the last he prayed for those hammering in the nails and forgave the penitent thief. This is not a suggestion, Jesus says, 'You must.' Forgiveness is tough, we may say it but we must mean it and feel it in our hearts and live it out in our lives. That is what Jesus orders. What he does not say is condone what is wrong, no he says 'rebuke the offender.' It is our job as Christians to stand up against wrong doing wherever it appears. That can lead to danger and death as indeed Jesus knew. Paul followed in his footsteps and was killed and Timothy understands the dangers but it is a Christian's role. It is central to Christ's teaching, champion what you know to be right, don't stay silent, be prepared to stand up and be counted. That takes courage, people especially those in

power don't like to be challenged but sometimes it is necessary and that is what Jesus did, that is what his followers have done down the ages. BUT says Jesus, point out what is wrong with a humble heart and then if the person repents, forgive. If someone wrongs you it hurts and it's a hard thing to come to terms with. Forgiving takes time; it does not just happen if it is to be sincere. In the end though not forgiving hurts you too. We need to listen to Jesus' words, notice he says if the person repents. To repent literally means to turn, so the person can't just pay lip service they must really be sorry. If a person is sorry, forgiveness must follow. God forgives us if we repent and turn to him, we must do the same. Jesus follows this up with another instruction,

⁴ 'And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, "I repent", you must forgive.'

That was when the apostles said, 'Increase our faith!' Actually are they asking for the ability to do things in their own strength or are they asking for more faith in God's power? Just an aside to illustrate what I mean, I remember as a child at Sunday school hearing this reading about faith and the mulberry tree and putting it together with Moses striking the rock with his staff and water gushing out. I decided I would have a go. The only rock I knew around here was the wall surrounding St. Leonard's by Faux' farm, so I got on my little cycle (the roads were pretty empty sixty years ago) and off I went. I actually did think that if I struck it and believed it would happen water would come out. I had faith in that, needless to say nothing happened. It didn't affect my faith in God's power a jot. But I can distinctly remember thinking why didn't it, what did I do wrong? It took a long while and a lot of thought for me to understand that we can't demand things from God, or expect God to do things at the drop of a hat to prove a point for us. Nor should we expect to get our own way. When God acts it is for a reason in his wisdom. Indeed prayer doesn't work like that either. We pray to God, we put our requests and intercessions and then we need to await God's will. So often later we can see how prayers were answered in quite a different way from what we imagined. Too often people demand from God or worse still use God as an excuse to do what they want. What we need is a trusting relationship of faith in the power of the God who loves us.

Jesus' reply needs careful thought,

⁶ 'The Lord replied, 'If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, "Be uprooted and planted in the sea", and it would obey you.'

We know that the mustard seed Jesus is referring to is tiny. It is not the disciples' faith in themselves and their own power to do things that Jesus means; what needs to grow is their faith in God's power. God can do anything; he is all powerful. They need to understand that God is in control and that his plan will be worked out, they must put all their trust in him.

The next part does seem somewhat alien to us,

⁷ 'Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from ploughing or tending sheep in the field, "Come here at once and take your place at the table"? ⁸Would you not rather say to him, "Prepare supper for me, put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink; later you may eat and drink"? ⁹Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded?'

Generally we are not used to servants and certainly not slaves, then of course as we have seen, to people of standing they were the order of the day. It is awful to think of toiling all day then coming in exhausted not to a good meal but to cook for someone else! Jesus is talking about everyday accepted behaviour, the norm. A servant doesn't get thanks, he is doing his job. That is strange to us. Now a person does a job and they deserve at least a thank you. It's polite, it is what we should do because all people deserve our respect. So what does Jesus mean? Well of course it is an

illustration. We are God's servants and we are to serve him, to obey Jesus' teaching and to do all in our power to follow the God who loves us. That is our duty and our joy. Indeed Jesus gives us the example; he serves his Father continually and he serves humanity in humility. If we do that then we are simply doing our duty to God.

¹⁰ 'So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, "We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!" '

The point is, I think, that God does not owe us anything, yet he gives us everything, he did not withhold Jesus, part of the Godhead. Jesus came to walk with us in love thus God suffered for us on the cross. We don't deserve it; we don't earn it, because God's grace and love are freely given. Every one of us is precious in his sight and he knows us all intimately. We are people of God and we have a relationship of love with him. We are with him in prayer, whatever form that takes. God sent his Holy Spirit to strengthen and sustain us as Paul emphasises to Timothy. So we are never alone. What we need to do is to serve God and serve one another, to love and to care as Jesus taught us to do, that is our duty and our commission. It should be our joy. It is when people see our joy in worship and service to others that they are likely to be drawn to the family of God.

Great is thy faithfulness, O God my Father, there is no shadow of turning with thee thy compassions, they fail not; as thou hast been thou forever will be. Thomas Obadiah Chisholm

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