

Keeping the Faith

Preached on St. Luke the Evangelist
Trinity Anglican Church, WRJ
Oct. 18, 2020
Text: 2nd Timothy 4: 5-15

In our reading from 2nd Timothy this morning, Paul is coming to the end of this letter to his protégé. He knows the end of his earthly life is near. He has done his best, but now it is time for him to pass his work on to Timothy. In the verses preceding the ones we read, Paul is giving Timothy a charge:

I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and His Kingdom: preach the word, be urgent in season and out of season, convince, rebuke, and exhort, be unfailing in patience and in teaching. (vv.1-2)

This should certainly be taken to heart by those who are called to preach or teach the Gospel. It is not a trivial thing ministers and teachers are called to do; it is serious and quite consequential. As St. James says,

Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, for you know that we who teach shall be judged with greater strictness. (James 3:1)

Given this, Paul wants to exhort Timothy and make clear what is required of him. To do so, he reminds him of three things about Jesus.

First, Jesus is the judge of the living and the dead. Someday Timothy's work will be tested by none other than Jesus himself. A Christian must do every task in such a way that he can offer it to Christ. He is not concerned with either the criticism or the verdict of men. The one thing he covets is the "Well done!" of Jesus Christ. If we all did our work in that spirit, the difference would be incalculable. It would save us from the touchy spirit which is offended by criticism; it would save us from the self-important spirit which is concerned with personal rights and prestige; it would save us from the self-centered spirit which demands thanks and praise for its every act; it would even save us from being hurt by men's ingratitude.

Second, Jesus is the returning conqueror. "I charge you," says Paul, "by his appearing." The word is *epiphaneia*. You will probably recognize at once that it is the source of our word epiphany. It was used for the manifest intervention of some god; and it was specially used in connection with the Roman Emperor. His accession to the throne was his *epiphaneia*, and that is what Paul is getting at here. Paul in effect is saying to Timothy: "You know what happens when any town is expecting the *epiphaneia* of the Emperor; you are expecting the *epiphaneia* of Jesus Christ. Do your work in such a way that all things will be ready whenever he appears." The Christian should so order life that at any moment he is ready for the coming of Christ.

Third, Jesus is King. Paul urges Timothy to action by the remembrance of the Kingdom of Jesus Christ. The day approaches when the kingdoms of the world will be

subsumed by the Kingdom of the Lord; and so Paul says to Timothy: "So live and work that you will rank high in the roll of its citizens when the Kingdom comes." Our work must be such that it will stand the scrutiny of Christ. Our lives must be such that they will welcome the appearance of the King. Our service must be such that it will demonstrate the reality of our citizenship in the Kingdom of God.

Continuing on, there can be few New Testament passages where the duties of the Christian teacher are more clearly set out than here.

The Christian teacher is to be urgent. The message he brings is literally a matter of life and death. The Christian teacher is to be persistent. He is to urge the claims of Christ "in season and out of season." This does not mean that he will give no thought to context, for there should be courtesy in evangelism as in every other human contact. But it does mean that perhaps we are far too shy in speaking to others about Jesus Christ.

Paul goes on to speak of the effect the Christian witness must produce. It must convict. It must make the sinner aware of his sin. This does not mean a holier-than-thou judgmentalism; but it does mean holding a mirror up to people that shows them the truth about themselves. It must rebuke, but not by a cruel shaming of people. Rather, Christians must stick to their guns, calling sin what it is and not bowing to social pressure.

In our personal relationships a word of warning and rebuke would often save a brother from sin and shipwreck. But, as someone has said, that word must always be spoken as "brother setting brother right." It must be spoken with a consciousness of our common guilt. It is not our place to set ourselves up as moral judges of anyone; nonetheless, it is our duty to speak that warning word when it needs to be spoken.

It must exhort. Here is the other side of the matter. No rebuke should ever be such that it drives a man to despair and takes the heart and the hope out of him. Not only must men be rebuked, they must also be encouraged.

Furthermore, the Christian duty of conviction, of rebuke and of encouragement, must be carried out with unwearied patience. We have spoken of this before. It describes the spirit which never grows irritated, never despairs and never regards any man as beyond salvation. The Christian patiently believes in men because he unconquerably believes in the changing power of Christ.

Paul goes on to describe the foolish listeners. He warns Timothy that the day is coming when men will refuse to listen to sound teaching and will collect teachers who will titillate their ears with precisely the easy-going, comfortable things they want to hear. In Paul's day it was tragically easy to find such teachers. They were called sophists, and they wandered from city to city, offering to teach anything for pay. The Hellenistic world was beset by false teachers hawking round sham knowledge. Their deliberate policy was to find arguments whereby a man could justify himself for doing what he wanted to do.

We don't have the exact equivalent of sophists today, but we do have social media and algorithms. These work together to feed us more of what we already believe, or want to believe. They are not designed to bring us to truth. In fact, truth is becoming an endangered species. Years of skepticism, moral or otherwise, have flowed from the

cloistered halls of academia into the general public. Now all we have are beliefs that cannot be argued for cogently, just fought over. If others won't listen, then we find the like-minded who will help us maintain our pet notions. Some of these can lead to darkness and danger, as the current crop of conspiracy theories will attest. As Paul says,

[T]he time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itchy ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own likings, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander into myths. (vv. 3-4)

Just because we live in an advanced technological society doesn't mean that our beliefs are informed by reason or truth.

In distinction to the madness that engulfs us, Paul lays certain duties on Timothy, and on all of us as faithful Christians.

First, we are to be steady in all things. The word Paul uses here means that we are to be sober and self-contained, like an athlete who has his passions and his appetites and his nerves well under control. One commentator says that the word describes "a mental state [where]...every faculty [is] at full command... look[ing] all facts and all considerations deliberately in the face." The Christian is not to be the victim of crazes, but hold firm in an unbalanced and often insane world. Second, he is to accept whatever suffering comes upon him. Christianity will cost something, and the Christian is to pay the price of it without grumbling and without regret. Third, he is to do the work of an evangelist. In spite of the conviction and the rebuke, the Christian is essentially the bringer of Good News. If he insists on discipline and self-denial, it is because an even greater happiness may be attained than by chasing momentary pleasures. Finally, he is to leave no act of service unfulfilled. The Christian should have only one ambition: to be of use to the Church of which he is a part and the society in which he lives. The chance he dare not miss is that of being of service to his God, his Church and his fellow men.

For Paul the end is very near and he knows it. He, the aged warrior, is laying down his arms that Timothy may take them up.

"My life," says Paul, "has reached the point where it must be sacrificed." The word he uses for sacrifice is the verb *spendesthai* which literally means to pour out as a libation to the gods. Every Roman meal ended with a kind of sacrifice. A cup of wine was taken and was poured out to the gods. It is as if Paul were saying: "The day is ended; it is time to rise and go; and my life must be poured out as a sacrifice to God." He did not think of himself as going to be executed; he thought of himself as going to offer his life to God. Ever since his conversion, he had offered everything to God—his money, his scholarship, his time, the vigor of his body, the acuteness of his mind, the devotion of his heart. Only life itself was left to offer, and he was going to lay it down gladly.

He goes on to say: "The time of my departure is at hand." The word he uses for departure is a vivid one. It has many a picture in it and each tells us something about leaving this life. It is the word for unyoking an animal from the shafts of the cart or the plough. Death to Paul was rest from toil. It is also the word for loosening bonds or fetters. Death for Paul was also a release. He was to exchange the confines of a Roman prison for the glorious liberty of the courts of heaven. Finally, it is the word for loosening the ropes of a

tent. For Paul it was time to strike camp again. Many a journey he had made across the roads of Asia Minor and of Europe. Now he was setting out on his last and greatest journey; he was taking the road that led to God.

So then, for the Christian, death is laying down the burden in order to rest; it is laying aside the shackles in order to be free; it is striking camp in order to take up residence in the heavenly places; it is casting off the ropes which bind us to this world in order to set sail on a voyage which ends in the presence of God. Who then shall fear it?

"I have fought the good fight: I have completed the race: I have kept the faith." Paul goes on to say there is laid up for him the crown. In the games, the greatest prize was the laurel wreath. With it the victor was crowned; and to wear it was the greatest honor which could come to any athlete. But this crown in a few short days would wither. Paul knew that there awaited him a crown which would never fade.

He also knew that in a very short time he would stand before the Roman judgment seat and that his trial could have only one end. He knew what Nero's verdict would be, but he also knew what God's verdict would be. The man whose life is dedicated to Christ is indifferent to the verdict of men. He cares not if they condemn him so long as he hears his Master say "Well done!"

Paul firmly believes that this crown awaits not only him, but all who wait with expectation for the coming of the King. It is as if he said to the young Timothy: "Timothy, my end is near: and I know that I go to my reward. If you follow in my steps, you will feel the same confidence and the same joy when the end comes to you." The joy of Paul is open to every Christian who also fights that fight and finishes the race and keeps the faith.

In the Name...