

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

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TIMOTHY

15th February 2015

1 Timothy 1:1-7

2 Timothy 4:1-18

Over the past week, the Bible study has had us reading the second half of the letter to the Romans and all the rest of Paul's shorter letters. These are the letters which he wrote later in life. Amongst these later letters are those Paul wrote to his younger friend and companion, Timothy. Timothy was first met by Paul and Silas in the town of Lystra, in modern Turkey, and Paul took him with him on some of his journeys after that. Indeed it was partly because of Timothy that there was a riot when Paul went to the temple in Jerusalem, since the Jews assumed that he had taken the Greek Timothy in there with him (he hadn't). Later in Paul's life, when he was in prison in Rome he sent various of his friends to keep an eye on the churches they had helped him found. Titus was sent to Crete, and Timothy to Ephesus. There Paul wrote to him a couple of times, and it is obvious from what he says that Timothy was having a pretty hard time as Paul's representative.

It turned out that some of the Christian leaders, perhaps influenced by Jewish Christians, such as the so-called Super-Apostles who had troubled Corinth, had devised a strict regime for the church. They didn't allow certain foods, forbade marriage and stressed controversial speculations as a way to spiritual growth. The result was that there were feelings of guilt, immorality, and endless arguments about "spiritual" matters, like the ranks of angels or the circles of heaven. Oh, and there were young widows who were allowed to go around gossiping and spreading rumours. Not a happy Christian atmosphere at all.

Paul writes to Timothy, and parts of the letter are definitely personal to himself alone – such as the injunction to stop drinking only water and take a little wine, since he was always getting a sickly tummy – water in those days was not always as pure as it might be! But other parts of the letter were definitely meant to be read aloud and shared with others, such as the instructions to the widows, the checklist of attributes given for those who want to hold office within the community, and the part we read this morning, where Paul denounces endless speculations as unhelpful.

One of the reasons that I am enjoying our current Bible Studies so much is that we cover so much ground each week, that there simply is no chance to get bogged down in details. Don't misunderstand me. It is also good to spend time with our Bibles going very deeply into what is said there, getting to grips with what the wonder of our faith is. But sometimes both in personal study and in group studies there can be a tendency to concentrate on one leaf and forget to see the tree. And when we do that we tend to get that one leaf out of context and out of perspective. Yes, if you look at a leaf – and won't it be nice when the leaves re-appear on the trees in a couple of months! - a leaf is a wonderful thing. It has shape and texture, colour, veining, life and the

whole DNA of the tree (I think). But leaves don't come alone, they only grow attached to a tree, and if we forget that, we may give the leaf too much significance in our understanding.

So people who study one part of the Bible to the exclusion of all else can get their faith skewed. And it can lead to the sorts of situation which Timothy was trying to deal with in Ephesus, where people spend time arguing about what can never be proved, and what has no bearing on helping them lead a godly life. The early church, of course, only had the Old Testament scriptures to go by, those and some letters from people like Paul and some stories about Jesus, written or not. No wonder that there was a tendency to focus on the Law. The Law might be hard to keep but it is easy to understand. But Paul and Peter and the apostles wanted the church to think more about some parts of the prophetic writings. We know that because nearly all the quotations from the Old Testament which they make are from the prophetic writings.. They wanted the new Christians to see that even before Jesus the prophets had foretold him, and had been telling the people about the great love of God, and about how his will was that all might be saved.

Paul is quite clear to Timothy, that the aim of his instruction should be love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. In other words those who teach and lead in the congregation should not promote endless speculation, or gossip, or immorality; they should not delight in making rules for their own sake. Instead their teaching should promote godly lives, lives lived in such a way as brings praise to God, both from those within the faith and those looking on from outside. And surely that is still the case.

It seems pretty certain that the last letter which we have from Paul's pen is 2nd Timothy, which is in many ways a sad letter, written by an old man who knows his life is about to end. In it we know that Paul has not seen all he hoped to accomplish done, and so he is writing to his young friend Timothy and begging him to come soon, before winter, before it is too late, and to bring his cloak and his parchments. Warmth for the body and food for the soul. There are passages within this letter which are very poignant, some of which we read today, but on the other hand some of the most lovely and faithful words we know are in that last letter which we have. Words like "I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed to him against that day." (2 Timothy 1:12) So we see the ageing, imprisoned Paul still utterly committed to his Lord, still believing implicitly in what he has himself taught others: that God is the one who justifies us, and does so by the work of his Son Jesus on the cross.

In these later letters of Paul there is one theme which seems to come up again and again, and it has to do with Christianity's Jewish roots. Paul was always quite clear that faith in Jesus, while it sprang from the faith of the Jews, was not just a continuation of that faith but a whole new way of relating to God. He understood that when Jesus died and rose it was to make a new covenant, or testament, as we saw about a month ago. But even to the end of his life he must have wondered if people were going to really take hold of that and the wonders of what it means. After all, throughout his life he seems to have been dogged by Jewish Christians who followed in his footsteps urging his converts to be circumcised. It seemed impossible to these Christians that people could be brought into the family of God, that is the real God, the God of the Jews, without actually becoming part of the family, bearing what had been up until now the mark of the family. It would seem to them that what they had dearly cherished as a mark of their chosen-ness was now to be set at nothing. It would be like being born into the royal family and then being told that your name and lineage didn't actually make you any more special. That has happened many times in history and it has never been easy for those who had thought themselves rightly privileged to take on board.

So Paul is often writing to his churches as well as to churches where he has never been, reminding them that circumcision is a sign of the old covenant but that it has been replaced by the new. And the sign of the new covenant is not circumcision, but Baptism. But all through the first century of the church this was a tussle that was ongoing, and Paul must have wondered if his vision of God's grace being the same for everyone who will receive it would win out. We know, of course, that it did, and so the way Paul harps on the matter can seem a bit boring and repetitive to us. But then think if Paul and his friends had not managed to get their message across? Circumcision was not where it would have ended. Those who advocated the Gentiles looking and acting like Jews would have had us follow all the requirements of the Jewish Law.

It would have been so difficult to see and trust in the work that Jesus did on the cross as being the one and only needed means of grace if we were still struggling to fulfil all the demands of the law, simply because they were there. Talk about fogging the issue! How long would it be before not only keeping the law but keeping it in the right way, with the right gestures or equipment or clothing would be burdens that would be heaped on us? So when we read the letters of Paul and come across him speaking out against those who are trying to impose circumcision as though that still mattered, we should remember that what he is really doing is making sure that we will not have our joy in Christ's salvation clouded. We will not think that we need to add anything to what Christ did to save us. We will be able to live free, to obey God's ways because we choose to please him, not because we have to do it to be Christian at all.

Of course very often Paul finds his insistence on freedom is mis-applied. Our friends the Corinthians seem to have been the best of all at doing this, with some of them being greedy and others immoral. But I get the impression from his letters, that Paul would rather have to help people reign in the ways that they express their freedoms (nothing that will harm someone else's faith or give a poor witness was his rule of thumb) than to see them take on the trappings of the old covenant in the Law again. Over the centuries the church has at times become very dogmatic about how people should live as Christians, and the Church of Scotland has not been at the back of the pack in this. You only have to read almost any Kirk Session minutes from the sixteenth to the early twentieth century to see what this could be like in action. But we are called to freedom.

And as Paul knows that he is almost bound to face execution soon, he does not know how his labour will turn out, though he trusts God. At times he sounds sad – when he talks of how at his first trial no one came to his aid. Or when he talks of the wrong done to him by Alexander the Coppersmith, or the desertion of Demas. If we think that Paul was always certain, always triumphant, always in control, then this letter to Timothy tells us otherwise.

But he trusted. He trusted and so when death was approaching he could say “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.” He could look forward to his reward with his Lord and Master. All of us at some point will be where Paul was when he was finishing this letter. We will be at the place of contemplating our own death, not as something which will happen sometime, but as something which is going to happen. Take away the idea of “sometime” and the thing becomes a lot more real and present.

When that time comes for you, and when it comes for me, I hope that we can find the comfort and strength that Paul did in his faith in Christ. I hope that we can look back at lives lived for him, knowing that we have not been perfect, but knowing too that we have done our best to live as God would have us, to have lived lives which have responded to God's love for us, and have expressed our thankfulness in service. Amen.