

Passing the Torch

Dear friends: Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord. If you've ever seen an opening ceremony of the Olympics that are now held every two years – alternating summer and winter games – then you know that the highlight of the event is when one especially favored athlete enters the stadium with a flaming torch, ascends to the top of a tower holding a much larger torch that dominates the skyline, and sets it ablaze, thus heralding the official beginning of the athletic competitions. What you may not know is that the fire on that athlete's torch was actually lit several months before. It takes place in a ceremony on a field near Athens in Greece where the original Olympics were held thousands of years ago. The kindling of this flame is done by eleven women who represent the vestal virgins of ancient times who were the keepers of a sacred fire that burned continuously. These days they don't keep a fire burning all the time; instead they use a parabolic mirror to concentrate the rays of the sun. What they're actually doing (supposedly) is reenacting a Greek myth that tells of Prometheus, the guy who stole fire from the gods and gave it to men. According to the legend, the gods were so upset with Prometheus that for his punishment he was chained forever to the side of a mountain where each day eagles tear out his liver and eat it. Then every night it grows back so he can endure his torture anew the next day. Lovely, don't you think? Just as an aside, the story also goes that the gods feared what men might accomplish now that they had the use of fire, so to hold them back and keep them in their place, they came up with a devious plan to counteract the benefit: they created women and gave them to men. (Hey, I'm just reporting what they said. You decide if, like a lot of myths, there's a kernel of truth to it. And for the record, for my own part, I'm very glad that the Lord created women.)

Anyway, back to the Olympic flame. Once lit, the fire for the upcoming Olympics burns continuously until it is extinguished at the end of the games. But obviously the fire has to get from Greece to the city that's hosting the games. And that's done by a giant relay in which the lighted torch is passed from runner to runner along a circuitous route that goes through many different countries. You've probably seen this on TV – they try to make a big deal of it. It's considered quite an honor to be an athlete chosen to bear the torch for a leg of this journey – the greatest honor going to the one who bears it last. What it is, of course, is a great big publicity stunt to stir up worldwide interest in the games. But I got to wondering, what would happen if one of the athletes on the relay were to let the flame go out? It's not like you could just whip out your *Bic* lighter and ignite it again. It would ruin the whole idea. After all, it's not just any flame; it's *the Olympic* flame. It symbolizes the spirit of the games and their ancient roots. It represents the timeless glory of athletic competition, and people from all over the world striving to be the best at what they do. The thrill of victory. The agony of defeat. Whatever. But it's imperative that the flame not go out. Each bearer holds briefly a tremendous responsibility, and must make sure that he or she passes it still burning brightly to the next runner until it arrives at its final destination.

The reason I mention all of this is that it reminds me of what's going on in today's Epistle lesson. It's from St. Paul's second letter to Timothy, which most scholars believe to be the very last writing of Paul that we have in the New Testament. And what the aged and soon-to-be martyred Apostle is doing in this letter is effectively passing the torch to his much younger colleague in the ministry, Timothy. It's not the Olympic torch, mind you; but the vastly more important flame of living faith in Christ Jesus the Lord who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he

gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began. It's a flame to be kept burning purely and brightly as it's passed from generation to generation of Christ's people – the same flame, without change or variation, that first came down and rested on the heads of the Apostles on Pentecost – until Christ our Lord returns. This is the fire that Paul is handing over. And as he places this enormous responsibility in the hands of young Timothy, Paul gives him a sacred charge: Stir up the flame. Keep it alive. Don't let it go out.

This was an important concern for Paul because the Christian Church had fallen on some very difficult times. Not that it ever had it easy. As Paul and the other Apostles had gone out spreading the Good News of Jesus around the Roman world they encountered all kinds of problems from the very start. Jews who rejected their message often spread vicious lies about what Christians taught and did, and in several places they stirred up violent opposition that resulted in Christians being arrested, beaten, and sometimes killed. In other places it was Gentiles who were offended by the Gospel. In Ephesus for example, the silver smiths who had a pretty good deal going making little statues of the goddess Artemis, which were believed to help heal diseases, realized that their profits were declining sharply because so many of their countrymen were converting to Christ and rejecting their idols. These smiths instigated a riot by which they hoped to have Paul and his companions killed by a lynch mob. Later Paul was arrested and held as a prisoner, first for two years in Caesarea and later for several years in Rome while awaiting trial on the false charges that he had caused a riot in Jerusalem. But despite this and lots of other setbacks, the saving message of Jesus continued to spread and the Christian Church grew steadily – all by the power of God's Word and his Holy Spirit. And for the most part Christians were held in high regard by their neighbors throughout the empire who knew them to be, well, the kind of folks that made good neighbors: honest, hardworking, hospitable, helpful, generous, and so on—the way they lived their lives was a powerful witness to the world of the faith in their hearts.

But that changed when the Emperor Nero accused Christians of having started and spread a fire that destroyed a large portion of the city of Rome. The actual cause of the fire is unknown; but because of his erratic behavior and declining popularity, it was rumored and widely believed in Rome that Nero himself was responsible for the fire. People were angry. So, in order to deflect suspicion from himself, he and his staff concocted the story that the Christians did it. They were, after all, a small and misunderstood minority making them an easy target. He ordered them rounded up to stand trial, and under extreme torture several of them "confessed". That was all he needed to proclaim them all outlaws and enemies of Rome and have them condemned to death – which sentences were carried out in the cruelest ways imaginable in a large stadium designed for chariot races. Many of the faithful stood firm, confessing Jesus to the very end. Others, however, did not. Out of fear for their lives many deserted the Lord and the faith they once claimed. Some even jumped to the other side, turning in their former brothers and sisters in Christ and making up all kinds of false accusations against them in order to save themselves and prove to be loyal to Rome.

And as waves of this persecution started to spread throughout the Roman world, it became a lot harder to confess the faith. Paul saw many of his close associates and several men that he himself had trained to be pastors give up and deny Christ. And you can imagine how devastating it would be to the faith of a congregation – especially for the recent converts and catechumens – if their own pastor publicly denied the very faith that he had been teaching. After so much success, these defections and the damage being done to the Church were demoralizing to Paul. To some degree, it must have seemed to him that all the hard work he had accomplished was coming undone. The flame of faith was flickering and in danger of being snuffed out. So it was vital to Paul that Timothy and other young pastors like him not let

it happen. They were the ones that needed to carry the torch through the next generation. This is why we hear him encouraging Timothy to fan to flame the gift of faith and not to be ashamed of his testimony about Christ; but to endure by the power of God whatever suffering might come for the sake of the Gospel.

I've no doubt that Paul's exhortation did indeed help Timothy face the trials that lay ahead of him, just as his words have bolstered the faith of countless Christians and their pastors since. But it's interesting to me that these words are addressed to Timothy of all people, because he was well aware that persecution is not the only thing that can snuff out the flame. You see, he himself was the product of a family in which the flame of faith had almost gone out. His maternal grandmother, Lois, and her husband (whose name we don't know) were Jews who lived among the Gentiles in the city of Lystra in the province of Galatia. They were probably merchants of some kind whose families may have been there for generations or maybe they were recent arrivals. Either way, Jews living outside of Judea tended to stick together in their own communities. They were obsessed with preserving the purity of their faith, their traditions, and their bloodlines. They could do business with their pagan neighbors; but they didn't mix socially. And marriage outside of the race and faith of God's chosen people would have been unthinkable. That's why poor Lois' heart was almost certainly broken when her daughter, Eunice, chose to marry an unbelieving Gentile. We don't know who he was; but we're sure that he was not a convert to Judaism for he did not permit his son, Timothy, to be circumcised – which was required of all faithful Jews. The situation would be like what happens today when Christian parents do their best to raise their children in the faith; but once these children are on their own and marry, they drift away, maybe marry outside the faith, and then don't even bother to have their children baptized much less raised in the church. It's devastating for a grandparent to see the flame of faith being extinguished in their children and not being passed on to the next generation – not because of persecution; but because of apathy, neglect, and its dilution with worldly philosophies and false religions.

It seems that Lois tried to ensure that her grandson learned the Scriptures, apparently with the cooperation of her daughter, Eunice; but put yourself in Timothy's sandals growing up. With mom and grandma he's learning about Moses and the prophets, and with dad and his paternal grandparents he's sacrificing goats to Zeus and the other gods of Olympus. It must have been very confusing. Which faith – if either – would stick? And what would he teach his children when they came along? And what about their children? Now it happens that Timothy was rescued from spiritual darkness and confusion when Paul came to Lystra on his first mission. He was just a boy then; but his mother and grandmother heard Paul preach Jesus as Savior, the long expected Messiah, at the local synagogue. By the working of the Holy Spirit, they became believers. And whether Timothy heard the Gospel from Paul or from Lois and Eunice, we don't know; but we do know that he also came to faith in Christ. And so enthusiastic and firm was his faith that when Paul stopped by again several years later on his second mission, Timothy joined him and began several years of seminary training on the road.

My point is that Timothy had seen the threats to the flame of faith from both ends – how it can be extinguished by fear of persecution on one side, and from apathy, indifference, and laziness on the other. He also knew how the flame could be hurt from within the Church by the teachers of false doctrines – for Paul had written extensively about them in his first letter to Timothy – men who introduced strange fire into the teaching of the faith; fire not from God, but from their own evil imaginations and lusts for earthly recognition, power, and wealth. Timothy knew that keeping the torch of faith burning so that it can be passed to the next generation means guarding and protecting it from every threat, and teaching it with passion and conviction

to the next generation so that they too, in their turn, can keep the flame alive and pass it on to those who follow.

The fact that we are here today gathered around Christ's Word and receiving the benefits of his blood bought forgiveness is testimony to the faithfulness of generations of Christ's people who have gone before us. It's proof of the Holy Spirit's work helping them to guard the flame entrusted to them in their day – all the Timothy's and Lois's and Eunice's and others whose names we don't know – who kept Paul's charge to fan the flame of faith and guard the good deposit entrusted to them.

And now it's our turn. Paul's charge to Timothy to fan the flame and keep it burning brightly is now our responsibility. We bear the torch of God's saving truth in *this* brief time of history. And the challenges we face in our day – the threats to the Gospel that might extinguish it – are in some ways the same as they've always been, and in other ways they are unique to our time. Christians still suffer persecution for their faith in various parts of the world, which causes some timid souls to renounce it. Satan keeps trying to inject false teachings into the Church that in one way or another deny Christ and the truth that we are saved by grace alone through faith alone in him, and so some are led astray. And there are the ever present sins of spiritual apathy, laziness, and neglect in all of us that work to rob the flame of the fuel needed to stay burning and that also provides the gift of discernment by which strange fires are recognized and properly rejected. We still have all of these threats – though at least for the present, we in this country really don't suffer anything that could be described as persecution. No indeed, we're more likely to be subject to ridicule for believing ancient superstitions and we're accused of being intolerant because we insist, with the holy Scriptures, that Jesus alone is the way, the truth, and the life. Paul told Timothy not to be ashamed of the testimony he had received, and neither should we be embarrassed because we hold fast to the truth, because this truth is our life.

And now in modern times we're told by the sharpest minds that science has done away with the need for God. With the speed and ease of access of modern communications, we are bombarded with so much information and so many ideas and images it's harder to keep things straight and discern truth from error. And from within the Church we keep hearing voices that tell us that the Christian Church must either change with the times and adjust its message accordingly or die.

My friends, that's exactly what we must not do. Our sacred calling is to keep alive the faith just as we have received it. We are to keep it whole and undefiled in our time, and we are to pass it on to our children and their children – as well as to all the other people who come into our lives that are willing to hear and receive it. And the thing to see is that it isn't somebody else's job. You have an important part in it; not just in supporting the ministry of this church and Christian missions throughout the world, but also in making sure that the teaching you hear is correct. And if you think something is wrong, you need to say so. If you're not sure, you need to ask. And if you see your brother or sister in the faith wandering, or your children drifting, or your grandchildren not being raised in the faith, then it's up to you to do something about it. Lord knows that there are many places in the world where the flame of faith once burned brightly, but now it's gone out. Our calling – your calling – is to fan the flame within you, within your family, and within this church so that it doesn't happen here.

May God in his mercy give us the grace and the power of his Holy Spirit to guard what we have received, and to pass the torch faithfully to those who will follow and bear it after us until Christ our Lord returns. In his holy name. Amen

Soli Deo Gloria!