

A Sacred Charge

In the name of Jesus, dear friends in Christ: At the end of today's Gospel reading, we hear our Lord ask the question, "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" It almost makes it sound as if he's not sure; and small wonder because from time to time throughout his ministry we read how he marveled at people's lack of faith. The human capacity to deny God's Word, to mistrust his promises, and to wander from the truth never ceased to amaze him. And we can understand why that is: he was incapable of those things himself. They are all symptoms of sin, and he was sinless. It never occurred to him to doubt the Word and promises of God. He couldn't wander from the truth; he *is* the truth.

But his question remains before us. When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth? And maybe we should personalize this. It's one thing to wonder if when Jesus comes in judgment he will find faith someplace on the planet; but what should concern you is if he will find faith *in you*. Will *you* have faith when Christ comes? And then secondly, will he find faith in your loved ones, your friends, your neighbors? Will he find faith in your children and grandchildren? Again, knowing how Jesus marveled at our capacity to doubt, deny, and stray, these are questions that should concern you immensely.

The Apostle Paul had these questions very much on his mind when he wrote his second letter to Timothy. He writes from Rome where he is in prison again. A few years earlier Paul had been tried and acquitted of causing a riot in Jerusalem. At the time, Christianity was a relative unknown to the heads of the Roman state. They thought of it as a sect within Judaism, and they couldn't understand what the big flap was about. But now Christians were everywhere, and for various reasons (based mostly on false allegations) Rome saw the new faith as a threat. They were trying to stamp it out. And Paul was one of the big fish, one of the most prolific preachers of Christ. This time they weren't going to let him go.

Paul, wasting away in his cell in the imperial dungeon, was well aware of this. He knew the time was short; and not just for him. Peter had probably already been martyred at this point; and if not he soon would be. Most of the other apostles were dead. John was likely in exile on the tiny island of Patmos. Paul knew that the first generation of Christians was rapidly passing away. The eye witnesses to Christ's resurrection, those who had seen Jesus alive and well after his horrific death on the cross, they would soon all be gone. It would be up to the next generation of Christians to keep the faith that saves alive: men like Timothy who had begun his training under Paul when he was still a teenager, and who was now serving as the bishop or overseer of the churches in Christ at Ephesus.

So what we have in this letter of Paul is what might be thought of as his last will and testament. He's giving final instructions to a key leader in the early Church to ensure that the Christian Gospel he worked so hard to spread and to keep pure and free of false doctrine would continue into the future. He wanted to make sure it was passed down whole and undefiled not just to the next generation, but to generations yet unborn, all of them, however many there would be from his time until the time of Christ's return. His hope was that if his instructions were followed, then the answer would be yes, when Christ comes he will indeed find faith on earth.

My friends, we are an important link in this chain of generations. Having received the Gospel that saves from our forebears – the same Gospel Paul taught – it's our part to preserve

it in our day and to pass it on just as we received it to those who follow us. And you know what they say about a chain. It's only as strong as its weakest link. If the chain of faith breaks in any generation, the generations that follow are cut off. We have only to look around the world and see how this is true: in places like central Europe which was once the heart of Evangelical Christianity, the faith is all but nonexistent. Millions are existing there now without hope and without Christ because someone or *some ones* in their ancestry dropped the ball. I don't need to tell you that it's happening here too. In survey after survey over the years the number of people who identify themselves as Christian is steadily declining in our country. And the truth is that a lot of folks who say they're Christian when they take these surveys, don't know what it means. They think that having a general belief that God exists and trying to live in ways they judge to be good is Christianity. It's not. And all of this should make us sit up and pay close attention to what Paul has to say about ensuring that the Christian faith is received, preserved whole, and successfully passed on in our generation.

First Paul tells Timothy, "Continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you have learned it." Paul means that there is a body of doctrine that Timothy has been taught, the basic truths of Christianity: how God created the world, how our first parents fell into sin, how the Lord promised them a Savior, how that Savior eventually came in the person of Jesus who is true God and true man, how this Jesus lived a perfect life, how he died as the sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the world, how he rose from the dead and ascended into heaven, and how he is coming again to raise the dead and judge the world. These timeless truths are not just to be learned once and filed away in the back of the mind; no, they are to be rehearsed, repeated, recited, and clung to – that's what it means to continue in them. And this is why we have the liturgies of worship that express these truths. It's why we recite the creeds. And it's why we follow the various seasons and festivals of the church calendar that, over the course of the year, highlight and focus on all the aspects of Christ's life and ministry.

And this part about knowing from whom you learned it is important. In Timothy's case, he was taught the faith by his mother and grandmother: people who dearly loved him and whom he knew he could trust. No doubt Paul is also referring to himself as one who taught Timothy. Elsewhere he calls himself Timothy's spiritual father. The point is that Timothy learned the faith from reliable sources, from people who practiced it themselves, who knew the peace and joy that comes of trusting in Christ, and for whom it was so very important to ensure that he, Timothy, also trust in Jesus. This is why I like nothing more than seeing families worshipping together, praying together, reading the Bible and having home devotions together. In such ways parents inculcate in their children not just the content of the faith, but also its central importance in their lives.

Why is it so important? Paul tells us: knowing the sacred writings are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. It's that simple. We're talking about eternal destinies here, spent either in the wondrous glories of the new heaven and new earth or in endless misery in the unquenchable fires of hell. Nothing could be more important. And there are a couple things worth mentioning here. First that when Paul says that the sacred writings are *able to* make you wise unto salvation, the word he uses for "able to" is the same word from which we get the word dynamite. It's more than, "Yeah, this is capable of doing it"; it's more "This is *powerful* to accomplish the goal". That is to say, the written Word of God is more than dead information, words on a page. Rather it's a living force through which the Holy Spirit of God miraculously conceives the gift of faith in the hearts and minds of those who hear and learn it. Secondly, when Paul refers to the sacred writings in this passage, he means primarily what we call the Old Testament Scriptures. The New Testament as we know it had not yet been compiled. I've run into a lot of people who think that now that we have the New Testament, we

really don't need the Old; but what Paul is saying is that it's all about working in us saving faith in Jesus. He's on every page.

This is emphasized as Paul continues, "*All Scripture* is God-breathed and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness". In giving us the Bible, God didn't waste any words. There are no passages he didn't want us to have – no chapters or books we can just skip over. There is value in all of it – and we ought to treat it that way. And saying it's God-breathed means it's all absolutely truthful. In our day many in the Church want to challenge that. They say, "The six day creation, the universal flood of Noah's day, this story about Jonah being swallowed by a whale ... c'mon. Get real. They aren't to be taken literally." No? If that's the case, we're in trouble. Because then God is in the habit of telling us lies. And if that's true, then we can't trust anything he says. And not surprisingly those who like to pick and choose which parts of the Scripture they want to accept as true and which parts they reject as false eventually end up denying all of it.

No, the whole Scripture has been given for our benefit, to build us up in holy faith in Christ, that trusting in him we may be righteous in the sight of God and equipped by his Spirit to bear the fruit of faith: namely, good works for our neighbors that flow from a right relationship with God through Christ.

In view of all this Paul then lays on Timothy the sacred charge to "Preach the Word". This is the task given to those who are called to the office of ministry: to speak the words of God, to explain their meaning, and to apply them to the lives of those who hear. When? Always. Paul says "in season and out of season". He means when people are ready to receive it, and also when they're not. You see, it's one thing to stand here and preach God's Word to a congregation that has assembled expressly for that purpose. It's quite another to go and confront someone privately about a sin they're involved in. In the first case you have a willing audience. Speaking from experience, in the latter case you almost certainly do not. But both need to hear the Word of God – the Word of God that calls sinners to repentance, and the Word of God that assures those who repent of his forgiveness in Christ Jesus.

Those called to the office of ministry have the sacred charge to declare the whole counsel of God, from Genesis to Revelation; and you as the people of God have the right to expect to hear it. It isn't about the pastor's favorite topics, or what he read in the newspaper the other day, or the latest fad or stewardship program guaranteed to grow your church and make lots of money. It's about your sin. It's about Jesus your Savior. It's about forgiveness and life through faith in him – faith which comes of hearing the Word of God, and only the Word of God.

It's a perpetual problem in the Church that people feel the need to add to what God has said – as if he hasn't given us enough to chew on in the Holy Scripture. Thus in the Middle Ages sprang up all kinds of myths and legends about various saints who supposedly performed miracles and did great deeds. When you went to church in those days, you were far more likely to hear about these saints and how you should aspire to imitate them in their piety, fasting, praying, living a life of poverty, and what not, than you were to hear about Jesus and what the Scriptures say of his life and work for our salvation. The same thing happens in our day. Not so much with the epic lives of the saints (although that's still popular in some circles), no what people like to gobble up now are the stories of folks who claim to have briefly died and visited heaven and want to describe what that's like, or of people who say they've received special revelations from Jesus or from angels or from the Virgin Mary. People want to hear from those who claim to be able to prophesy events in the future or who say that they've calculated the precise date when Christ will return. Also immensely popular are recurring revelations about the

so-called “lost books of the Bible” and the writings of those who go to great lengths to explain why the Word of God doesn’t really mean what it plainly says.

Paul warns Timothy of this kind of thing when he says, “The time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate teachers to suit their own passions, and they will turn from the truth and wander off into myths.” That day is upon us in spades. It has been since the Church started. And it will continue right up until the end.

And this is why we are to be on our guard, sober-minded, and vigilant. It’s why we need to heed Paul’s instructions to continue in what we have been taught and have so firmly believed, and that we demand that those who are called to minister in the Church execute their sacred charge to preach and teach the entire counsel of God, neither detracting from it nor adding to it. This is how the Lord himself will by the power of his Holy Spirit preserve the faith in our generation. It’s how he will ensure it gets passed down to the next generation. And it’s how we can be sure that when Christ comes, he will indeed find faith on earth. May the Lord in his mercy grant it to us and to those who come after us. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!