

And Some Matters of Housekeeping ...

In the name of him who will rescue us from every evil and bring us safely to his celestial kingdom, dear friends in Christ: This morning's Epistle reading from Paul's second letter to Timothy picks up right where last week's left off. So to help us understand today's passage, it'll be good to do a little review.

Paul is in prison in Rome. He's to stand trial for his faith in Jesus and his proclamation of the Christian Gospel. When the trial will happen is anyone's guess. Roman courts could be horribly backlogged. It might be in weeks, months, even years. What's not in question is what the outcome of the trial will be: Rome had declared war Christianity. Paul knows with almost 100% certainty that he will be condemned and sentenced to die for preaching Jesus as Savior and Lord. What's weighing heavily on his mind, though, is not the ordeal he will face. No, what he's anxious about is the survival of the Christian Church he worked so tirelessly to strengthen and to spread. Paul knows that the first generation of Christian evangelists, the apostles and other eye-witnesses of the life and ministry of Jesus – he knew that they would soon all be gone. The task of keeping the Church going (and hopefully growing) would now fall on the shoulders of the next generation – the disciples of the disciples, so to speak. It would be up to them and the generations of believers that came after them to preserve the faith and pass it on.

That's why Paul is writing to Timothy. Timothy had been born and raised in Lystra in Galatia. He'd been taught the Jewish faith by his mother and grandmother. When Paul came to their town on his first mission journey, the family rejoiced to hear that the promises God made to Israel were all fulfilled in Jesus. They became charter members of the Christian church there. At the time, Timothy was about 12 years old. When Paul came back to Lystra a few years later on his second mission trip, along with fellow evangelists Silas and Luke the doctor, Timothy joined the group and became a pastor in training. He learned his lessons well and was soon an integral part of the team. He shared with the others in the adventures and severe hardships as they took the Gospel to Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, and Corinth. Paul found that he could rely on young Timothy to visit the new churches they started and ground them more thoroughly in the faith and correct errors and misunderstandings that kept cropping up. He was a reliable man. A few years later, on his third mission, Paul felt comfortable leaving Timothy in charge of the Christian churches in and around Ephesus, which had become a major hub of the new faith.

But now, some ten years later, with Paul soon to depart this world, Timothy would have to take on greater responsibilities. The dozens of churches Paul had founded all over Greece and Asia Minor, no longer able to write to him with their questions and concerns asking for his Apostolic insight, would naturally turn to his disciple, Timothy. And with that in mind, we heard last week how Paul laid out for Timothy what were the most vital tasks for a leader the Church. First, Paul said, hold fast to what you have been taught. He means doctrine, the fundamental truths of the faith: the Trinity of the Godhead; the person and work of Jesus Christ; his life, death for sin, and resurrection; and his ascension and coming return to judge the living and the dead. It also includes teachings concerning the Church, Baptism and the Lord's Supper, Christian worship, and how the faithful are to love and care for each other. Contrary to what so many people believe today, there is such a thing as pure doctrine in the Church. Paul believed it. He taught it. And he wanted Timothy (and all other pastors) to teach it also – and, I might add, he wanted them to reject and protect God's people from all false teaching. That was job

number one. The second thing Paul told Timothy was this: preach the Word. He reminded Timothy that all Scripture is inspired by God and is powerful for teaching, correcting, rebuking, and encouraging people – growing and strengthening them in holy faith and guiding them in Christian living. These two things together, holding fast to pure doctrine and the preaching of God’s Word, are the lifeblood of the church. If they keep going on, then so will the Church from generation to generation until Christ returns.

That’s what we heard last week. Now, as the letter to Timothy continues, Paul turns to several other personal and pragmatic issues that are on his mind. You see, the Church’s doctrine can be kept pure unto the salvation of souls. The Word of God can be rightly proclaimed for the building up and equipping of God’s people. But even where they are, they are lived out in the lives of fallen people living in a fallen world. Life can be messy. And messes call for matters of housekeeping – to which Paul turns.

For instance, Paul knows that Timothy is going to be greatly saddened when he learns of the upcoming trial and likely outcome. Paul was his spiritual father, his long-time mentor, and his dear friend and senior colleague. Paul’s death will break Timothy’s heart and leave a gaping hole in his life. And thus Paul tries to ease the pain a bit. As if to say, “Don’t waste your time being sad about me”, he continues, “I’m already being poured out as a drink offering. It’s time for me to go. But that’s okay. I’ve fought the good fight. I finished the race. I have kept the faith. All that remains for me is to receive the crown of righteousness that the Lord will give me on that Day – and not just to me, but also to all those who have loved his appearing.” He’s done several things here. He’s told Timothy that he’s not the least bit concerned. He knows Jesus on whom his faith is founded. I’m going to a better place. I’m looking forward to it. He’s also said that we’ll meet again – that you too and all the faithful will rise on that Day. He’s encouraged Timothy to follow his example in fighting the good fight and keeping the faith until whatever end the Lord has planned for him. And he’s reminded Timothy of one of the Church’s greatest treasures in the present. When he says referring to the Lord Jesus, “those who have loved his appearing” he means not just his appearing on the Last Day, but also his appearing now to his Church in the Sacrament of Holy Communion. There’s a connection between the two. It’s those who recognize their sins, repent, and hunger and thirst for forgiveness and the righteousness that comes by faith which are actually received when Jesus gives himself visibly through the elements of bread and wine – those who love *that* appearing of the Lord, they are the same who are longing with eager expectation for his final coming in glory. There’s a reason we call it a foretaste of the Feast to come. And Paul is reminding Timothy that when we take Holy Communion we do so with all the faithful, both those alive on this earth and those who are alive with Christ in his Heavenly Kingdom. Taken altogether, these words of Paul to his younger colleague are indeed powerful comfort that will help him in the days to come.

And speaking of coming, Paul next directs Timothy to do just that – and as soon as possible. There is important business to attend for the good of the Church, and Paul finds himself shorthanded. He needs someone he knows he can rely on to take on some of his responsibilities. Indeed, it’s quite remarkable that Paul is, even from prison, still orchestrating so many affairs. He’s busy writing letters, dispatching missionaries, always thinking about how he can help the churches that are struggling to grow all over the Roman world. Thus he has sent a man named Crescens to the churches in Galatia, and Titus to Dalmatia. It seems that he’s sent a fellow named Tychicus to be Timothy’s replacement in Ephesus.

But not all those who have left Paul are on a mission for the Church. He mentions Demas, who apparently had been someone he thought he could trust. Instead he turned out to be one like Jesus told about in the Parable of the Soils. Some seeds fell on the stony ground.

The plants sprang up quickly; but died in the heat of the summer because they had no deep root. These stood for those who believe at first; but fall away when times get tough. Other seeds fell among the weeds, which choked the plants and made them fruitless. These stood for those who come to faith, but are too wrapped up in the cares and concerns of the world. In the end, they produce nothing of value. This Demas seems to be a case of both. Staying with Paul, he feared guilt by association and coming under persecution for his faith. And, as Paul says, he loved the world, choosing to indulge himself in the fleeting pleasures of this age while giving up the eternal joys of the Kingdom to come. There's a warning for all of us in him.

Likely to ease Timothy's concern, Paul mentions that Luke is still with him. Timothy knew Luke well, both as a fellow evangelist and as Paul's personal physician. It would help to know that Paul had the good doctor to look after him during his imprisonment. You see, back in those days prisons did not feed or cloth the inmates. Prisoners were dependent upon family and friends to bring them food and exchange clean clothing. That Luke was there would mean that Paul was being well cared for – or at least as well as he could be cared for in a Roman dungeon.

Paul next directs Timothy to get Mark and bring him also, saying that he is helpful to the ministry. This is for Mark something of a redemption. Many years before, young John Mark had traveled with Paul and Barnabas on the first mission journey. But you might say he pulled a Demas, and abandoned the other two when the going became difficult. Later, when Mark wanted to accompany Paul on his second trip, Paul said no way. We need someone dependable, and Mark doesn't fit the bill. The good news is that Mark repented, and through the Spirit's strength and his faithful service in the years that followed, he demonstrated that even those who stumble can become fruitful for God's Kingdom. Who knows? Maybe Demas was turned around later also by God's grace. I guess we'll find out one day; but the point is that we shouldn't write off those who wander from the faith or who fail in their ministries. As long as there's life, there's hope. And we should be praying for them and doing what we can to encourage their return to faith and faithful service.

In what might appear to be a rather mundane matter, Paul next asks Timothy to pick up a heavy cloak he left with someone in the city of Troas, which would be on the route that Timothy would take on his journey to Rome. True story: when I was at seminary, one of the professors boasted that he could preach a solid Lutheran law and gospel sermon based on any verse in the Bible. A few of the students took him up on it, put their heads together, and challenged him to prove his claim with this particular verse: "Bring the cloak that I left with Carpus ...". I don't recall the details of his message; but the professor did indeed come through. He reminded us that even the great Apostle Paul had physical needs. Sometimes we make of heroes of the faith plaster saints who are somehow above human suffering or who are miraculously preserved from the aches and pains the rest of us experience. That's just wrong. Doubtless with winter coming on and Paul confined to a damp, sunless, underground cell, he'd need this coat to keep warm. But note that even then, Paul is more concerned about his spiritual needs. He asks Timothy to bring also his books and above all the parchments. What he means are his copies of the Scriptures – which weren't in that day all put together in a single volume. Instead you'd have individual scrolls of the various books of the Old Testament. But when Paul mentions also the parchments, he almost certainly is referring to the more recent writings of himself and the other Apostles. He's in the process of assembling most of what will be the New Testament canon. Yes, Paul needs to keep warm; but what he wants most to sustain him in his trial are the words and promises of God fulfilled in Jesus Christ and written in Holy Scripture.

Then Paul warns Timothy about a threat. There's a man named Alexander, a metalworker, who's been something of a thorn in Paul's side. He's mentioned also in the first letter to Timothy as someone who became a member of the church at Ephesus, but then set himself up as a teacher of a different kind of Gospel. We don't know the specifics of the false doctrine he was propounding; but we do know that when the church called him to repent and renounce his errors, he stubbornly refused. Paul had to excommunicate him from the church. Apparently that did stop Alexander from being a nuisance. It seems he went on a personal vendetta against Paul, doing whatever he could to destroy his ministry and ruin his reputation. As Paul says, "he did me great harm". With Paul out of the way, it's likely that Timothy will become his next target.

This passage really struck home for me because just this last week I spent some time with a pastor friend of mine who is pretty discouraged. He's dealing with a few Alexanders of his own in the congregation he serves who are resorting to all kinds of underhanded tactics to discredit him and his ministry. He was wondering if it was worth it; perhaps even thinking of throwing in the towel. A passage like this reminds us that it's nothing new. Paul had to deal with it. So did Jesus – as you recall he had his share of detractors, and he was the perfect teacher. The fact is that those who proclaim the true Word of God are going to make people angry and upset. You've got to expect some resistance. It's not a job for those who don't want any stress or who can't handle criticism or opposition. It's a job for those who trust that the Lord will stand by them in their trials and that he will, in his time, set things straight.

And that's what Paul looks forward to as he concludes his letter. He's got one more trial to stand – and he knows who will be standing beside him: the same One who stood for him, in his place, dying his death for sin so that he could live forever. Paul knows too that his trial will give him yet another opportunity to witness to the truth of the Gospel. As a Roman citizen, he'll have the right to speak in his defense, which means he'll be able to tell once again to a captive audience of unbelievers – perhaps to the Emperor himself – the story of his conversion and the wondrous love of God in Christ Jesus. He'll be able to say, "In Christ I live. In Christ I gladly die; because no matter what you do to me I will be rescued from every evil and brought safely to his heavenly kingdom." Paul hopes that his bold witness in that hour will plant the seeds of faith in some who hear, so that they too may come to trust Christ and share in heavenly blessings. And by telling Timothy this, he's encouraging him to stand firm in Christ, knowing in whom he trusts, boldly proclaiming the truth, and continuing to fight the good fight of faith. Let me suggest that it's encouragement for all of us who trust in Jesus, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!