

26th February 2017

2 Timothy 3-4

At the tender of sixteen I had a crush on a girl who came to our church youth club. She got me reading the bible. She had become a Christian and was very enthusiastic and open about her faith. It helped that she was also quite cool and attractive and I had to confess I was more interested in her than in her new found faith. But in order to get in there I had to get with what she was talking about. So I thought I need to read the Bible and understand a bit more what she is on about. My grandma had just been given a pocket Gideon New Testament. It was small enough to hide when someone caught you reading it so you didn't have to own up to studying the Bible. I read mostly at night under the bed sheets just in case I was disturbed.

There is nothing quite like reading the source documents of our faith. It soon grasped me that Jesus was something different and if he was who the bible said he was I had a big decision to make about who was Lord of my life. Me or him? To cut a long story short – I didn't get the girl – but I did get Jesus.

Our Christianity Explored Course starting on Tuesday will do a simple yet powerful thing. We will spend the six weeks of Lent reading through Mark's Gospel. There are good grounds to believe this is the first gospel to have been written and may well have been based on Peter's personal memories and his journey with Jesus.

I know whenever I read a first-hand account of someone who witnessed an amazing event it always thrills me and helps me to imagine being there myself. That is what you are doing when you open the gospels. I pray for the Spirit of God to use this course to help people be there and encounter Jesus. Will you pray with me for that?

Will you encourage those you know to consider this opportunity? I know it's a hard ask because people have their defences up and most are just not interested. I only started reading the bible out of mixed motives. I wanted to get with a girl not with Jesus. But God can use mixed motives and flawed individuals. Good job because otherwise we would all be stuffed.

As we finish looking at Paul's second letter to Timothy Paul encourages Timothy to read and know the Holy Scriptures because they are able to make him wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. 'All Scripture is

God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, ¹⁷ so that the servant of God^[a] may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.’

‘God breathed’. As you read the gospels it may feel as if the breath of Jesus is on you, so close you may become to him – you can almost sense his presence in the room. It has been a hallmark Christian belief throughout the centuries that the Bible is inspired – from the Latin word meaning ‘in - breath’. That through the Holy Spirit God revealed his person and purposes to certain believers who wrote down the message to his people. Those writers wrote from their own personal, historical and cultural contexts. So in scripture there is inevitably a mixture of the human and the divine. This encounter with God, this message from God meets the human mind, talents, language, style and experience that converts it all into writing.

The degree of inspiration of scripture has been a topic of ongoing debate in the church.

If you are a Muslim you believe the Koran is the literal word of God. God dictated it through an angel to the prophet Mohammad. The church has never seen the

scriptures as the pure dictation of God – though some people treat it like that. The Bible has always been seen with more nuance and ambiguity – God breathed, human written. But what we do know is that God still speaks to us through its pages. God breathes through the words of scripture. It still inspires and challenges and teaches and corrects.

I often find the parts of the Bible which jar with modern sensibilities the most useful passages. They make me dig deeper, they challenge my cultural norms and make me reassess my life before God. The Bible becomes a critical friend, an honest dialogue partner, a lamp for my feet, a sword cutting through the confusion or evasion.

But sometimes the Bible isn’t clear. There are any number of interpretations and arguments about its meaning. It is frustrating. We talked at the Bible Class on Thursday about sound doctrine and false teaching and we discussed various interpretations of Paul’s contentious advice about the role of women in chapter two of 1 Timothy and whether it was universal advice or cultural and contextual – advice just for that moment. It raised the honest question of how clear is the Bible on some issues.

I know preachers who will stand up and sound off with great certainty: 'The Bible says this...' Sure there are many things which the Bible is clear about. But also many things that there are various interpretations. Let's be grown up about this. I have given most of my life to trying to understand the bible and I am well aware that there are a lot of issues for which there are any number of perfectly valid views. So I can't stand up in front of you and with integrity say – the Bible is clear about homosexuality or marriage - the topic that is most pressing at the moment for our discernment - because there are different views. I would be deceiving you and giving you false teaching if I said anything else.

Paul starts chapter three by warning Timothy of these terrible times. ² People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money....⁴ ⁵ having a form of godliness but denying its power....: These teachers oppose the truth. They are men of depraved minds, who, as far as the faith is concerned, are rejected. (Verse 1-9) and in chapter 4: For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather round them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. ⁴ They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths.

It conjures up the image of going from church to church until they find a preacher they agree with.

That is not say there isn't key fundamental beliefs. I believe Jesus rose from the dead for example. The resurrection is unbelievable at one level. It defies science and the natural laws. I believe it because I can't explain Christianity and the rise of the church without it. I believe because I have to trust the witness of scripture. Such as Paul, who is writing from prison awaiting his execution. He writes in chapter 4 ⁶ *'for I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time for my departure is near. ⁷ I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, and I have kept the faith. ⁸ Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day – and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.'*

These writers of scripture were witnesses to the resurrection. They were the ones who had met the Risen Lord. Because of that experience they were fearless. Prepared to suffer martyrdom because they had a firm belief that death was not the end. At the end of life, like

finishing a race, if you have run straight, with your eyes on God, you will receive the crown, the reward of eternal life.

I talked with someone the other day who was facing up to their mortality and considering death. I encouraged them with the hope of the Christian faith through the resurrection. They said, quite rightly, that it is quite a leap of faith to trust in the resurrection and that there is life beyond the grave. I said it's also a leap of faith to believe there is nothing beyond death and that death is the end of the story. . You need faith for that as much as you need faith in the resurrection. Because you don't know if there is nothing beyond death.

And if you want to ask 'is there any evidence?' apart from the resurrection of Jesus, there are many tales of post or near death experiences, many of which are remarkably similar. All of which should make you doubt your doubts that there is nothing beyond the grave.

What we have in scripture is testimony to the one who said he is the resurrection and the Life: the one who holds the keys to death, the one who has victory over sin and death.

As an minister I have had many visits to the sick and dying. Even those who have no belief in God or the afterlife feel compelled to examine themselves, to ask,

'have I been loving enough to my friends and family? Have I been generous enough with my money? Have I got any regrets? In the shadow of death something makes us ask if we have lived as we should.

Paul puts his hope in God. Chapter 4 v 18: *The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen.*

Paul is confident in God's power even as he faced execution. His faith encourages our faith to hold firm, to run the race, to fight the good fight.

And Paul uses this image of a fight – because all his life he has received opposition. He has been in a fight. He sadly writes '*At my first defence, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me. May it not be held against them. ¹⁷ But the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength.*'

At this time of fierce persecution of Christians some of Paul's colleagues and friends had distanced themselves from him, hoping to avoid persecution themselves. Paul felt deserted. Leadership can often feel lonely. It may make you question whether it's worth it. Have you done the right thing? Paul is pretty convinced he has and has the

conviction to say he fought the good fight and finished the race.

He mentions some who have been good friends in verses 9-14. Mentioning Mark may give us pause for thought. Mark had left Paul and Barnabas on his first missionary journey and this had greatly upset Paul (Acts 13 and 15). Causing a rift between Paul and Barnabas that was so severe that they parted company. Somewhere along the line Paul had given Mark a second chance and Mark had proven to be a worthy helper. We don't have all the details about Mark's changed life or Paul's change of heart, but Paul realised that people can change.

There's a lesson in these few words. We should allow people to grow up and not hold them back from ministry or leadership or faults in the past that have now been corrected. When we encourage someone and open our minds to the possibility that he or she has changed and matured, we may be salvaging a significant ministry. Mark went on to not only be Paul's good friend but a trusted Christian leader (Colossians 4.10, Philemon 1.24) and possibly wrote the gospel.

Timothy is told to keep his head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, and discharge all

the duties of his ministry. In other words, keep calm and carry on!

He's had a warning of people who will oppose his leadership, who will preach a different gospel and tell a pack of lies. He has to remain balanced through these difficult and testing times. He has to go on announcing Jesus as Lord. What is required is not success as the world regards success but loyalty and perseverance.

It takes a great deal of personal strength to get through conflict and to listen to other people especially those who often misunderstand or misrepresent you and your ideas and maybe are angry at you. It hard to listen without constantly trying to jump in and defend yourself. Someone once advised me to let others go first – to have the strength of character to listen and reflect, knowing that your moment to speak would come and you don't have to force it. Having the confidence to wait, rather than jumping into the fray with guns blazing and then to speak graciously is a hall mark of great maturity. Ambrose Bierce summed it up when he wrote 'speak when you are angry and you will make the best speech you will regret.'¹

Paul is calling Timothy in these letters to further maturity in his leadership. To respond rather than to react to the

opposition he is getting at Ephesus: to keep his head but also to keep strong and resolute in the gospel he knows and the faith he proclaims.

May God help us all to fight the good fight, finish the race and keep the faith.

¹ S Chalke, Change Agenda, Zondervan 2007, p23