

5th February 2017

1 Timothy 1-3

I celebrated my 51st birthday last weekend. I am well and truly middle aged now. And getting to this point you not only look forward but you also look back. You have enough experience to bore your children of stories of ‘when I was a lad’ and your wisdom for how to live their life today.

Over the next month we are going to be looking at Paul’s letter to Timothy. Paul, at the end of his life, whilst in prison awaiting execution, offers advice and wisdom to Timothy a church leader.

He hopes (in chapter 1 verse 18) that Timothy may ‘*fight the battle well, holding on to faith and a good conscience.*’

This morning I want to look at the battle we are in, what it means to hold on to faith and have a good conscience.

Let me first start by saying the pastoral letters raise lots of controversial teachings, some of which we will reflect on; some we won’t. There is also the question who wrote it. I will assume that Paul wrote it, but there is debate. Those kind of questions will be covered in our next Bible Class at the end of the month so if you want to engage in these issues come along then.

But the apostle’s overriding concern in these letters is with truth, that it may be faithfully guarded and handed on.

Lately we have heard some outlandish statements and counter claims. Indeed fantasy and unsubstantiated promises have so become the order of the day that the Oxford Dictionary named ‘post truth’ as their 2016 international Word of the year. They define ‘post truth’ as ‘relating to circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than emotional appeals.’

Post truth is often about a lifestyle choice, a strategy for getting what is desired, a manipulative way of sucking people into a position that propagates a divisive and cruel narrative in order to rule and dominate others. They say whatever it takes to get their way.

The US Presidential campaign had claim and counter claim. The Washington Post had a Pinocchio detector and said that 64% of Donald Trump’s statements were absolute fabrications, falsehoods and deceptions.

The Brexit debate had Project Fear on one side and claims of the Battle bus that we would be £350 million better off each week if we came out of the EU (which ignored what we get back from the EU in grants, aid and research investment).

Churches can also engage in post truth statements: they can make claims about purported healings which turn out not to be such, rumours of revival associated with charismatic individuals and abuses of power which turn out to be nothing but false. The old word for post truth was lies. Now more than ever we need to be concerned with truth. We are in a battle for truth.

A couple of weeks ago I gave a talk on Timothy Keller's book 'Making Sense of God'. I looked at the 'truths' that are around in secular society:

'You don't need to believe in God to have a full life of meaning and hope and satisfaction'

You should be free to live as you see fit, as long as you don't harm anyone'

You become yourself when you are true to your deepest desires and dreams'

You don't need to believe in God to have a basis of moral values, equality and human rights'

There's little or no evidence for the existence of God or the truth of Christianity'.

And I questioned all those values and exposed some of their weaknesses whilst reaffirming the Christian truth and

hope. If you missed the meeting and wanted the notes – some are available at the front – or I'll email them to you.

These pastoral letters urge us to examine what we are being told and sift out the truth from the lies.

In contrast to this relativisation of truth it is wonderfully refreshing to read Paul's unambiguous commitment to it. He himself has been appointed as a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth (1Tim 2.7); the church is the pillar and foundation of truth (3.15). The false teachers have wandered away from the truth and even oppose the truth.

We are not sure exactly what the false teachers were teaching. Paul describes it as godless myths, lies, and old wives tales. Scholars speculate it could have been gnostic type beliefs: the Gnostics believed that only an elite group of people were spiritual enough to know God.

But through these letters the essential truth, the sound doctrine of the Christian faith is spelled out over and over again: That God wants all people to be saved and come to a knowledge of his truth that there is one mediator between God and humanity: Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all people.

Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners (1.15) and Paul knows that more than others. He once persecuted and killed Christians, yet God in his grace encountered him and turned his life around.

A while back a friend told me of his sister. Her partner had left her and their baby for another woman. She felt worthless and contemplated suicide. She knew her brother, my friend, was a committed Christian and knew the strength he drew from his faith. So as a last chance she took herself to the local church one Sunday morning. The preacher was doing a talk for all ages and was using a visual aid: a £20 note. He said 'who would like a £20 note?' They all put their hands up. He then scrunched up the £20 note and said 'who wants it now?' They all still put their hands up.

He dropped the note on to the floor and stood on it with some muddy boots that had walked through dog dirt. The note was all smelly and horrible now. Again he asked who wanted the £20 note. Again they all put their hands up.

The minister drew the punch line (as ministers do!). 'Even though the note is dirty and battered and smells, it's still worth £20 and you still want it. Our lives may be messed up, dirty and battered, but the truth of the gospel is that God still sees your worth. You are still his child, still

priceless to him and Jesus would still die on the cross for you.'

The illustration went right to the heart of my friend's sister. It's not been an easy road for her since but she has gradually rebuilt her life and found faith. She has the truth of the gospel as the foundation of her life – a truth that gives meaning and hope and satisfaction; a basis for her true worth and value, something that no suffering no rejection or even death can take away.

'Jesus loves me this I know so the Bible tells me so: little ones to him belong, we are weak but he is strong. Yes Jesus loves me, yes Jesus loves me yes Jesus loves me, the bible tells me so'. The kid's songs always tell it straight. It's all you need to know. This is the sound doctrine that Paul urges his church leaders not to depart from.

There are two types of leaders Paul addresses in chapter three. There is Timothy who has been appointed to oversee (bishop) the churches in Ephesus (west coast of modern day Turkey) and in Crete. There are the trustworthy pastors whom Timothy is to appoint to lead these small churches. They need a consistent moral character and a Christian home life, they must also be loyal to the apostles teaching and have a teaching gift so that they will be able to teach the truth and to confute error.

But whilst they are to hold to the teaching of sound doctrine, the apostle's faith, they are to have a good conscience and to have the respect of non-believers and the local community in which they belong. It is important what other people think about us, whether they think we are moral and people of good character in their view.

Timothy Keller shares a story of meeting a disillusioned university professor who told him he was a secular man but held to strong humanistic values. 'That's why I avoid churches', he said. 'There are only two kinds of churches the legalistic and the relativistic. Both are bad news. I want open minded ness but real solid values. Can't get that combination in church'.

He went on to tell Keller some harrowing tales of his experience in some very narrow abusive, doctrinaire churches, but then of his disgust with the 'you can believe anything you like' denominations as well. 'These churches are filled with people like me fleeing the legalists, but what they have created is nothing much more than a social club'.

Well I can recognise what that man saw. I have been in churches which are just social clubs – there is no engagement with Christian truth and wrestling with the implications of the gospel. I have also been in churches

which tell you what to believe and also how to behave. Leave your brain at the door.

In case you haven't noticed my intention and hope for this church is that it will be open-minded yet have real solid values and beliefs. Being open minded encourages questions and doubts as a way to find truth. But as a church leader I also have a responsibility to try live a holy life, be a role model in God's strength and also stand for the apostolic faith. If I should waver from that I hope I would have the integrity to step aside and let someone else take over.

This tension between sound doctrine and a good conscience is evidenced in these opening chapters. In chapter one Paul lists a number of immoral actions: killing your father or mother, murderers, sexually immoral and those practicing homosexuality, slave traders, liars and perjurers. It is shocking to modern ears to find homosexuality in such company as murderers and slave traders. I have a Life Application Study Bible that tells me unequivocally that the Bible says homosexual behaviour is a sin. No shades of grey in that.

However in the next chapter in 1 Timothy you get another controversial passage:

¹¹ A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. ¹² I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet. ¹³ For Adam was formed first, then Eve. ¹⁴ And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. ¹⁵ But women will be saved through childbearing – if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety.

I turn to my Life Application Bible and it now says this:

To understand these verses we must understand the situation in which Paul and Timothy worked in first century Jewish culture. Women were not allowed to study. When Paul said that women should learn in quietness and full submission he was offering an amazing opportunity to learn God's Word.....

Some interpret the passage to mean that women should never teach in the assembled church. However commentators point out that Paul did not forbid women from ever teaching. Paul commended co-worker Priscilla taught Apollos (Acts 18) Paul frequently mentioned other women who held responsibilities in the church...

Some scholars see these verses about Adam and Eve as an illustration of what was happening in the Ephesian church. Just as Eve had been deceived in the Garden of

Eden so the women at Ephesus were being deceived by false teachers. And just as Adam was the first human created by God so the men in the church at Ephesus should be the first to speak and teach because they had more training. This view, then stresses that Paul's teaching here is not universal but applies to churches with similar problems. Other scholars however contend that the roles Paul points out are God's design for his created order – God established these roles to maintain harmony in both family and church.

In other words, lots of shades of grey in interpreting this verse. Is it contextual – is the ethical advice to do with a certain situation, a certain cultural understanding of the role of women, is it all relative to that day? Or is it universal, for all time?

The Presbyterian tradition of the United Reformed Church became the first Christian denomination to ordain a woman as a church minister. Her name was Constance Coltman and this year we celebrate the 100th anniversary of her ordination in 1917. So we didn't take this as universal teaching a long time ago.

And why doesn't the Life Application offer the same greyness to the issue of interpreting the condemnation of homosexual practice? Why doesn't it say some scholars

think that the type of homosexual practice being condemned is that linked to pagan temple worship or paedophilia where adult males abuse boys? It knows nothing of the homosexual orientation and loving relationships as understood by modern society?

You have to be careful who tells you the truth you know? Open minded ness will have the courage to look at all sides of the truth in order to discover the truth.

We of course have the decision to make on same sex marriage in this place and we have two speakers coming in who will justify their position for and against it by the use of scripture and how to interpret it, how to reason with good conscience for either side. I know some of you are dreading it. I know some of you have already made your decision for or against and I have been inspired by so many of you who genuinely don't know but who are looking forward to the opportunity to get to grips with an contemporary issue that is relevant to our society at the moment and to the future of the church and the promotion of the gospel.

I am trying not to make my mind up on this issue until I have heard those views and prayed and talked with others. I hope I will have the courage to challenge my own prejudices and even be open to change my thinking –

because that's what open mindedness means. It doesn't mean that I shall stop seeing the Bible as the inspired Word of God, or that Jesus did not die for my sins and rise to give us hope.

And these things matter. Beliefs affect behaviour and attitudes. In my twenty plus years of ministry I have had to support women who have been abused by men who thought themselves superior and dominant because the Bible says so. I cried when one widow told me she had a good husband because he never hit her. I have dealt with gay people who have tried to take their lives because they can't square being a Christian with being attracted to people of the same sex.

I read the testimony of an Evangelical Church leader, *The Revd Dr Nick Bundock, Team Rector of Didsbury*, the other day about the sad journey his church had gone on after a 14 year old from his church committed suicide.

LIZZIE LOWEⁱ was gay. Nobody in her family or church knew this — how we wish we had. As a 14-year-old, she was still exploring her feelings, and trying to juggle the many powerful emotions of the teenage years, but it was painfully clear from the coroner's hearing in December 2014 that her sexuality and her perception of faith were at

odds with one another, and had become a chasm too wide to cross.

Lizzie had become convinced that God could not love her the way she was — a feeling she expressed by text message to the few confidants she had, leading up to her fatal decision.

St James and Emmanuel has undergone a revolution since Lizzie died. It is not that we were ever “hard-line”. Actually, we have always been a pretty broad expression of Evangelicalism. Like many similar churches, however, we have largely avoided the topic of homosexuality, to preserve the peace. I now realise, too late, that ignoring the topic of sexuality is, by definition, exclusive, and unsafe for people who are gay.

In the months after the coroner’s report, the revolution at St James and Emmanuel started with a decision by the PCC to adopt a statement of inclusionⁱⁱ. This was followed by three structured “listening evenings”, and inclusion is now a regular item on the agenda of the PCC.

We lost some members during the turmoil of 2015. That was immensely painful for me as a vicar. But we have also gained members.

Worship in our church has never been more vibrant and alive. Our paradigm shift has swept a new sense of immanence into our services, and a fresh honesty into our interactions.

Paul encourages sound doctrine but also good conscience. In ancient times the conscience was the moral compass. That strange mysterious inner voice telling you what’s right and wrong. Many thinkers, Jewish and pagan, believed it was the divine presence guiding and warning the human race. Of course our consciences are also shaped by our culture and the values we have been brought up with, so our conscience needs to be sharpened, particularly on God’s Word. But even when we act on conscience we may admire people’s principles but disagree with them.

This week a few of the men’s group went to the cinema to see Hacksaw Ridge, a movie that is in contention for the Best Picture Oscarⁱⁱⁱ. It tells the extraordinary true story of conscientious objector Desmond T. Doss who saved 75 men in Okinawa, during the bloodiest battle of WWII, without firing a single shot. Believing that the war was just but killing was nevertheless wrong, he was the only American soldier in WWII to fight on the front lines without a weapon. As an army medic Doss single-handedly evacuated the wounded near enemy lines - braving enemy fire and putting his own life on the line.

He was a devout Christian. In one scene his commanding officer argues with him about his faith. Doss says the commandment is thou shalt not kill. 'But that only relates to murder not to defending your country from evil', retorts the officer. 'Jesus says love your enemies' says Doss standing on his principles. Another fellow soldier says he believes the Bible but will pull the trigger of a gun to save his wife and children. Doss though stays true to his beliefs and his conscience is clean. He prays before the battles and during it he prays 'Lord just let me save one', then when he does, he prays again 'Lord let me save one more'. It is a powerful film of conviction and faith but also very gory and visceral so have a strong stomach if you go and see it. I described it as Chariots of Fire with blood and violence.

Pacifism can be biblically warranted but people will take different stands. Holding on to the fundamentals of faith but living it out differently with a good conscience.

Paul in this pastoral letter says 'The goal of faith is love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and

ⁱ <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2016/25-november/faith/faith-features/grief-self-criticism-and-a-new-immanence>

ⁱⁱ We believe in an Inclusive Church — church which does not discriminate on any level, including: economic power, gender, mental health, mental ability, physical ability, race or sexuality. We believe in a Church which welcomes, accepts and serves all people in the name of Jesus Christ; which is scripturally faithful; which

a sincere faith (1.5). Let us fight the battle well, holding on to faith and a good conscience.

seeks to proclaim the Gospel afresh for each generation; and which, in the power of the Holy Spirit, allows all people to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Jesus Christ.

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.hacksawridge.movie/>