

St James' Cathedral, Toronto
Wycliffe College Founders' Day Sermon
October 3, 2004

Rt. Rev. Peter Mason

2 Timothy 1:1-14

I am delighted to be invited to preach on this occasion, the 127th anniversary of the Founding of Wycliffe College. We began in a schoolroom of St. James' Cathedral in this very location, and like our sister college – Trinity – have enjoyed a long and vibrant friendship with this cathedral parish. Thank you, Mr. Dean and your staff, for making us so welcome today.

I am at the age and stage where my wife and I take increasing delight at the progress and development of our family. We are blessed with three children and four grandsons, each of whom live out in their lives many of the values and visions which Carmen and I share. They aren't perfect – after all WE are their grandparents. But in all sorts of ways they bring us much joy, and particularly in those situations in which our own faith in Jesus Christ takes root and blossoms in their lives; and we trust it will be there long after we are gone.

That is what tradition is all about – the living faith of the dead, not the dead faith of the living.

The bible, not to mention church history, is full of examples of just this process...one generation articulating and practising the way of the Gospel, then passing it on to the next, with encouragement, warning, and passion.

There are few better examples of this than that of the Apostle Paul and his young friend and protégé, Timothy. The New Testament provides much information about their ministry together and their shared commitment to Jesus Christ, Timothy's mother was Jewish and his father Greek; evidently he was raised in the Jewish tradition, and even before meeting Paul heard the story of Jesus from his mother and grandmother and became a believer.

So here a few moments ago we read an excerpt from 2 Timothy, Paul's farewell charge to his son and partner in the gospel, Timothy. Like other of Paul's writings 2 Timothy may well have been cast into its final form by a later generation; but there is little doubt that in spirit and content, it captures Paul's love for Timothy and his passionate hope that the young disciple will continue and expand the work of the gospel started by the great Apostle.

Look again at the character and life of young Timothy, and ask whether we too in our generation are called to walk in his steps.

1. The Spiritual life of Timothy actually predates him; it is rooted in the call of God, and learned from his grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice. We know nothing more about this extended Jewish family...how they came to hear about Jesus, how these two strong women evangelised the young man. Everybody has his or her unique story, and not every story includes the blessing of a nurturing, supportive family, but wherever it exists, it is an unqualified bonus.
2. But it isn't enough for Timothy to rely on the faith of his family. "Fan into flames the spiritual gift God gave you..." exhorts Paul. Family faith, the religion of our forebears, is of little value unless we say our own personal "Yes" to it. If it gladdens your heart to see the next generation come to faith, it breaks that same heart when they reject it.

3. Thirdly, Timothy may be struggling with the burden, the expectation Paul is laying on him. “Don’t be afraid,” urges Paul; “God has given us the Holy Spirit, a spirit of power, of love, of self-discipline.” I don’t think for one moment that St. Paul is minimizing the weight and even the danger of the task at hand.

There will be difficult days ahead; expect to suffer – not because you are paranoid or a masochist, but simply because it goes with the territory. In a world of self-centredness, of corruption, of rivalry, jealousy and prejudice, anybody – then or now – who challenges that status quo in the name of the Royal Law of Love, can expect rejection, opposition, ridicule, and worse. Indeed, continues Paul, the stronger the opposition, the more you are to live in the faith and love of Jesus, and guard the treasure of the gospel.

So there is Timothy’s Mandate:

Celebrate the faith of your parents.

Make their faith your own personal faith.

Be prepared to live your life and exercise your ministry with courage, love, and self-discipline, even in the face of opposition and suffering.

.....

But ... Timothy is not simply a cookie-cutter copy of the Apostle Paul. He has his own unique personality, his distinctive gifts for ministry, and he will have to work out that ministry in the particular circumstances and situations he will face. And he will have to do it without the benefit of Paul looking over his shoulder. What united Paul and Timothy, and indeed unites us with them across two millennia, is a common rootedness in the gospel, the Good News of God in Jesus Christ.

What is that rootedness, that commonality in the Gospel?

Our text highlights three dimensions of the Good News of Jesus that unites us

- Purpose
- Grace
- Vocation

Purpose.

In a day and age when “givens” are replaced by “relatives”, and “absolutes” are replaced by “conditionals”, it becomes increasingly difficult to speak of Divine Purpose in any meaningful way. In our desire not to exclude, offend, or evaluate, we avoid much talk of God’s Purposes, lest they appear to encroach on others’ rights, freedoms, or choices. After all, if we mustn’t impose our wills on others, should we then suggest there might be a higher will and purpose over all of us? Better to settle for being Cosmic Orphans, than children of an Infinite, Good, Personal, Creator of the Universe.

And yet... Christians as well as people of other faith traditions have resisted the pressure to relativize all things. They have declared their convictions that we are not drifting meaninglessly through the galaxies. Indeed we are the subjects of a good and gracious Creator-God who invites us into a conscious relationship, mysterious and problematic though that may at first appear.

Grace.

The second of these gospel dimensions is Grace, perhaps even more difficult to grasp and practise than Purpose. Listen again to our text:

“Rely on the power of God who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works but according to his own purpose and GRACE. This grace was given to us in Christ Jesus

before the ages began, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Saviour Jesus Christ, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.”

If the Purpose of God is to establish a friendly relationship with the world and all its creatures, then the Grace of God is the divine capacity to establish that relationship despite the hardened hearts, sinful ways and arrogant superiority of us human beings. And for Paul...and Timothy...and yes, for ourselves, Jesus was the agent, the instrument of God’s Grace. It was Jesus, whose life, death, and resurrection revealed the Father’s love, made forgiveness possible, and established the victory of life over death. No wonder we call it Good News!

Why is Grace such a difficult concept? Because in a society that teaches self-reliance, rewards personal achievement, and despises any sort of weakness, the notion of the Grace of Jesus Christ calls us to be humble junior partners with God, co-operative members of the Body of Christ, and willing servants to a still-needy world.

Vocation.

Finally Vocation. On a Sunday when we are focussing on Theological Education it ought to be easy to think about Vocation – or Call. But we need to be careful not to limit our notion of vocation to individuals only. It is one thing to declare yourself Called to be apriest, teacher, professional, etc...but Christian Vocation must always be rooted in the mission of the community, the church. True, Paul declared “God chose me to be a herald (or a preacher), an apostle, and a teacher of the Good News.” But what Paul – and subsequently Timothy – did as individuals, they did because of the mission of the church which was established by Jesus Christ, its Head.

Our Vocation, our Calling, therefore is not just our individual jobs or tasks within the church or community; our Vocation is all that we are and do that is consistent with the Purposes of God for all of God’s creation. Whether it be seeking peace, promoting justice, healing the injured, feeding the hungry, or whether it be preaching, pastoring, or leading a church, it needs to fit into the larger picture of God’s will, and therefore contribute to God’s greater Glory