

2 Timothy 1:1-14

Years ago I led a retreat for a parish, a whole weekend. A good weekend, we all got on and gave glory to God, but we were a bit different. They were guitars and Graham Kendrick and I was organs and Orlando Gibbons. They were denim, I was linen. And they were *demonstrative* whilst I come from the sort of family where you wear a tie to do the gardening. I am only demonstrative when I have a letter from my doctor and another letter from your doctor and I know your mother's maiden name. So, at the end of the weekend, when they came to thank me, I hoped for a polite ripple of applause, but instead two very large men came and put their arms around me and prayed for me - at length. Which was lovely, but when people hug me in public I quite often do a passable imitation of a hat-stand.

Why am I telling you this? The reading we have just heard, from the Second Letter of Timothy, takes us into tricky territory. It is important, but it is not easy, and it has to do with what being religious looks like and feels like. Is it hugs, or is it hat-stands?

First I need to tell you about this letter; about Two Timothy. In your bibles it will say *The Second Letter of Paul to Timothy* and you will find it after the *First Letter to Timothy* and after most of Paul's other letters: Romans Corinthians, Thessalonians... Clever people who write books and who like nothing better than an unusual Greek verb, call the two letters to Timothy and the letter to Titus the 'Pastoral Epistles'. That's because these are letters unlike Paul's other letters. These letters are all about *pastoral* matters, they are letters about the church and how it works. So, the First Letter of Timothy tells you what you should wear, how you should say your prayers and it has a lot to say about bishops and deacons

whoever aspires to the office of bishop desires a noble task. (1 Timothy 3:1)

And there is something else that makes these Pastoral Epistles different from the rest of Paul's letters. These letters think that there is a problem, a serious problem. This morning we got a hint of that, towards the end of the reading we heard

Hold to the standard of sound teaching that you have heard from me

Now, you only tell people to hang on to sound teaching if you think that there is a risk that they might have some odd ideas. And that is exactly what is going on here. The First Letter to Timothy talked a lot about 'truth' and 'deceit' and then wagged its finger and said

Have nothing to do with profane myths and old wives' tales (1 Timothy 4:7)

These are not letters *about* something; they are letters *against* something. There is a problem and the problem is false teaching, heresy.

These letters really are not like the other letters Paul writes. In fact, they are so unlike the other letters that those clever people with their Greek verbs are inclined to think that they were not written by Paul at all. They may well have been written a little later by someone determined that we should go on remembering what Paul told us when things get tricky.

But the important thing here is not whether this letter was written by Paul or someone close to Paul. The important thing here is the problem this letter tackles. It has something to do with hugs or hat-stands. It has something to do with what faith looks like. In these letters is the very beginning of what got takes us from Calvary to College Green. How are we going to explain the fact that after Jesus told us to repent and love our neighbour we looked at one another and thought it would be a very good idea to have deans and vergers and apses and Finance Advisory Committees. We started with a gospel and we got a church. Two Timothy is part of what got us from there to here.

Jesus preached something very simple, 'Repent and believe, the Kingdom of God is at hand'. That is the heart of what he had to say and his disciples kept asking 'Excellent, but what exactly does that mean, what

do you want us to do?’ Paul came after Jesus saying ‘There is only one thing that matters and it is the cross; you have to die with Christ and live with Christ’. And Two Timothy follows and tries to say something about just precisely how you do that.

Jesus said ‘Repent and believe, the Kingdom of God is at hand’. That is the gospel. But the really important thing we need to know was that he did not just tell us the gospel, he *was* the gospel. When Jesus healed the sick that was the Kingdom coming, when he raised the dead, that was the Kingdom coming. When Jesus taught us to love another that was the Kingdom coming, and when Jesus said ‘not my will be done’ and died that was the Kingdom coming. The whole gospel is Jesus Christ. Paul was right the whole of faith is found in Christ, it is to be like Christ.

And that is all at once dead simple and an overwhelming challenge. How do I live like Christ when the question is about genetically modified humans, or Brexit, or the cathedral budget, or the argument with a friend, or the person who is sick? What do I do, what do I say? That is hard and the church has lots of answers and they are not all the same. For some it is hugs and some of us are hat-stands because the hugs don’t do it for us. When the truth gets contested, when we disagree we need help and that is why Two Timothy was written.

And it says two things that we need to hear. I told you that these letters tell us things about bishops and deacons; in fact they tell us more about bishops than any other letters in the New Testament. And the striking things is *what* they tell us. Listen to this:

Now a bishop must be above reproach... an apt teacher, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, and not a lover of money | Timothy 3:2-3

That is pretty good advice, none of us want a bishop waving a broken bottle and demanding money with menaces. But it is not what we ask for now when we appoint bishops or deans come to that. Now the adverts talk about leading engagement in the public square, or facilitating mission, or financial management. That was not what mattered in the Letters to Timothy. Instead of worrying what skills the bishop had these letters want to know that the Bishop is authentic, that he lives out the holiness he talks about. That is really important the question we need to ask of ourselves and of each other has much more to do with what we are and rather less to do with what we say or put on a CV. What kind of life do we lead? We talk about Christ can anyone else see Christ in us.

That is the first thing. The second is this business of telling the truth, knowing the sound teaching. That really matters in Two Timothy. Later in the letter you come across one of my favourite verse in scripture:

The time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires

2 Timothy 4:3

This letter keeps asking do you know the truth? Do you know the truth or do you prefer opinions that agree with your own? Do you know the truth or do you follow your nose? This letter wants us to live like Christ, it wants us to be authentic. And it is absolutely convinced that we can only do that if ask ourselves hard questions. We can only live like Christ if we learn and remember what Christ taught us.

We do not make faith up as we go along. It is not an instinct, a gut feeling, it is more than that; it is saying our prayers, reading the bible, learning the faith. Of course it is love and joy and hope, but it is also discipline and repentance. Sometimes you hug and sometimes you might be a hat-stand because there is a deep conversation to be had about what the faith looks like and we come at that slowly throughout our lives. 2 Timothy invites us to think about what real faith looks like and sounds like. We are perhaps tempted to think we are most authentic, our faith is most real when it is spontaneous. 2 Timothy suggests that what is real and authentic might be spontaneous and also informed and disciplined.

It is harvest festival and you probably feel cheated that I have not spoken about fields of corn or tins of baked beans. The idea of harvest is deep in scripture, the Kingdom of God that Jesus preached gets compared to the harvest. We are the harvest, we are what God gathers in. What we are, and what we will be, depend on God, but remember what Jesus said when he preached about the sower,

these are the ones sown on the good soil: they hear the word and accept it and bear fruit

Mark 4:20

Hear the word and accept it; know the sound doctrine, remember the sound teaching. As followers of Christ we offer God our lives, that is the harvest, but they are lives shaped by teaching, by truth, by the practice of faith. We are summoned into truth because the truth is the one thing that will save us from ourselves.