

Sermon: Hold on to the faith

2 Timothy 1:1-16

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Intro

If you know that your end is near, what is the heritage that you really like to hand over to those who stay behind? To your children, friends, colleagues? What is truly important for you at such a moment? I am not sure my children would care much for my stamp collection or for a collection of second hand shoes or an antique tv. And at my last moment – I am sure that will not be of prime concern for me either.

The coming month we will together listen to St Paul's second letter to Timothy. Paul wrote this letter to his friend and colleague who led the church in Ephesus, ca. 65AD. Paul was in prison and death seemed near. What is truly important to tell your buddy in such circumstances?

The letter II Timothy is the Apostle Paul's testament: his final, most urgent advice to a church leader; advice that was both relevant for bishop Timothy in his own situation, and for us as well I believe.

1 True Faith

Poor Timothy – he had a hard job! Imagine to be a bishop in a city, in Ephesus, with so many problems.

From Paul's first letter to Timothy we know that he suffered from frequent illnesses. Timothy was also relatively young, so he seems to have been a bit timid. That is hard when you face problems in your church. When you have to lead a community in troubles.

And he faced problems. Ofcourse the normal problems, like poverty, and broken marriages, and people who did not know how to raise their kids.

But there were also people in his church teaching a counter-gospel, different from how Timothy had been taught by St Paul himself. How do you face those confident, well-spoken, experienced teachers of untruth! Our churches today face this problem on a worldwide scale.

And then, the believers were also persecuted by the Roman state. Paul himself wrote from prison in Rome, and the believers in Ephesus, and certainly their leader Timothy, were also facing dangers.

So Paul tells Timothy to not be afraid. "For God did not give us a Spirit of timidity, but a Spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline." (2 Tim 1:7)

Power Timothy needed in these times of resistance against him inside the church and persecution coming from outside the church. Love he needed, because it is much easier to write off anyone who resists your leadership and to hate your enemies; and self-discipline he needed for being prepared to suffer from the verbal attacks by heretics and physical attacks by the Roman State without punching back, and for holding on to the faith.

And how does Timothy have access to this power, love and self-discipline? Where does he find the stamina? Where do we find our stamina to stand strong in life?

Paul tells his friend that he remembers his sincere faith. Real faith from the heart is our anchor into heaven. Our ship of life may be tossed around, but it is safely anchored in eternity. And this life line of faith is how the Holy Spirit accesses our lives. Through our sincere faith the Holy Spirit gives us power and love and the self-discipline to stand strong against the storms in our life.

Paul focuses on the attitude of the heart. Timothy with his whole heart believed and that was his lifeline.

But Paul also speaks of sound doctrine – the right theology. "What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching.... Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you."

In our days, you often hear people say things like: "It does not matter so much what you believe, as long as you are sincere about it." This sounds sort of kind in our societies filled with diverse viewpoints, but come on, the idea is rather strange.

And I think certainly after the events here in Egypt in the past months, I do not think many will think that it does not matter what people believe, as long as they are serious about it. If people seriously believe that setting a church to fire is rendering God a service, and they are sincere about it, should we consider this normal?

It is important that we wholeheartedly believe, but only the right faith, the right dogma's if you like.

2 True Gospel

Some people have some resistance against dogma, against the received teachings from the church. And surely, maybe the church has not always taught the faith wisely.

In his letter to Timothy, so dense with thought, Paul describes the message of the church, the Gospel, with many inspiring words. Our 'dogma' is not dry or boring – it is amazing! It is a message worth living for – a message, Paul says and shows in his own life, even worth dying for.

Paul describes the Gospel as:

The gospel of power

The gospel of salvation

The gospel of grace

The gospel of God's eternal purpose

The gospel of life and immortality

Or, to summarize all, it is the Gospel of Jesus Christ

Knowing him is power, salvation, grace, life and immortality. This is a faith to live for! This is a faith to die for! This is actually all about Jesus Christ himself.

Yes, the church has at times taken Jesus Christ himself out of the message. I am afraid liberal Christianity has done this, by making Jesus into just a prophet with a deep message, and by distorting or rejecting the historic faith of the church.

Thereby it has made the Christian faith into something harmless, like a roaring lion without teeth, a good moral message at best –sweet icing on the cake of life, but not, I think, worth living for. And certainly not worth dying for.

But liberal Christianity was a reaction, to a certain extent, to dogmatic Christianity that had all the dogmatic facts right, but something of the sincerity of believing was missing. To teach the Christian faith without the love of Christ, without grace for people, without a life of peace, is an insult to the Christ of the Christian faith.

We can think of so many things the church throughout its history could have done better... but does this mean that the historical teachings of the church are untrue? That would be a very simplistic conclusion. The baker where you buy your bread may be a grumpy man sometimes, but does

this mean his bread is not good, or that you do not need to eat?

Maybe our resistance to accept the teachings of the church is more a problem of ourselves actually. We do not like anyone to tell us what to believe, do we? We live in 2013, and no one can tell me what to think.

In general it is not a bad idea to be critical, to use your mind, to carefully weigh the pros and cons of what people tell you.

But if the source of this critical attitude is an overdose of individualism and a resistance against the authority of God and his church, then it defeats us. This cannot be good for us!

For me it was so liberating to accept the idea that I do not have to create my own faith-systems, that I do not have to think everything through, or that I do not even have to understand all things.

St Vincent of Lerin in Southern France, a church leader who died in 445 AD, summarized well what is truly important in the church. He said: 'In the Church itself, all possible care must be taken, that we hold that faith which has been believed everywhere, always, by all.'

As Christians we can disagree about many things, but if we hold on to what all Christians at all times in all places believed, we can be fairly sure that what we believe goes straight back to Jesus Christ and his Apostles.

3 True Community

God has deposited truth in his church, starting with Adam, and Abraham, and Moses, and the prophets, mostly through his Son Jesus Christ, and then through his apostles. And next through those appointed by the apostles, like Timothy, who in his turn was told to teach this deposit of the faith to the next generation – to people who in their turn could teach other people.

In 2 Tim 2:2 Paul tells him, "What you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also."

Paul wrote this to Timothy around the year 65; Timothy was the overseer, the bishop, of the church in Ephesus until he died in the year 80, others think in the year 97. So for a period of 15 to 30 years bishop Timothy taught other people the faith that he had learned from his mentor, St Paul.

And this is how the church has handed over the faith from generation to generation. This is not an individual matter, of sitting all by yourself with your Bible, though that is extremely useful.

Paul stresses the community of faith in his words to Timothy. He underlines first that Timothy had a sincere faith, in line with his grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice. Important to have such family. And important for us to be such believing and faithful families for our own kids if we have them.

Eunice and Lois began teaching the Hebrew Scriptures to Timothy while he was still very young. They made sure that he knew the Christian faith.

Paul reminds Timothy of his family tradition when he wants to encourage him to hold on to the content of the Christian faith. Timothy was walking in a fine heritage and if he failed to do this, not only would he smirch his own name, but he would lessen the honor of his family name as well.

To think of our Christian forefathers, if we have those, is an important motivational factor for running in the same course. That is certainly true for me. I would not want my family alive nor my family in heaven to be upset for me leaving the course of Christ.

Paul asks Timothy to continue being in community with his grandmother, with his mother, and with Paul as well. “What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching” – stick to it. And, Paul adds, do this “with faith and love in Christ Jesus.” Faith is a matter of content, theology, and it is a matter of personal commitment to Jesus Christ, with love and faith.

Holding on to this faith-content and to this faith-commitment makes us participants in the community of Adam, and Moses, and Paul, and Timothy, and our grandparents, and parents.

In this context, Paul also asks God to show mercy to the household of Onesiphorus, a citizen of Ephesus and a member of Timothy’s church, who had come to Paul in Rome to support him in prison.

It seems that Onesiphorus himself had passed away. That is why Paul prays that God grants him “mercy from the Lord on that day”. On that day, when he faces the eternal tribunal, may God be merciful to him. Is Paul here praying for someone who is already dead?

In Judaism this was not strange – and Paul grew up in an environment that saw in prayers for those who had passed away not something hateful, but a lovely thing. Let me quote William Barclay on this, a minister in the Church of Scotland in the past century.

This one thing we can and must say – if we love a person with all our hearts, and if the remembrance of that person is never absent from our minds and memories, then, whatever the intellect of the theologian may say about it, the instinct of the heart is to remember such a one in prayer, whether he is in this or in any other world.

For Jesus and the apostles, the community of believers was wide, much wider than we usually experience. It was one community of all those before us and all those who are still to come. If we hold on to the faith of Jesus and the apostles, we live in a world populated by saints – saints from ages past, and saint in the ages to come.

Conclusion

This is the legacy of St Paul. This is his most important message to Timothy and to all of us.

To the saints of the ages past we say – we believe with you. Our faith is in God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And to the saints of the ages to come, we say with trepidation... we will hand over our faith to you, our children, the future generations, our friends... so that we enable our children and our friends to become saints, to also be part of that great family of believers.

And by holding on to the faith, we are directly linked, even today, with those friends and family-members who have already moved up, to be with the Lord.

We actually express this faith each week in the Creed, to help us, to use the words of Paul, “keep the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus”. That is the faith of our church family, throughout the world, throughout time, and even our anchor into eternity.

Amen