

Sermon: The power of words

2 Tim 3:1-17

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Intro

When people are about to die, we are always interested in last words. 'What were his or her last words...' Often these are powerful memories for us and we remember them.

The apostle Paul was about to die; he was in prison in Rome and soon to be fed to the lions. What were his last words?

The second letter he wrote to bishop Timothy in Ephesus are actually his last words.

In the first two chapters, Paul underlined the importance of holding on to the true faith. Both the right doctrine - the words we use for describing our faith - and a right heartfelt commitment to this faith - belief in Jesus Christ - are important.

In times of need, when the days are hard, this faith is our anchor into heaven. It connects us with God and it allows the Holy Spirit to work in our lives. In the time of Paul and Timothy, when the church was attacked from the outside, this was extremely important.

1 Preachers who like themselves too much

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But the walls of church, however thick they may be, do not keep our problems away. Timothy faced pressure from the Roman State, but also in his own church.

Paul gives a list of 18 sins that troubled the church of Timothy in Ephesus. He also says that in these last days, the problems on the inside of the church only increase. The major issue was false teachings.

This is the major problem of Timothy. There were wrong theologies being discussed. People used wrong language, wrong words, for speaking of the Christian faith.

We must not be romantic about the good old days; the church was always a community of sinners. Life in general, even church life, seems to be full of moral pitfalls.

The focus in the list of sins St Paul gave, is on selfishness; it is about people who love themselves and only live for their own benefit. This love of self is the basic sin from which all others flow.

The moment man makes his own will, or his honour, or his desires, the center of the universe, divine and human relationship are destroyed.

If we do not care about the morality God desires for us, for our church, for our societies, we do grave harm to ourselves, and church, and society. Our uncontrolled passion – anger, lust, slander, they should never dictate our lives. But we must be honest. We are all very open to be taken for a ride. And it's a ride into hell. We must be so careful.

Words are important. One of the sins Paul mentions is slandering, speaking evil of others. The Greek word for slandering is *diabolos*. That is the same Greek word for the devil as well. He is the patron saint of the slanderers, the gossipers, the people who talk evil of others behind their back.

I know, it can be so sweet to talk about others. Do we not all know the experience? But mind you, if you steal my goods, I can buy new things again. If you rob me of my good name, I can never repair the problem. Let us be extremely careful to safeguard to honour, the good name, of each other. It is the most precious thing we own.

2 True preachers live the truth, preach the truth and have troubles 600

But the most dangerous sinners mentioned are those who spread their new ideas about the faith, but who are just beside the truth. Claiming new insights, new wisdom, new revelations. And that is so attractive. They are so attractive, because 'new' seems to be the password for getting our interest.

In the case of the Gospel, 'old' is better.

Paul refers to Jannes and Jambres – these were according to Jewish tradition the names of the magicians of Pharaoh who did great fake miracles when Moses was used by God to do real miracles.

Paul compares false teachers in church with those magicians. Some people can take others captive with their convincing words. Words can be like magic. Do not be taken captive by those words of people teaching untruth.

In church we will never lack such opponents. There will always be people with twisted ideas about the Christian faith who wish to win others for their mistaken beliefs. They start new churches, new sects, new meetings, new groups...

But do not fall into this trap. Hold on to the faith as preached by the apostles. Anything beyond that is dangerous. Anything less is dangerous.

We do not need the magic of all things new; we need the Spirit of God who connect himself with the truth of God.

One of the primary tasks of church leaders is to make sure that the words to describe our faith that we use in church are not harmful for the faithful but true and uplifting.

In the church, this was always battle. Listen to what St Ignatius, being led by Roman soldiers from Antioch to Rome for being martyred, said to bishop Polycarp of Smyrna, who would later also be killed by the State. He wrote is around 115 AD.

Do not let yourself be upset by those who seem to be very reliable and yet put forth strange teachings. . . . Stand your guard, like an anvil under the hammer. The mark of a good athlete is to win despite taking blows. Accept trials of all kinds for God's sake, and we will be accepted by Him.

How do we recognize true Christian leaders? They take blows. They face times of trials. True leaders follow the example of Paul. They are characterized by preaching the same doctrine, by their manner of life, their purpose, faith, patience, love and perseverance.

They do not live for their own salary, for their easy life, they do not live for enjoying their life. They live for God and for others, even if the price

is high. A jetset Christianity is a false Christianity.

Problems and persecutions cannot be avoided. People hate the light and will resist those who preach it and live it. More light will mean more problems, both from outside the church and from inside church.

3 Centrality of word of God for teaching and life 700

Paul then returns to his central theme, the heart of his testament for the church. 2 Tim 3:14:15:

But as for you, Timothy, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

From whom had Timothy learned the faith? From his mother, his grandmother, from the apostle Paul. That and nothing else must be his diet of spiritual food and that must be what he preaches.

Paul summarizes this message by referring to the Holy Scriptures. The Word is important. He underlines the urgency of using the Word of God as our guideline.

It is important to note that Paul sees the role of Scripture in the first place as making us wise for salvation through faith, in Jesus Christ.

It is not intended to teach us that the earth is round, or flat, or square. It is not intended to give us a scheme for how this world will end. It is not teaching us about the laws of sciences.

The bible is also not intended to teach us theories about God, and Jesus and salvation. It is our handbook on the road of faith with Jesus, and any one on that road, has take the safe route.

When we read our Bible – a very good habit to do this regularly – we should not do this for satisfying our curiosity. It is for salvation. It is intended to lead us to faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Do not consider it strange that you find it hard to believe, or that you do not experience much of the faith, if you do not allow the Word of God to make you wise for salvation.

And this is where teachers of strange ideas often go wrong. They have lost the right focus of the Word of God.

But this is also very orthodox preachers can go wrong. As soon as we preach the Word of God without the warmth and the urgency of the need of faith for salvation, it can become dry dogma, dry doctrine. True, but very unattractive.

And likewise, the orthodox faith preached by people who care more for their easy life and for their own pleasures, are a danger for the church. What we need is people who live the faith they preach.

We must at all times question ourselves whether our lifestyle is in accordance with the word of God. And for this, we have the Scriptures as our help. Paul says that these words are God's tool to make you a complete person, equipped for every good work.

All Scripture is inspired by God – his Spirit pervades the pages... and because God himself is present in those words, Paul says they are useful for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction.

Useful for doctrine. There we have this again. Doctrine - the right words - is important for making us complete and equipped for every good work.

But also reproof, and correction are important for completing you.

Interestingly, Paul underlines that this reproof and correction are also good for the man, and allow me to add, the woman, of God. People can be true servants of our Lord and still need to be told where their mistakes are. We should all be open to correction.

You are invited to correct me when you think I am teaching wrong, or living wrong. We need to all speak into each other's lives.

But talk to me, not to others. Speaking words about the shortcoming of people to others than they themselves, is poisonous. The same words spoken to the person himself, can be a great medicine. Use your words wisely.

When it comes to ensuring that we hold on to the right doctrine and that we lead right lives, priests, deacons, bishop, are not higher than anyone else in church. We stand together under

God's authority, and we stand together with empty hands and empty lives. We all depend on him to fill us afresh with his Holy Spirit, every day.

And we all depend on the courage of others to sometimes put the hand on the shoulder of someone to us, brother, sister, do this a bit different next time.

We must all be prepared to put our hand on the shoulder of someone else - But we are not ready to do this if we do not also have the grace to accept that hand of someone else to remind us of walking better on the path of God.

All of us, we are only in a position to use the Word of God to admonish and encourage someone else, if we do our best to also allow our own life and opinions to be put under the light of God's word. This may be painful at times, but it is good, yes necessary.

Conclusion

Paul wants you and I to be people of God, complete people, fully equipped for living our lives for God. For this, God uses the right words, of scripture, of the apostolic teaching, and sometimes our words, speaking a word of wisdom to each other.

We desire to love God above all, and to love all other people as Jesus loved us. For helping us on this road, we need many hands on our shoulders, many people to help us understand and apply the word of God.

This is painful, but the pain is worth it – as it makes us stronger in our faith, it connects us better with our Lord, it strengthens our faith – our anchor into eternity. And it makes us love God and each other more. So let's go for it.

Amen.