



The Round Church at St Andrew the Great Cambridge

A Sermon Preached
on Sunday 15th February 2004
by Mark Ashton

10p

2 Timothy 2:20-26

The Lord's Servant

Introduction: The context of 2 Timothy 2

It is a depressing fact that there has been so much disagreement down the years over the Christian faith. If the gospel is true, why do people disagree so much about it? Why are there always squabbles going on between supposedly Christian groups? For example, this very month the rifts within the Church of England are threatening to get even wider over the blessing of same-sex unions in Church.

But we need to remember that this is not new. Right from the outset, there was a fierce battle over what Christians should believe. The New Testament letters, interestingly, have little to say about Roman persecution (even though we know that began very early in the life of the Church). But they have a great deal to say about false teaching. It seems that the devil could not stop God sending His Son Jesus Christ to die for the sins of the world; but ever since the devil has done his best to confuse the message about that rescue operation. There have always been those inside the outward and visible Church who work to undermine and to contradict its basic message – that Jesus died for our sins and rose again for our salvation. We've got to learn to live with it. It's no good our tut-tutting to ourselves at the latest revelation about an unbelieving bishop, or whatever. 'Twas ever thus! And it's not going to end. In fact, nothing could be more boringly predictable . . . if we are to believe the New Testament.

Even in the 1st Century, Paul knew he had to protect the truth of the gospel against false teaching. But how could he do it? He was a prisoner in Rome and he had heard that the Church at Ephesus was being invaded by false teaching. What can he do? Write? He has already written. Visit? He has already visited, and anyway now he is in chains, facing death. The time for visits is over. What can he do? Well, his strategy is not a plan, but a man: the man Timothy. See his first letter to Timothy chapter 1, verses 3 and 4: *'As I urged you when I went into Macedonia, stay there in Ephesus so that you may command certain men not to teach false doctrines any longer nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies. These promote controversies rather than God's work – which is by faith.'* And how was Timothy to do it? *'Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching'* (1 Tim. 4:13). That was Paul's strategy – and, if you think it sounds feeble (and let's face it, it does, doesn't it?), look around you now. I reckon there must have been about 70 generations of Timothys for you and I to be here together in St Andrew the Great at this moment.

So that is the context of our passage – a Church confused with false teaching, and a man charged to be faithful in correcting error. So he is first to stand up for Christ.

1. Stand up for Christ . . .

Back in verse 8 (of 2 Timothy 2) Paul had told Timothy: *'Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel . . .'* and then at the beginning of verse 14: *'Keep reminding them of these things.'* Timothy was to stand up for the simple message about Jesus against a background

of theological dispute: *‘Warn them before God against quarrelling about words; it is of no value, and only ruins those who listen. . . .¹⁶Avoid godless chatter, because those who indulge in it will become more and more ungodly. ¹⁷Their teaching will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus,¹⁸ who have wandered away from the truth. They say that the resurrection has already taken place, and they destroy the faith of some’* (vv. 14b, 16-18). These two speculative theologians, Hymenaeus and Philetus, had speculated away from the truth. By treating the resurrection as a spiritual experience, they had disposed of it altogether, changing the confident Christian expectation about the future into a vague mystical experience in the present, and destroying people’s faith in the process.

And, of course, our age is no stranger to such speculative theology. Someone has re-written that incident from the gospels when Jesus asked His disciples, “Who do men say that I am?” and the disciples replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah, or one of the prophets” etc. The modern version goes ‘Jesus said to His disciples, “Who do men say that I am?” and they replied, “Some say the ontological proclamation of the eternal kerygma; others say the eschatological manifestation of the ground of our being.” And Jesus said to them, “Whaaaaat?”’

If we would faithfully pass on the only message that can save people from their sins and bring them into relationship with the living God, we are going to have to contradict an awful lot of nonsense. The father of lies has made sure of that. But we must stand for Christ, in a Christ-like way, and that is what the final verses of chapter 2 are concerned with.

2. . . . in a Christ-like way

(a) Ready for anything (vv. 20, 21)

‘In a large house there are articles not only of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay; some are for noble purposes and some for ignoble. ²¹If a man cleanses himself from the latter, he will be an instrument for noble purposes, made holy, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work.’ (vv. 20-21)

It is not quite clear to what ‘the latter’ in verse 21 refers. In the Greek it is actually ‘If a man cleanses himself from these things’, or ‘these men’ – so it may well be a reference to Hymenaeus and Philetus and their sort of false teaching. It is certainly the message we convey with our lives that is in view here. You pick a container according to what it is going to contain (trash or coq au vin). What do we want our lives to contain? What sort of message do we want them to convey? Unlike the container, we can choose. The Master is looking for those who will convey the gospel message faithfully, and that means being prepared to do any good work.

It is that little word ‘any’ that catches the eye. A person who is a gospel utensil, a gospel vessel, a gospel container, will be prepared for any, for every, good work. It is the difference between being what Alan Redpath used to call R.F.A. – ‘ready for anything’ – or just R.F.S – ‘ready for some things’. For some of us, we are very happy to do good works – when we choose to do them. We’ll serve Christ, and other people, but at the time that suits us and in the way that suits us. Do I serve God on my terms? – or on God’s (RFA)? Gospel ministry is never about what I want to do. It is about the service of others, laying down my life for them; it is not about safeguarding my own interests, or exhibiting my own gifts: *‘In a large house there are articles not only of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay; some are for noble purposes and some for ignoble. If a man cleanses himself from the latter, he will be an instrument for noble purposes, made holy, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work’* (RFA). And that means there are some things we must avoid.

(b) What to avoid (vv. 22 – 24)

‘Flee the evil desires of youth . . .’ (v. 22a). Not primarily (in this context) sexual lust, but all those ungodly characteristics that are typical of the immature: love of the limelight, self-promotion, brashness,

love of novelty, impatience, love of my own opinion and (particularly) being argumentative: *'Don't have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments, because you know they produce quarrels.* ²⁴*And the Lord's servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful'* (vv. 23, 24). This is not just argument over doctrine. The immature always find it hard to lose any argument graciously (I know, because I have been there far too often, to my shame!) or to concede a point with a smile, or to accept correction or criticism with cheerful gratitude; rather than disagreement or a grudging and sulky silence. How that applies to me!

But Paul's main focus is on doctrinal disagreement: *'And the Lord's servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful.* ²⁵*Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth . . .'* (vv. 24, 25). False teaching is not just false doctrine: it is also a false way of teaching – trying to score points and to win arguments. Look again at verse 14: *'Keep reminding them of these things. Warn them before God against quarrelling about words; it is of no value, and only ruins those who listen.'* How often in ministry I have won the argument and lost the man! That is not the way God's work is done. And God's work is not God's work when it is not done in God's way. I cannot do God's work in my own way. The gospel dictates the manner in which it is to be communicated. So there are certain things we must pursue:

(c) What to seek (vv. 22-26)

' . . . pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, along with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart' (v. 22b). *'And the Lord's servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful.* ²⁵*Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth,* ²⁶*and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will'* (vv. 24–26). Righteousness, faith, love, peace, a pure heart, kind to everyone, able to teach – which in this context must be to do with relationships rather than intellectual ability. The gospel message shapes the gospel method. It is driven along by love. Notice how the passage ends: *'Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth,* ²⁶*and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will'* (vv. 25–26). The purpose of good teaching is redemptive: we are trying to get our opponents to heaven. We are not trying to trounce them, but to save them. And if that is our attitude, it will control the manner in which we stand up for Christ. We will do it in a Christ-like way.

Stand up for Christ, Paul says to Timothy, in a Christ-like way.

Conclusion: What do we want from those who teach?

This passage, indeed the whole letter, is mainly about Timothy as a pastor-teacher – and not all of us here would see ourselves in that role, although all who are Christian believers are instruments/articles/containers of some sort for conveying the gospel (as per verses 20 & 21). But we are also all involved in the teaching process, because Christian preaching is never a purely one-way transaction. Faithful teaching is drawn out of the pastor-teacher by faithful listeners.

Humanly speaking, it is impossible to persevere indefinitely in teaching faithfully those who do not want to be taught. In fact, congregations get the preachers they deserve. I had a wise friend, long since gone to glory, who used to have a very specific criterion by which he judged the quality of a church: it was the rustle of the Bible pages when the preacher announced his text. Did the people turn to examine the word of God for themselves? If a congregation does that, its minister will teach them faithfully. Will you keep an eye on us here at St Andrew the Great? It is a two-way process. It is why we try to plant a faithful Bible teacher (Christopher Ash, Steve Midgley) with people who want to be taught the Bible, knowing

that both are necessary for faithful ministry.

When the time comes for you to move from here to another place, will you look for such a man? A man who trembles at the word of God and who will try to feed your soul faithfully from it? There will be plenty of people who will look after your body and your mind (doctors, dentists, psychiatrists, school-teachers and colleges) but there are very few in life who will care for your soul.

What sort of preachers do we want? Do we want entertainment, jokes, stories, enthusiasm and vigour? Do you know what Abraham Lincoln used to say about preachers? “When I see a man preach, I like to see him act as though he is fighting bees.” Well, we get what we want. It may explain why Lincoln also said, “If all the bored people in all the pews of all the churches of America were laid out end to end across the country . . . they’d be a lot more comfortable”!

Let’s remember where we began: there has always been theological disagreement. It is not going to come to an end in the 21st Century, unless Jesus returns. Until then we have to live with it, and that means exercising discernment – to spot the godless chatter and the foolish and stupid arguments; and to learn from and encourage the approved workman who correctly handles the word of truth and gently instructs those who oppose him in the hope that ‘. . . ***God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth,***²⁶***and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will***’ (vv. 25b–26).

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)