



The Round Church at St Andrew the Great Cambridge

A Sermon Preached
on Sunday 7th March 2004
by Mark Ashton

10p

2 Timothy 4:1-8

A Solemn Charge

Introduction: Famous Last Words

The New Testament letter that we have been looking at for the last few weeks, 2 Timothy, was almost certainly Paul's last letter. We saw last week how Paul used it to warn Timothy that it would be hard to persevere in the Christian faith – because so many people would oppose it, or try to undermine it. But Timothy was to remember Paul himself, and to remember the other Christians who had helped him (Timothy) to believe in the first place; and especially he was to trust the Bible. So chapter 3 ended with those verses: *'...how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. ¹⁶All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, ¹⁷so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work'* (3:15-17).

This week the letter reaches its climax: in verse 2 of chapter 4 with those three words: 'Preach the Word'. The way to trust the Bible, according to Paul, is to preach the Bible.

This passage is rightly seen, I think, as Paul's last will and testament to the Church: his last words, as it were, to you and me, in the Church today.

We have a strange fascination with 'Famous last words', don't we? You probably have your own favourite; mine has always been what Oscar Wilde is reputed to have said (the sort of thing you can't really believe!) as he lay dying in a cheap hotel room in Paris in 1900: "That wallpaper is killing me. One of us will have to go."

But this final message of Paul the Apostle has far more significance for us today than mere nostalgia. That is clear from the very solemn tone with which he introduces it in verse 1 of chapter 4: *'In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: ...'*

1. The Appearing Judge (verses 1, 8)

That's not a very memorable title perhaps, but notice that's the theme which provides the framework for all of our passage (which is from verse 1 to verse 8) because look how it ends – Paul writes in verse 8: *'Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day – and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.'* The appearing of the righteous Judge: *'In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom...'* (4:1). You and I live our lives in the presence of God, whether we are believers or not. The universe in which we live is a creation, the work of an all-seeing, all-knowing, all-powerful Creator God. And because it (and we) are His creation, it is a

morally accountable universe, where good and evil are distinct from one another – and where they matter. Despite appearances, it is not actually in moral free-fall. Its Creator has appointed a day when it will come under judgement. His Son will reappear on this earth to judge both the living and the dead, and to set up His kingdom, His rule over the life of men on this planet: ***‘In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge ...’*** (v. 1).

And that is why Timothy (and Christian believers in every age since the 1st Century, in which these words were written) are to preach the word; because the only thing that can save us from that universal judgement is the gospel message: that I deserve God’s judgement for my sins, but that Jesus, His Son, died in my place on the cross so that I may be forgiven. According to chapter 3 verse 15, it is ***‘the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.’*** That’s what salvation is: salvation is escaping from judgement. It’s not being condemned by God, as we deserve to be condemned – to be separated from Him for ever in hell – it is to be saved from that judgement. And that salvation, says Paul, comes through the word of God: it comes through the Scriptures. So they must be proclaimed, in order that people may be saved when Christ comes to judge.

I wonder if you’ve ever been caught hovering when the guests arrive. I once had that embarrassment: I was hovering very busily and looked up to see them looking at me through the window. They had been ringing the front door bell, but I couldn’t hear because I had the Hoover going. In a sense you are doing the right thing at that moment, but you wish you’d got round to it earlier. When the doorbell goes it’s too late. The doorbell is going to ring and Jesus is going to be here, and at that moment every person who has ever lived will be in desperate need of having heard the gospel: because it alone can save from judgement (which is what He will bring with Him at His return). And that is why Paul wrote: ***‘In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: Preach the Word...’*** (4:1, 2a). Let’s now consider The Patient Preacher (these are not great titles, but they are the best I could come up with).

2. The Patient Preacher (vv. 2-5)

(a) God’s Priority for His Church – preaching the Word

‘Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage – with great patience and careful instruction’ (v. 2).

Here is God’s Priority for His Church. Not celebrating the sacraments (Baptism and Holy Communion), not working to improve the social and political conditions of this world (although that is an excellent task and one which will always result from true Christian ministry); not even Church growth (increasing the numbers of those who call themselves Christians). No, Timothy was to preach the word: ***‘...be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage – with great patience and careful instruction.’*** Notice that the language of that verse echoes the language of verse 16 in the previous chapter: ***‘All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness...’*** This is God’s way of doing God’s work. We do not have to invent a message to save the world; we have been given it, and the word will do the work. This is the mission of the Church. Inevitably, as a clergyman, I move in ‘churchy’ circles. And I have noticed that the word ‘mission’ has subtly changed its meaning in those circles today. It is now taken to mean ‘Church Growth’; and everyone is for it. Everyone is for mission: everyone would like to see the Church grow in numbers. But few will patiently preach God’s word – and that is our true mission: that is God’s way of growing His Church, because it is only His word that can save us from the judgement and bring us to life as God’s children.

But how subtle the devil is! How subtle of Satan to get us enthusiastic about mission (everywhere in

Church circles people are enthusiastic about mission) and yet so reluctant to do it in the only way God has told us it can be done! There are books on mission in all the Christian bookshops: how to get churches to grow. But there is only one way God has told us it will happen – and that is the way, I fear, we fight shy of: to preach God’s word. In every way we can we must tell people about Jesus and what He has done for us. No wonder Paul wrote: *‘Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season...’* Bishop Maurice Wood used to say, “The rest of your time is your own.” *‘...be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage – with great patience and careful instruction.’* It doesn’t sound very exciting, does it? And I have to say I don’t think it is: it’s a difficult and a delicate task: delicate because two fragile conditions need to be fulfilled if it is to happen. And one of those conditions concerns my second little sub-heading.

(b) The Listeners – but will they listen?

‘For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. ⁴They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths’ (vv. 3, 4). When people turn away from God, it has been said that they do not usually end up believing in nothing, but believing in anything. Often what is substituted for Christianity is far less credible than Christianity.

But here Paul has in mind the false teachers with whom Timothy has been battling in Ephesus; or rather those who listen to and support such teachers. Paul does not describe their teaching, except to say that it is an alternative to the truth, and that it is popular. Have you ever had the task of getting a rabbit or a guinea pig back into its hutch in the garden? Or a chicken? We spent many frustrating hours last August trying to get a white Bantam (a kind of chicken) back into its hutch in the run in the garden of a house we were borrowing from friends in Devon. It was in the dark: we couldn’t find any torches. So we were going around this garden that we didn’t know (it was full of bushes and a shrubbery and a pond) with matches – peering under bushes trying to find a white Bantam that seemed to have turned itself black in the meantime and had completely vanished. We knew where we wanted it to go. It knew where we wanted it to go. But would it go there? Its Bantam nature was determined to roam the great outdoors, and I can’t say I blame it. It did not understand about foxes. But the way human beings will do anything to avoid God’s word to them reminds me very much of that Bantam (or any guinea pig or rabbit that you’ve ever chased around the garden in the same way) – seeking any alternative to the one place of safety. And we are to blame for preferring to hear only what we choose to hear, rather than what God has provided to save us: the safety of His Son.

You see, these people here described to us in verses 3 and 4 have decided in advance what they are prepared to listen to and what they are not prepared to listen to. They want to be comforted, to be entertained, to be intrigued, to be affirmed, to be reassured; and every day on the radio and on the television we hear the teachers of their choice. Did you notice that ‘great number of teachers’ there in verse 3? As if the sheer number will make what they are saying right. (And how often the evangelical theologian feels that sheer weight of liberal numbers telling him/her that he/she must be wrong). These are teachers who are concerned, notice, for what is marketable, what is popular, what’s in fashion, what the radio producers would love you to hear, what people will listen to; but not for truth. I wonder if you and I do need to beware of ears that have pre-selected, for our comfort and delectation, what it is we are prepared to hear from God – rather than the raw, living, dynamic voice of the real Creator God speaking into our hearts. Will we listen? That’s one fragile, fragile condition.

(c) The Evangelist – sober, enduring, thorough commitment

The evangelist, the faithful preacher – but will he preach? *‘But you* [it’s the same expression as in 3:14 – ‘But as for you’], *keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry’* (v. 5). Now this is why the Church’s situation is always so fragile: for the Church to be healthy both conditions must be fulfilled – people who are prepared to listen to God, and preachers who are prepared to preach God’s word. And once again, I think you’ll agree, the

preacher's task does not sound exciting. That phrase 'keep your head in all situations' is to be 'feet on the ground', don't go running after novelties and myths of the previous verse – which would be speculative re-interpretations of the Scriptures. ***'Keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry'*** – all four imperatives in that verse make the same point: they are telling Timothy to persevere. Stick at it, Timothy. It's going to be hard just to go on proclaiming God's word week after week, faithfully, trusting it to convert people and to build the Church. I think the faithful preacher has to be a bit of a plodder. Some of you will soon be on your way home, and there may be a faithful preacher there whom you can encourage. Here, those 'Grill the Preacher' sessions are great opportunities for encouragement. Showing no interest in the preaching always discourages. Faithful listeners, faithful preachers: it's a fragile thing in the Church.

And it isn't just the preacher: the faithful youth group leader, the Sunday School leader, the CU rep, the Bible study group leader, the home group leader. There are many, many different ministers, all of whom seek to build God's kingdom here on earth. Maybe you're not in any sort of a role like that, but still you may be saying, "Yes, I want to build God's kingdom. I want to speak to other people about Jesus. I want to tell them it's the one thing that will save them from that judgement when it comes." We all need the dogged perseverance of faith because we are seeking a kingdom that cannot be seen. We've set our hearts on something invisible: that there is a God, and it is a morally accountable universe; that there will be a judgement, and those who set their hearts on evil will spend eternity in hell. We are to trust that God is telling the truth when he says His word will do that work. And that's the point of those final verses which I'm calling 'The Departing Apostle.'

3. The Departing Apostle (vv. 6-8)

'For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure. ⁷I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. ⁸Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day – and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.' (vv. 6-8)

It sounds boastful until we remember Paul's actual situation at this point. We are going to study the final verses of this letter next week, and we will find that they are going to tell us that Paul is lonely (he's missing his friends), he's cold (missing his cloak) and bored (he's missing his scrolls) – a poor old man in prison, shivering and lonely and frustrated. Did that look like success? Did that look like triumph, like victory? It looked like the very opposite; and the thought would naturally cause Timothy to despair. But, No, says Paul, do not be deceived by appearances: ***'I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.'*** The fact that I'm old and lonely and cold and dying in prison does not mean that God's work is not going forward. It's not a boast: it's faith's contradiction of how things appear. That pouring out of a drink offering (the expression used at the beginning of verse 6) was the libation, it was the pouring out of an expensive offering of wine as a sacrifice. It wasn't seen as an extravagant waste; so nor should Paul's imprisonment be seen in that way.

We might think, "How can God be doing His work while His apostle Paul was locked up in prison?" But God was doing it. That is Paul's whole point to us. Indeed, this final imprisonment of Paul in Rome wasn't a defeat or a setback for God at all. It was actually God's seal on the fact that it was His work, all the time; not Paul's, not the enthusiasm of those early Christian preachers who we always think were so much better than us. The New Testament does not encourage us to think that at all. They weren't more effective than we are, because it wasn't their effectiveness at all: it was God's work, it was what He was doing. And Paul's part in it was now over.

There used to be a Boy Scout practice of Bob-a-Job Week. I don't know what's happened to it in recent years. A boy scout would come to your door and ring the doorbell and offer to do a job for a bob, a

shilling in old currency (maybe it was decimalisation that killed it off: 5p-a-Job doesn't quite have that sort of ring about it, does it?). And when the job was done you were given a little sticker to put by your front door or in the front window, which simply said, 'Job Done'. This was so that you didn't get harassed by a further eager scout (I suppose it was a bit like a rather more positive and altruistic version of Trick or Treating). The sticker didn't actually say 'Job Well Done', it just said, 'Job Done'. And there was a big tick, I seem to remember, and it always had powerful glue (because you used to see them sticking on doors for months afterwards). It's a very silly illustration, and one that only some people will be able to relate to, but it's exactly what Paul is saying here: 'Job Done'. He's not saying, 'Job well done'. He's not saying, 'I have fought the fight well'. He is saying, 'I have fought the good fight. I've committed myself to God's purposes here on earth. And my part is over. The story goes on, because it was never my story in the first place. It was always God's.' But Paul's part is over. And now it's ours.

'For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure. ⁷I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. ⁸Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day – and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing' (vv. 6-8). So Paul isn't celebrating his achievements in those verses. He is celebrating the certainty of the fulfilment of God's promise to him. What God rewards is not success, but faithfulness. And Paul's intention here is not to boast, but to encourage.

Look at the last verse, as we finish: ***'Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day*** [and unless we might think it's a reward for how meritoriously he has performed, he immediately adds:] – ***and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing'*** (v. 8). You see, it was to encourage Timothy, and to encourage you and me to long for that appearing. We are only here for a time. Soon we will go to Jesus, or He will come to us. And we are bound to ask ourselves, Do we long for that moment? Do you long for His appearing? Do I long for it because I've done what I was put here on earth to do? Or will we die in the only way our culture knows of dying: raging against the dying of the light, because death for our culture, as we know, is the ultimate obscenity?

Well, let's put it in a nutshell – Paul's charge to the Church, to you and me: If you want to be ready for death, speak as much as you can about Jesus.

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