

Sunday 25th July 2021

2 Timothy 2:14-26 (Present yourself)

Talk by Russell Jones, Prayers by Julian Providence

Welcome to our morning service. Today we'll continue our reading of Paul's second letter to Timothy and hear his advice to his young friend who was going to lead a church. We'll hear what God expects of us and how we can be honoured as workmen good and true by our heavenly master. There are many things in our lives that can keep us from God and drive us in a different direction but, as Paul wrote in today's passage, 'God's solid foundation stands firm'.

Today Julian will lead us in our intercessions.

Prayers

Let us pray...

Faithful Lord we bring our prayers to you this morning knowing that you hear us and are concerned about all that we bring to you in prayer. Let us pray knowing that our requests presented to God in the power of his Spirit can change the world around us.

We pray over our nation in the week we have come out of the final coronavirus restrictions. Please Holy Spirit we ask for you keep watch over our nation. Even as infections are set to rise sharply, we ask that you give supernatural wisdom to our government. Help ministers and scientists think and plan in the coming months in ways that best protect our society and economy, especially those whose jobs are most vulnerable to loss of trade and self isolating. Please also watch over the NHS and social care, schools and teachers, young people and the most vulnerable our society. Please raise up in government people who are compassionate and willing to think through the complex issues we face as a society. We ask for you to empower our government to make decisions in the best interests of us all and we pray against selfish ambition and pride.

Lord we remember places around the world facing famine, mostly because of conflict but also because of climate change and COVID.

We think of the Tigray region of Ethiopia where nearly 2 million are facing starvation because of conflict. We also remember Yemen, Syria, Afghanistan, and South Sudan among so many others.

We pray in your mercy Lord you would come to the aid those countries. Please let the wealthy and free nations not forget the needs and suffering of people beyond their own borders and move them with compassion we pray to help. We pray also for many held in refugee camps around the world. Thank you in your word your that you promise to watch over the foreigner and sustain the fatherless and the widow (Psalm 146:9).

We think of the many changes across this planet because of climate change. We pray for those grieving the death of loved ones following extreme heat and fires in the Western US

and Canada and flooding Germany and other countries in Western Europe. Please bring comfort to the grieving and help people rebuild their lives. We remember especially the poorer nations where millions will be affected by food shortages, drought and disease in coming years. You are just and you care about this world Lord. Please lead nations to take steps now to limit the effects of climate change especially those who have polluted the world the most.

We know you promised this world is passing away but as your church we also know you created this beautiful world that reflects your glory. Let us as your church who also reflect your glory honour you by caring for this amazing world you gave us to look after. One day our home will be under a new Heaven and on a new Earth. Thank you Jesus that you opened the way for us to Eternal Life. Give us boldness Lord share with others this hope you have placed within us.

We pray now for St. John's.

We lift to you our preferred candidate, asking that you will watch over them and bring them safely to our new church. Even now be speaking to them, giving them vision and understanding of what you will do through our merged churches.

We pray your guidance to be over the process of appointing them that this will happen without hindrance. We pray the same for the process of merging St John's and Holy Trinity, that you would keep watch and direct this process in your perfect timing.

Bless Holy Trinity we pray, especially as Nick prepares to step down as leader. Please be with him and Cathryn as they move on to the new part in their lives that you have for them. Be with Holy Trinity as they adjust to life without Nick and to all the changes that are to come. Please bind them and strengthen them as a church through this time and be with us also.

We pray for the needs of our church.

We continue to pray for Will and Cath and Sam. Please Holy Spirit may your presence remain close to them. We pray for Val's mobility to continue to strengthen, for Andy, for Gemma and family and Lorraine K.

We pray Your blessings on Françoise and Mick as they draw closer to their wedding on 7th August. Bless their union Lord. We pray they will grow together with you as part of their relationship.

We pray also for Kemi's daughter Ola preparing to wed Seun, also in August. Lord would you please bless and watch over them and we pray that they will draw closer to you as they begin their new life together.

Keep your hand on all these wedding preparations we pray.

We ask you Lord to be with all our activities at St John's - with home groups and midweek groups, CAP and Foodbank, Amaze Penge, PCC and prayer meeting and our meetings together on Sundays.

Please may your Presence linger over each one of these. May each of us know that time spent seeking and serving you is time spent sitting with you Jesus. Father God may we come away renewed and refreshed with a sense of how passionately you love us, knowing we are your dear children, unified with you and with one another by your Spirit.

Let's pray to that same Father that our Lord Jesus revealed to us...

Our Father in heaven

Hallowed be your name

Your kingdom come

Your will be done earth as in heaven

Give us today our daily bread

Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us

Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil

For the Kingdom, the Power and the Glory are yours now and forever.

Amen.

Reading

Today's reading is from 2 Tim 2.14-26

¹⁴ Keep reminding God's people of these things. Warn them before God against quarrelling about words; it is of no value, and only ruins those who listen. ¹⁵ Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth. ¹⁶ Avoid godless chatter, because those who indulge in it will become more and more ungodly. ¹⁷ Their teaching will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, ¹⁸ who have departed from the truth. They say that the resurrection has already taken place, and they destroy the faith of some. ¹⁹ Nevertheless, God's solid foundation stands firm, sealed with this inscription: "The Lord knows those who are his," and, "Everyone who confesses the name of the Lord must turn away from wickedness."

²⁰ In a large house there are articles not only of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay; some are for special purposes and some for common use. ²¹ Those who cleanse themselves from the latter will be instruments for special purposes, made holy, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work.

²² Flee the evil desires of youth and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, along with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart. ²³ 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 be quarrelsome but must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. ²⁵ Opponents must be gently instructed, 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.

This is the Word of the Lord – **thanks be to God.**

Sermon

We don't often refer to the titles of our sermons. In fact, the person preaching is probably the only one aware that there is a title, but this one is called Present Yourself as Paul advises Timothy on how to present himself in the course of his ministry. Everyone presents a version of themselves to other people, changing according to the situation, but we also have to think about how we present ourselves to God. He knows our real selves, our hearts and motives, so there's no point in putting on a show for him. We might be tidy, efficient, and self-controlled at work, and fool everyone for years while we are different the rest of the time. But God knows. When we present ourselves to God as Paul describes here, then we will present ourselves to people in the right way too. When we're right with God, we're going to be right with others.

Today's passage begins in the middle of a larger topic, verse 14 saying 'Keep reminding them of these things'. They are 'the elect', the Christian believers in Timothy's church, and 'these things' are Paul's previous urging – to keep going, and to be faithful to God because God is faithful to you. He has to be, because if he doesn't, he is not being true to his nature as God, fully revealed in Christ Jesus. Though this passage is directed to a pastor, it has plenty to say to every single one of us. We're not to get wrapped up in disputes about the meaning of words that don't matter, scoring points that make us feel good personally while all we really achieve is to 'ruin those who listen' as Paul puts it. Instead of building a support base around some point of doctrine supported by carefully chosen Bible words, we are to do something much simpler and much less scholarly. It occurs three times in this letter and it begins verse 15: 'Do your best'. Do your best to present yourself to God as someone approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and correctly handles the word of truth'.

It is about being practical, being effective. The image of working with my hands makes me quail. When I started secondary school, my worst subject was woodwork. We spent half a term making a tiny letter rack, made of three pieces of wood glued together. When I showed mine to the teacher, or master as we called him then, he said 'Do you want to swap it for one that someone else didn't want?' I agreed it was best and took home a flimsy, wonky rack that was so bad a former pupil had been too embarrassed to take it home. But it was much better than mine. My mother burst out laughing when she saw the replacement but it's still in the kitchen 50 years later. Since then my skills, of course, have deteriorated. For me, DIY means Damage it Yourself. I'm better with words than with wood but the goal is the same really, whether talking about God in a sermon or a conversation, or making a wooden letter rack – to produce in a workmanlike honest way, something that is useful and sound.

'Do your best' in the original Greek emphasises the meanings 'Be diligent', 'be zealous', 'try hard', as suits a 'workman' with the word. In older translations it said 'Study to show yourself approved to God' but it's not about books and college. I'm a bookish person, and because of the concentration on the Bible here, this church attracts many others who gain much faith through Bible reading and study, but it's not what Paul meant. God's truth helps to shape and build people, and also to measure and repair us. What he wants us to do is to be diligent in the use of God's word so we won't be ashamed when our work is inspected.

Jesus is called 'the Word' by John - he embodies the truth of the Bible; he is our example; he is God's living presence in our lives. How do we 'handle' his teaching, his example, and his presence - will we be ashamed? Or will we be someone who 'correctly handles' the word? That phrase 'correctly handles' was used to mean 'plough a straight furrow', or 'sew a straight seam', or 'cut a straight board'. It's possible to apply God's word to our own life without being able to read, by applying what we hear and what we know to our own lives so that we can cut a straight board for ourselves, as we measure and shape our own lives.

There's a clear warning about what to avoid here as well, called 'godless chatter', which will become ever more ungodly, showing how such talk can attract others, but will spread like gangrene. That's a nasty image but obvious in what it says. It will rapidly increase and corrupt until a healthy faith has become rotten. It doesn't say exactly what the godless chatter is about, but we can have a good guess. 'Quarrelling about words', already mentioned, may well mean arguments over petty points of liturgy. The biggest and oldest division within the Christian church is that between the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Catholic denominations, and the key sticking point that drove them apart was one Latin word in a creed, the word *filioque* meaning and from the son. Does the Spirit proceed from the Father or from the Father and the Son? Is speculation about this a good reason to split the church? It was really about money and control, not about the word *filioque* - that was the excuse - but it is still the excuse for the division. You see, godless chatter can be about apparently godly things such as the petty details of church life, about religious duties and nitpicking over churchy things.

The gangrenous false teaching of Paul's time that was spreading was a serious lie that is still heard in some sections of the English church nowadays - that Jesus' resurrection was spiritual not physical, or to put it in honest terms, it never happened. There was, and is, a piece of false teaching that says salvation, our coming to faith, is our spiritual resurrection and that's it. One of the local Anglican vicars a few years ago thought that. Denying physical resurrection is serious because Jesus' resurrection is a foundational belief - it shows the completion of salvation for God's people. Christianity is not a philosophical system - it's a response to an event, the death and resurrection of Jesus. It is good to share our responses to that first Easter Day, and to share our experiences of God's work in our lives, but it's bad to share spiritual ignorance.

Paul mentions some false teachers named Hymenaeus and Philetus, who were destroying faith with the lie I just mentioned, and they taught that special knowledge was needed to be a true Christian believer rather than faith in the resurrection. Special knowledge isn't necessary - that's the point of this whole passage. We don't need masses of head knowledge, or revelatory visions - we need to present ourselves as honest workers with God's word, straight and true. We have encouragement here in the simple statement 'God's solid foundation stands firm' and on this foundation, which is God's church, there are two inscriptions, and they are sealed. The first is from God to us: The Lord knows those who are his. 'Knows' is intimate - we are chosen, secure, and under his protection. This is sealed, like a scroll from Caesar with a Roman seal on it which no one would have broken open. It's a legal promise, guaranteed by God. The second inscription is from us to God, showing our duty: Everyone who confesses the name of the Lord must turn away from wrongdoing'. This leads in verses 20 and 21 to a sentence where those who turn away from wrongdoing are

compared with those who do not, using different kinds of household vessels to draw the contrast.

The best dinner service, gold plates and silver cups, are shown when guests come, and these represent the true speakers of God's word, God's crown jewels which will survive the test of fire, unlike the wooden vessels. This is how the comparison works. When we separate ourselves from ignoble purposes, we set ourselves apart from worldliness, and God makes us 'an instrument for noble purposes' and honours us as holy. To be holy is to be set apart for God, so think of the silver chalice used specially for communion, outside pandemic times anyway. We can become like that chalice – but far more valuable than a silver cup in God's eyes. Paul is thinking of the way Pharisees would thoroughly wash their hands after going to markets or other public places, cleansing themselves from any possible contamination by ceremonially unclean people or objects. I think we know all about that too after the last 16 months. In this verse it is the faithful, true use of God's word that cleanses us and sets us apart as ceremonially clean, fit for honourable service, just like the chalice that is so carefully washed clean, and it's made of silver because that is a metal on which germs find it difficult to survive. Faith, truth, and right living make us like silver, resistant to wrongdoing. If our chalice is dirty, we will have to be purged, wiped clean to be ready for service, and often that isn't a pleasant experience.

The final five verses are all about our behaviour, how we will appear when we do turn to 'noble purposes'. Timothy, the man who this letter was written to, was young for a pastor, probably in his thirties, and he is warned to 'flee the desires of youth' and run in the opposite direction chasing after right living, faith, love, and peace. Notice they won't just drop into our laps – we do have to actively chase them! There's no explanation of what 'the desires of youth' are, but Paul does mention again 'Don't have anything to do with foolish arguments', and I think that's a clue to what he means by 'the desires of youth'.

When we're young, we want to assert ourselves, be a big noise, make a role for ourselves, gain a place in the world, compete and win. Older people are likely to be more content with who they are, not feel a need to impose on others or compete. There is no need to compete, Paul tells Timothy, no need to quarrel. Instead, 'be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful'. There's an important idea in that verse. We are to be 'able to teach', not we 'have to teach'. We might meet people who enjoy stupid arguments, and who might be completely unwilling to listen, but all we are asked to do is to 'not quarrel' verse 24, 'be kind', 'not resentful', 'gently instruct', 'and speak 'in hope'. Don't worry about refuting error, proving you know better; teach positive truths that build people up if they listen.

A prayer to finish. Father, we thank you that you speak to us through Paul's letters, explaining so clearly what you want to see in our lives. Help us, and strengthen us as we dwell in your word, and as we respond to the atoning death and hope-filled resurrection of your son. May we be true and faithful workers with your word, kind and gentle, that you may honour our work when we present ourselves to you. Amen.

To conclude our service this morning, a final blessing

Almighty God,
by your command time runs its course;
forgive our impatience,
perfect our faith,
and, while we wait for the fulfilment of your promises,
grant us to have a good hope because of your word;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.