



THE WAY OF DISCIPLESHIP

Sunday 28 September 2021

SERMON TRANSCRIPT

Hello church, it's such a pleasure to be with you today, to have the privilege of finishing up this series on 2 Timothy, where over many months we've been exploring together what it means to be a disciple, what it looks like to trust in the Father's love, to be devoted to Jesus and to one other, and to have the Holy Spirit shape our lives over time, helping us to live in Jesus' way.

As Bruce mentioned in previous weeks, the book of 2 Timothy is very much a personal letter written in the last weeks of Paul's life from a Roman gaol cell to his friend and co-worker, Timothy. The picture we have of their relationship is immensely beautiful. There's a sense of mutuality and kindredness that surpasses things like age and ethnicity. "I have no one else like him," says Paul of Timothy, in Philippians 2:20. "Let no one despise your youth," encourages Paul in 1 Timothy 4:12; and in the opening of this second letter to Timothy, Paul addresses Timothy as his "beloved child."

In many respects, this letter has welled up out of Paul's desire to strengthen Timothy as a disciple and as a leader, and out of Paul's desire to strengthen the church too. When Timothy received this letter, it was likely that he was pastoring the church at Ephesus, having been left there by Paul to strengthen that community as it recovered from some false teaching that had arisen from within the congregation.

There is a lot of reminding, recalling and remembering going on in this book; but also a lot of yearning too, particularly in chapter 4, which is what we're exploring today. "Do your best to come to me quickly," says Paul to Timothy, in verse 9. "Do your best to get here before winter," he says, in verse 21.

There's such a haunting tone to this last chapter, as you might expect. There's no doubt that Timothy's separation from Paul was all for the purpose of a great good. And yet in this last chapter, we glimpse Paul's longing for Timothy to come to him in person, his ache at being separated from the person who has meant so much, at a time when being together feels like the most important thing.

And doesn't that hold such resonance for us now.

Chapter 4 in 2 Timothy opens with Paul's usual heart-on-his-sleeve flair. "In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus," he writes to Timothy, "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."

"I give you this charge," says Paul, which can also mean, "I give you this load... I give you this burden... I pass onto you this responsibility."

"Preach the word," says Paul. "Be prepared. Be persistent, in season and out."

In other words, tell the story:

- Tell the story of Jesus.
- Tell the story when things are fantastically good: when there is gathering, embracing, loving, building, mending, healing, laughing and dancing.
- Tell the story when things are wretched: when there is scattering, uprooting, tearing, hating, killing, weeping and mourning.

"Proclaim the word," says Paul. "In season and out."

Paul gives Timothy this solemn charge to preach the Word, in season and out, because he knows from experience that it's in the encountering of Jesus, in the abiding with Him, in the telling and the listening to the stories of Jesus' life, all the things Jesus said, as well as all things He did, that we have the best means of living out Jesus' truth, His life and way.

Paul was once a Pharisee of the Pharisees, which meant he held to the strictest following of the Law of the Jewish faith - but it was a radical encounter with the risen Jesus that shook him to the core, that caused him to rethink what he thought he knew and set him off on a path that he never imagined.

We find that encounter in chapter 9, in the book of Acts in the New Testament. It's here that we read about a Paul (who was then called Saul) - a young, bright-eyed religious leader, perhaps just like Timothy, only somehow a little less self-doubting, and a whole lot more pumped up on steroidal zeal. In chapter 7, we see Saul minding the coats of some of the religious leaders, as he watched on with approval as those leaders stoned Stephen to death. Now, Stephen, a follower of Jesus, was being martyred because he'd had the

temerity to question and challenge those leaders on the blasphemous story they were telling about God and themselves.

Saul went away though, from witnessing Stephen's death, utterly convinced those leaders were right on track. And the Scriptures say Saul began breathing out murderous threats of his own as he became fully committed to the rounding up of every 'deluded' follower of Jesus, riding high on the fat of his own zeal, convinced he was doing it all for God. But then of course, there came that terrifying moment. That moment where Saul was struck by a blaze of light so intense, it knocked him face down in the dust on the road to Damascus, and he heard a voice coming out from the radiance, calling him by name, saying, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" And when Saul gathered up the courage to ask who was addressing him, there came this reply, "I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting."

Now, there is something immensely comforting in Jesus' reply here for His followers: the reality that Jesus is so closely identified with those that suffer for Him, those followers united in Him by the breath of his Spirit, that He feels their agony as His very own. But we can only imagine the weight of dread that descended on Saul in that moment. We can only imagine the flicker of fear, as a panoply of faces spun through his mind: those followers of Jesus that Paul had actually harmed and those that had been harmed by his tacit approval. In that moment on the road to Damascus, did Saul feel a Damocles sword swing above his head? Did he feel a shiver run down his spine? Did he begin to wonder how he could have got it so wrong?

Not long after, Saul was told by the voice to get up and to go into the city and wait. By the time Saul had staggered to his feet, the Scriptures say that his eyes were opened, but that he couldn't see a single thing and he had to be led into the city of Damascus by the hand like a baby. And so, for three days straight, Saul was without sight, during which time he neither ate nor drank.

Meanwhile, in another part of the city, a man called Ananias was also having an uncomfortable conversation, in which Jesus was asking him in a vision to make a pastoral visit to a certain murder-breathing Christian hunter. Now, I'm sure you can appreciate Ananias's quite reasonable anxiety, why he might suggest that he didn't feel quite up for the job. But the Lord asked Ananias to go anyway because Saul has been chosen by Jesus to be the one who would bring Jesus' name and His story before the Gentiles and their kings and the people of Israel and that Jesus Himself would be the One to show Saul how much he was to suffer for Jesus' sake.

And so even though Ananias was probably shaky on his legs, he went to Straight Street where Saul was staying, and he entered the house. And the first thing Ananias did was to lay his hands on Saul and the first word he uttered was, "Brother."

Brother!?! It's astonishing, isn't it! And how did he know to say something like that?

"Brother Saul," said Ananias. "The Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me to you so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." And immediately something like scales fell from Saul's eyes and he got up and his sight was restored.

The writer Flannery O'Connor says that "there is a moment in every great story in which the presence of grace can be felt, as it waits to be accepted or rejected."

This was Saul's moment.

And in that instant, Saul recognised that it was Jesus Himself, the crucified risen Son of God who had come to him on the side of the road to Damascus; and that it was Jesus who was offering forgiveness and embrace, to a violent blaspheming persecutor, in a house on Straight Street. In that moment, the fierce tender mercy of Jesus, it bowled Saul like a skittle, and he was never the same again.

After that, for more than thirty years, Paul poured himself out in city after city, speaking to Gentiles, to their kings and to the people of Israel - to anyone that would listen - testifying that Jesus Christ was the King, the Messiah, the world's true Lord, a descendent of David, raised from the dead, sent by God to restore all humanity, to reconcile all things in heaven and earth.

And wherever he went, Paul suffered for the sake of Jesus' name.

It seems to me that Paul gave Timothy this important charge to preach the Word because Paul knew from experience that it's only as we encounter Jesus, only as we keep company with Him, only as we abide in His love, energised by His Spirit, that we can live out Jesus' life of love and faith and gentleness with any consistency, discerning what is both true and good.

"Proclaim the message," says Paul. "Convince, rebuke and encourage as you go," he urges Timothy. "But do so with the utmost patience."

Isn't that astonishing! Can we see it? That when we first met Paul, before he met Jesus, he was violently and impatiently carving his mark in the world. And yet after meeting Jesus and after a lifetime of following Him, in this passage we have a Paul who seems to understand that the means don't justify the ends. That violence of any kind, including impatience, is inadequate to the task. In advocating patience to Timothy, Paul is helping him to see that suffering-love is the most convincing means of persuasion - something Paul first learnt in that house on Straight Street.

Paul goes on, in chapter 4, in verse 5, to encourage Timothy to keep his head in all situations and to endure suffering. "Endure suffering," he says.

I think Paul means the common-to-all humankind suffering that has come about because of the fall; and the more particular suffering we experience from being a follower of Jesus. It feels hard to talk about this right now without becoming a little bit undone, because of the intensity of the suffering that so many people are experiencing, locally and across the world. There is much to lament about this season, and I know that Jesus can hear all our cries, because He is the One who has entered into our suffering in every way.

I feel grateful for Paul's reminder to Timothy to keep his head, because it's very easy to become unravelled by the experience of suffering of any kind. But I'm also grateful for fact that Paul acknowledges suffering as a fact of life, as a reality for a follower of Jesus; that he doesn't pretend that it doesn't exist, or that it's not incredibly painful. I am grateful for Paul's honesty in chapter 4, as he faces his own death and the desertion of his friends. For a start, he doesn't hide how he feels, he expresses his anger, his loneliness, his disappointment and despair. We get to see him wrestle in real time with a rollercoaster of feeling, even as he is surrendering all of that to God.

So how do we endure it? How do we endure suffering?

I want to share a story about my good friend Marg, who is ninety and has been blind for close to 50-years, after losing her sight unexpectedly at the peak of her flourishing career as a nurse educator. Unlike Paul, she never recovered her sight. But even though she has never seen my face, I always feel like she sees me through and through.

In all kinds of ways, Marg has been my Paul. I'd like to say that I have been her Timothy, but the reality is it's probably more truthful to say that she has been the Paul to my doubting Thomas.

I was drawn to Marg right from the start, more than twenty-five years ago, because she was so devoted to Jesus and so emotional, so fully alive, so contemplative and funny and wise and fierce - and fiery too, which I liked a lot, not knowing what to do with my own fieriness half the time. I've yet to meet anyone who is so easily and beautifully contrite, so willing to allow the Holy Spirit to have His say about her flaws and weaknesses and so quick to respond to the Spirit's nudges, even at the age of ninety. She has taught me so much about what it means to love Jesus, to hold onto faith, even when things don't go the way you'd hope.

Losing her vision was a huge blow to Marg and yet she didn't let it defeat her - although I'm sure at times she felt it would. She distinctly remembers hearing the English preacher John Stott speak on 2 Corinthians 4:16 when he came to visit Australia and his peculiar

high-pitched voice repeating over and over again in his sermon, "So we do not lose heart. So we do not lose heart," until that verse sunk in through the darkness, as if it was meant just for her.

In my mid-thirties, I was knocked down by an unexpected cancer scare. I had two young boys then, and so when I got the news that I would need to have some investigative surgery, I almost keeled over with terror. My older sister had died of that same disease only a year earlier. And suddenly my faith felt as weak as water. Even though I knew Jesus well and I loved Him, I could not shake the feeling that I was being stricken by God, or at the very least that I was being abandoned by Him. Beneath that surging fear was the deeper shame, the dark agony and embarrassment, that I even thought and felt this way.

In the midst of my anguish, it was Marg who came to my aid; Marg who had to wrestle with the very same doubts and uncertainties all those years ago, when she lost her sight, smack bang in the prime of her life. One night, she listened patiently as I poured out all my doubts and unsound theological thoughts about Jesus in the carpark before bible study - and then she hugged me tight and murmured in my hair, "Oh, darling!" Then a little while later she said so tenderly, "I don't think that's how He works."

And then she came with me to my first medical appointment - this snowy-haired blind lady, ostensibly to help me fill out my medical forms. But really to pray me through, to help me keep my head, to help me not lose heart, to strengthen my legs as I struggled through the wilderness, learning the difficult and significant lesson of how to walk by faith and not by sight.

A little while later, just after my third son was born, I experienced a significant trauma, where I was deeply wounded by someone in my extended family. I tried to keep the sorrow of that to myself for the longest time, until it hollowed me out from the inside and I became crushed by a sadness so real and deep that I could barely function. Eventually I listened to what felt like the nudge of Holy Spirit, and I went to Marg and her sister Nan to tell them the whole story. And afterwards, when I had finished talking and they closed their eyes to pray for me, I kept my eyes open. I don't know why. But that's how I came to see the tears falling down Marg's cheeks, those tears shed for me that were the beginning of my healing.

Marg lives on her own now, after the death of her older sister. But she is as alive and as vital, fierce and funny and as astute as ever. The kinds of conversations we have are a little different. Perhaps we speak a little bit more about the past, her family, the significant turning points, her longing for those that are gone, especially her sister. We speak a lot about God and Jesus and faith and church. I always wince when she talks to me about how she's finished her funeral service and how much she is looking forward to seeing Jesus, and how she sometimes wonders why she hasn't gone to be with Him yet. I don't like to say

that it's probably because I'm still praying for Jesus to keep her here...

The most astonishing thing is that, as we speak now, I sometimes see the tears in Marg's eyes and hear the snuffle in her nose and I get the clear sense that it's not just Marg helping me not to lose heart, but now after all these years, it's also me helping her.

Which brings me back to Paul...

Paul faced more trouble than I could ever dream up, even as a writer of fiction. In the second last section of chapter 4, Paul ends with some personal remarks, reciting a long list of people that have abandoned him. He discusses some other people who have actively done him harm and relates the experience of being deserted by every single person at his first defense trial. "May it not be held against them," he writes, striking an exclamation mark at the end of the sentence.

And where did Paul learn such a response? Hadn't he glimpsed it first in Stephen who, as he was being stoned to death, fell to his knees, crying, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." And where did Stephen learn that, except he heard it over and over, till it sunk in deep. The story of Jesus hanging naked on the cross, strung up between a thief on his right and a thief on his left, as he took on the sin and the sickness of the whole world, enduring total abandonment and desertion so that we might be embraced forever, as the soldiers cast lots for his clothes, while the leaders scoffed from the foot of the cross, even as he found the breath to say, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing."

What are we to make of love like that?

Paul shares one last detail in his letter to Timothy about his experience of being deserted at his first defense trial. "But the Lord stood by my side," he said, "and gave me strength." The same Lord who stood by Paul's side on that dusty road to Damascus. "The Lord will rescue me," says Paul to Timothy, "from every evil attack and bring me safely to His heavenly kingdom."

To that kingdom of love, where God will be with His people; in that place where there will no more death, no more mourning, no more pain; where every tear will be wiped away and all things shall be finally mended.

"So we do not lose heart," says Marg, my wise 90-year-old friend.

"But the Lord stood by my side," says Paul, "and gave me strength."

"In this world," says Jesus, "you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."