

A Sermon Preached at the Eucharist

Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost, Oct. 24, 2010

2 Timothy 4.6-8, 16-18

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‘At my first defence, no one came to my support, but all deserted me’, Paul complains to Timothy. Paul reveals a strong sense of betrayal throughout his epistles; and although he goes on to pray here ‘May it not be counted against them!’ we might wonder how sincere that prayer is.

In this same chapter of the *Second Letter to Timothy* Paul makes mention of others who have let him down: ‘Alexander the coppersmith did me a great deal of harm. The Lord will repay him for what he has done.’ And he pleads with Timothy: ‘Do your best to come to me soon, for Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica; Crescens has gone to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia.’

Paul’s commitment to the gospel, which is illustrated in the rest of this morning’s reading from the *Second Letter to Timothy* and Paul’s personal

experience of the life-giving power of the gospel means he can be deeply wounded when he sees the gospel betrayed and worked against.

The whole of the *Second Letter to Timothy* can almost read like a resignation speech ('I've fought the good fight, I've finished the race...' '...so I'm finished, I've had enough'). But that is not Paul's point at all. We might conclude that Paul is a man thwarted by not getting his own way in everything, responding to diversity in thinking and practice with anger and the desire to control. But Paul always steps back from this very human response. 'But the Lord stood by me and gave me strength...' Paul never loses that sense of the presence of the Lord and of the manner in which the Lord strengthens him. And he is aware that the Lord does this for a specific purpose: '...so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and the Gentiles might hear it'. Paul remains aware that he is called to be an evangelist to the Gentiles, regardless of the disappointments and betrayals he might experience. Paul was firm in his insistence that faith should not be surrendered to those who wanted to turn it into a competition for spiritual power and influence.

Understatements come in various forms. Take, for example, the former US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's observation that 'Death has a tendency to encourage a depressing view of war.' At Diocesan Synod yesterday these were described as difficult days for the Diocese of Newcastle, which is certainly an understatement. We are confronting

allegations which, if proven true, constitute wide-ranging betrayal of individuals and of the church. This is not just shocking and disappointing, it is corrosive: it attacks our trust in one another and the church, and it attacks our trust in God.

There is a certain sadness in this picture of Paul still grasping hopefully at opportunities to spread the word of goodness and grace among the Gentiles. Paul's hopes would appear to last only a short time: soon he would be martyred, under pressure the Christian community around Paul partially collapses. Yet in the midst of this, his strange peace floats alongside hurt and anger and disappointment. Paul's experience repeats itself. Perhaps it is just the kind of thing which Timothy and his colleagues are experiencing from the many who seem to be undermining their work. Perhaps it is what we as a diocese are experiencing now – hurt, anger and disappointment. What can we learn from Paul that will help us at this time?

A motif that unites our readings from *Joel* and the *Second Letter to Timothy* this morning is that of 'pouring out': in *Joel* God will 'pour out' the spirit upon all flesh; and in *Second Timothy* Paul speaks of himself as poured out as a libation.

The libation was the drink offering, an offering of wine poured over the sacrifice on the altar. The wine has two related effects, one theological

and one physical. The theological effect is a generous and joyous offering, an outpouring, to God. The physical effect is that the wine hits the flame and rather than dousing it produces a bigger flame, lots of smoke, and a spreading and intensifying of the aroma of the wine. There is something of resignation in the drink offering, but also something of joyous abandon.

So Paul is not telling Timothy that he is giving up. Rather, he is saying that he is giving over himself fully to God, even as he believes the time of his departure may be near. And in so doing, he is giving Timothy the encouragement to do likewise. Give it your all. Pour out your best. Offer it all to God with joyous abandon. Let the fragrance of the gospel spread everywhere.

Paul is not praising his own gifts, his own abilities or his own good works. What he is, however, absolutely sure about is God's work and God's will to always accomplish what God wants to accomplish, working always through human beings, through creation. Faith is not faith in one's own abilities or in the abilities of others, but faith is that which, planted within us, turns us, despite the upheavals and setbacks and failures of life, into faithful workers for his kingdom.

Paul begins by describing his life as an offering, more specifically a "drink offering." His blood is being poured out. The parallel to Christ is

evident. Paul's life has a different goal than that of perfection or success or a happy retirement. His life's goal is given already in Christ, in Christ's death and life, not as objective reality that exists outside of our lives but as Christ's death and life witnessed again and again in our life.

So although these verses are filled with disappointment and pain they are also filled with hope. Despite the description of a hopeless situation, Paul's vision is directed to what is often called an eschatological hope. An eschatological hope, however, is not a hope directed towards some future justification (even if Paul refers to his final vindication before the Throne). Eschatological hope is a present hope. It is hope in the present moment that forms, that transforms the 'now' in which we live.

Eschatological hope is the knowledge that Christ is present today. It sees the world with different eyes, with eyes that are not confined by the restrictions of self-interest.

As the Bishop reminded us yesterday we as a diocese have to show that we are responsible, open, transparent and professional in our dealing with these issues before us. These are the virtues you would expect of any well-run institution. But more than that I think we have to show ourselves as people who fully understand the central role betrayal plays in our faith, and how, against that pervasiveness of betrayal we also experience the centrality of love and grace and hope. Paul is a model for us here; but the crucial exemplar is Jesus himself, to whom be glory in the Church and in the world, now and forever. Amen