

**SERMON – 14/2/21**  
**'Empowering the Young'**

1 Timothy 4:12-16

“Do not neglect the spiritual gift that is in you, which was given to you when the prophets spoke and the elders laid their hands on you.”

(1 Timothy 4:14)

Since the turn of the year our focus has been on the six key areas of Growing Young which research has shown are characteristic of churches where the presence and the involvement of younger people is a blessing and where people of all ages are thriving as a result.

We have looked at fuelling a warm community, taking Jesus' message seriously, being better neighbours, prioritising families and empathising with one another across the generations. Finally this morning we take up the theme of empowering young people as we look at what is a very important thread throughout the whole Bible, that of passing on our faith not just to the young among us but to generations yet to come.

Our reading this morning was of words written by the apostle Paul to Timothy, a younger man whom he trained and mentored in ministry. I can't promise you a comfortable sermon today but I have a sense that there are important and strategic lessons for us all as a church in this passage as we draw to a close of this Growing Young series. Listen for a word from God.

We actually know quite a lot about Timothy from the Bible and from history. He was born in Lystra, a town in what is now southern Turkey. His mother was called Eunice and his grandmother, Lois, both Jews who had embraced the Christian faith at the time of Paul's first visit to their community. Timothy's father was a Greek and we are told that Timothy had not been circumcised according to Jewish custom but his mother and grandmother *had* taught him the Scriptures from an early age and although we are told that he was quite reserved and that he suffered from stomach problems the congregation in Lystra spoke well of him, and his gifts as a preacher having been recognised by those with the gift of prophecy the elders of the church there set him apart for the ministry of the Word. In 52AD he became a companion of Paul and Silas on the missionary journey that took them into Greece and for a time Timothy ministered in northern

Greece with Silas and in Corinth for a time with Paul and served for many years in Ephesus until he was martyred there in the year 97.

The apostle Paul describes Timothy as 'my true son in the faith' (1 Tim.1:2) and as well as receiving visits from him when he himself was in prison, he wrote two letters to him which we have in the New Testament and which give us some interesting insights into the pastoral oversight of the early church as well as a more personal expression of apostolic ministry than we see in the letters he penned to whole churches.

In the short verses we read this morning Paul gives six exhortations to his young friend which I think have something important to teach us all – young and old among us – in relation to our Growing Young project. And I would like to challenge both young and old among us to consider what changes God may be asking each of us to make personally in the way we interact with one another as members of the Body of Christ and in the way we exercise the gifts that each one of us has been given by God for the building up of that Body and for the advancement of God's Kingdom in the wider world.

I highlight as a text for this morning's sermon words from verse 14: Paul says to Timothy, "Do not neglect the spiritual gift that is in you, which was given to you when the prophets spoke and the elders laid their hands on you." It raises the issue of who does what and why in the church and I think it must actually challenge every single one of us to examine ourselves and to seek God's prompting and leading of us as individuals and as a fellowship at a time when we face major uncertainties not just in the church but in society as a whole.

I think sometimes we set ourselves up for a fall in the church because we allow ourselves to become polarised too easily. It becomes about young people and about old people when it should be about all of us. It becomes about men and women when it should be about all of us. It becomes about locals and incomers when it should be about all of us. It becomes about the spiritually-minded and the practically-minded when it should be about all of us. How much we read in the New Testament about spiritual gifts – and they range from preachers and healers and prophets to those who give and those who are kind, those who build and those who are involved in administration – and yet how bad we are at actually releasing those gifts in God's service. Some of us are hesitant to offer our gifts whether for fear of

rejection or for fear that we will have a job for life and others of us are reluctant to make room for others to serve alongside us whether for fear that we may find ourselves redundant or for fear that others might do things differently from the way we do them or (heaven forbid) better than we do.

Listen to what Paul says here to Timothy and let's listen for what God may be saying to us at this time.

First of all the apostle says to his young friend, “Do not let anyone look down on you because you are young but be an example for the believers in your speech, conduct, love, faith and purity.” (v.12) I was ordained to my first parish when I was 26 years old, younger than one of my babies is now. Of course I was wet behind the ears and I thought I had all the answers while of course I needed to gain experience. But I know that there was fruit from my early ministry just as I hope there will continue to be fruit in however many years there may remain to me. I was glad of older and wiser counsel both from fellow ministers and from the elders of my congregation but as I have grown older myself I recognise increasingly that older does not necessarily mean wiser in every situation. Early in my ministry I remember one of my elders, a woman in her sixties, telling me that she had made her mind up to step back from active eldership once she turned 70. Sadly, though, she had such a tight grip on so many things in the church that when that time came she found it impossible to let go, fearing that everything would fall to pieces without her. Unfortunately some things fell apart *because* of her – although she did not consciously look down on younger people (in their 40s and 50s) but that was in fact the unintended consequence of her actions. I don't want to fall into that trap.

As we seek renewal as a church at this time, those of us who are older are challenged to look upon those who are younger than us with an eye for the God-given potential that we are apt to overlook because (with maturity as much as in our youth) we tend to think we have all the answers. Those who are younger are called to rise to the challenge and to show the rest of us up through what you say and what you do as disciples of Christ. You see it is not we who have all the answers (whatever age we are) nor is it for us to determine how young is too young and how old is too old for particular avenues of service in the church. It is Christ's Church, it is Christ who calls us to serve and it is Christ who equips us. What is Christ saying to *me* today about what it is I should be doing and not doing?

Secondly Paul writes, “Give your time and effort to the public reading of the Scriptures, to preaching and teaching. Do not neglect the spiritual gift that was given to you when the prophets spoke and the elders laid their hands on you.” (v.13-14) Now Paul here is specifically addressing Timothy who was called to be a pastor and teacher and perhaps God is calling someone today to enter on that particular kind of ministry, but something similar must be said no matter what our particular gifts might be. Whatever age you are, step up to the mark and do not fail to fulfil God's call to you, and play your part in bringing on the gifts of others. Those of us who are ordained elders have a God-given responsibility to lay our hands on the next generation as they take up leadership and formal ministry in our place but those of us who are elders - simply in the sense of being older - need to be putting hands on shoulders so that the next generation can begin to take up every kind of role within the church and in mission to the wider community. Some in the congregation have a God-given discernment, in some cases a gift of prophecy, and we should together be seeking God's prompting as a church so that the right people may undertake the right tasks at the right time, setting people of all ages free not just to 'keep the show on the road' but to be the servant people of God in this place, the Body of Christ, for the common good. Perhaps God is prompting you today to give someone a prod, to tell them that you think the Lord might be wanting them to take up a particular role. Just as God did it through Paul and others with Timothy through the church in Lystra, so should it be here in Kinross.

And finally we read, “Practise these things and devote yourselves to them in order that your progress may be seen by all. Watch yourself and watch your teaching. Keep on doing these things because if you do you will save both yourself and those who hear you.” (v.15-16) This cannot just be a flash in the pan. God is working out eternal purposes day by day and as year succeeds year. We're all on a journey which requires commitment and openness from all ages. To the young among us and to the old among us and to everyone in between, I say this. Lift up your eyes, open your ears. Where can you see God at work? What is the Spirit saying to the Church? Then speak up – join the conversation and let's all be part of what Christ is planning not only for our time but for generations yet to come.