

SERMON – 17/7/22

Titus 2:11-15

“He gave himself for us, to rescue us from all wickedness and to make us a pure people who belong to him alone and are eager to do good.” (Titus 2:14)

Life is often described as being like a journey. As we look back over our own life history we sometimes puzzle, sometimes marvel over the twists and turns that the journey has taken us and as we look ahead we wonder where on earth the future may take us, usually taken by surprise when our carefully laid plans fail to materialise or when some unexpected opportunity or challenge comes across our path from nowhere. As Christians we often, rightly, take comfort and encouragement from the fact that God is with us moment by moment and from the reassurance that we are being led and accompanied along life's path, but I'd like to encourage you today to open your eyes to new dimensions of God's presence and think of your life as something more than a linear journey in space and time. Think about your place in the context of eternity.

We return this morning to Paul's little letter to Titus that we were looking at during June, continuing this year's focus on the theme of Christian discipleship that Brenda helpfully put flesh on the last two Sundays when I was on holiday with her spotlight on Peter and on Andrew. One of the big themes of the letter to Titus is the content of Christian teaching that is the foundation of our faith, that gives shape to the life of the church, that challenges the faithless and edifies the faithful.

In the short passage that we have read this morning from the end of chapter 2 there is a very simple message. It's the message that Paul gives to Titus – to 'encourage and rebuke with all authority.' It is the message that Titus is called to pass on to the Christians of Crete and that I am commissioned to pass on to the Christians of Kinross. In some ways it is an entirely unremarkable message, predictable even, just the kind of thing that anyone would expect to hear in a church. On the one hand the Christian preacher is to teach people to 'say No to ungodliness and worldly passions' and to rebuke them when they don't, and on the other hand to teach and encourage folk to 'live

self-controlled, upright and godly lives'. OK, that's what we have needed to be reminded of from our earliest days: don't be naughty, but rather be good. So, does that help this morning? Does that give you enough to be working on this coming week? Should we just wind up now and head home? Let me just wag my finger at you for good measure and send you off with the clearest of messages ringing in your ears: Do this, don't do that. Just keep to the straight and narrow.

But wait, that is the kind of simplistic, moralistic teaching that has masqueraded as Christianity for too long and while it's certainly a thread that runs through the whole of the Old and New Testaments, it is the kind of things that is equally to be found in the lifestyle teachings of all the major world religions and philosophies, not to mention today's state religion of secular humanism. Don't be nasty, be nice. Don't be greedy, be generous. Don't be violent, be kind.

Admirable though that is as far as it goes, it is not distinctively Christian and it certainly doesn't go anywhere near doing justice to the heights and depths of the Gospel which is much more about our inspiration and motivation to walk the right path than it is about specific do's and don'ts. And here is where Paul takes Titus somewhere very special in these few short verses.

The genius of the apostle Paul's preaching is that he doesn't simply wag his finger at people or tell them to stop doing what is wrong and start doing what is right. Any fool can do that and in any case the conscience does the same job for most people. No, Paul makes preaching something much, much more powerful by setting the question of a person's lifestyle in the context of eternity and I really hope I can help you grasp what he is teaching here because, if you can get your head round it, it will really revolutionise how you view the connection between something as apparently mundane as the words you choose to use in a particular moment or the course of action you take on a particular day and something as momentous as the working out of the eternal purposes of God.

I wonder if you noticed as the passage was read that the apostle makes reference to the past, the present and the future. Specifically he refers to the action of God in Christ in the past and

in the future and connects them to what goes on in the present, whether that is the present the Titus and the church in Crete were involved in or whether it is the present here and now in Kinross this 17th day of July 2022.

Paul says to Titus here in verse 11 that 'the grace of God has appeared' – he is referring to the coming into the world of Jesus and to the event that was Christ's birth, life, ministry, suffering, death and resurrection. Think of that as one pole of the axis on which the whole of human history turns, a point of supreme cosmic significance. The other pole of that axis is what Paul speaks about in verse 13 – 'the blessed day we hope for, when the glory of our great God and Saviour will appear.' And here he is referring to the Second Coming of Christ, the culmination and conclusion of all things worldly.

In the first appearing of Christ, redemption is accomplished, the price is paid for our sin and we who accept the invitation to follow Him are set free to live life in all its fulness – 'It is finished,' as Jesus cries victoriously from the Cross – but as we are all too well aware, redeemed and forgiven though we may know ourselves to be in Christ, we are still held earth-bound by our sinful human nature, constantly falling short as we travel life's journey but living by faith and living in hope for what one day will be made perfect when Christ appears again in glory.

At the moment we are in the in-between times, caught between the 'now' and the 'not yet' – that's what makes life such an uncertain business – but the good news that Paul holds out to us here is that we are not just bobbing about helplessly blown this way and that by every wind there is, we are connected to what Jesus *has* already accomplished for us in the past at Calvary, inspired and propelled (compelled even) by our redemption in Christ to live in Christ's way, and we are connected to what Jesus *will* accomplish for us at the Last Day, drawn on as if by an invisible thread by the promise that we will on that day be purified and perfected, and inspired (in the words of Brian Wren's hymn that we will sing in a moment) to 'live tomorrow's life today.'

That connectedness to the eternal purposes of God revolutionises how we see the here and now. Let me put it this way. 'Now' is a

sacred moment. *Every* moment is a sacred moment not only because it is graced by the presence of the living God – Immanuel, God-with-us mind-blowingly wonderful though that undoubtedly is – but yet more because it is inextricably linked to the coming of Christ in the past and in the future. In the words of our text this morning: “He gave himself for us, to rescue us from all wickedness and to make us a pure people who belong to him alone and are eager to do good.”

So for the Christian each moment, each word, each day, each step along life's journey is an outworking of the gift of new life imparted to us through Christ's death and resurrection because we have already been rescued from all wickedness, and each moment, each word, each day, each step along life's journey is an anticipation of life eternal, a foretaste of what it will one day be like to be a pure people who belong to Christ alone without all the disappointments and shortcomings of life here and now.

The challenge is to take that thought and those promises and let them impact on the here and now in your thoughts and in your words and in your actions. In your planning and in your day-dreaming let the fact that Christ came for you and will come again for you steer your course. In what you say and in the way that you say it let the Jesus who was born among us and lived and suffered and died and rose again for us, and let the Jesus who will one day return in majesty for us elevate your words to be worthy of Him. And then as you take today's and tomorrow's and the next day's steps along life's journey hear not the berating preacher with the wagging finger but hear the Word of God which holds up the eternal significance of who you are and what you do: “For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ.”

That's what will make us 'eager to do good' and that is what makes sense of the otherwise mystifying twists and turns of life's journey. You can rest secure on the sure foundation of Christ's victory and in faith you can rest equally secure as you wait for the blessed hope. Now, let's live.