

Sermon – Called to be Uncomfortable?
8-10-23 (David Charlesworth)

1 Timothy 4: 9-16

The sermon today is a continuation of our series where we share and discover the scriptures that have shaped the faith and ministry of those on the preaching team at St Paul's. Today it's my turn and we have just heard part of the letter from the Apostle Paul to a chap called Timothy. Out of all the chosen texts in the series this is the only one from the body of letters that make up a goodly part of the New Testament and the only one written by the Paul after whom this church is dedicated.

Right at the start it's a good idea for us to know who Timothy was and why Paul wrote to him, not once but twice as recorded in the Bible.

Paul we probably know best as the Apostle who toured the Mediterranean spreading the good news of Jesus to and beyond the Jewish communities and creating local congregations in the early church. In this he was assisted by a number of people, of whom Barnabas and Timothy are perhaps the best known.

We know quite a bit about Timothy: a convert, the son of a mixed Jewish/Greek marriage in Lystra (Turkey). He was not naturally brave and was often unwell. He needed a lot of encouragement, but loyally did many difficult tasks supporting the establishment of Christian communities as requested by Paul, often travelling with him, but also being assigned to support them after Paul moved on to the next city or into imprisonment. Paul was a mentor to Timothy and in his first letter he is writing to Timothy who was in Ephesus at the time, choosing and training new church leaders.

What is encouraging about this reading for us today is that it's all about the 'calling' of people to serve the Lord, people who may not already be equipped, or the obvious choice in terms of skills, knowledge or even attitudes. Called to be the hands and eyes of God here on earth now – as we heard in the song after the reading. Relevant because as a church, St Paul's is in a season when many of our members will be called to new or additional service and yet may feel unprepared or lacking in adequacy.

So it's worth looking at what it means to be 'called', how do we recognise it, how do we endorse and support it and where does the equipping power of the Holy Spirit fit in.

Well, a good place to start is actually our verse of the year selected for St Paul's: 'Just as our bodies have many parts and each part has a special function, so it is with Christ's body. We are many parts of one body, and we all belong to each other.' Romans 12: 4-5

How encouraging it is that we all have individual roles to play in being Christ's body at St Paul's. Every one of us is contributing, be it polishing brass, giving a kind word of encouragement, making tea, running a home group, cutting the grass, teaching the children, opening the church in the morning, being the vicar, washing the altar cloths. The list is as long as the number of people in the church. We all contribute, often in numerous

special ways – and we do it because we belong to each other. It is part of our distinctive community life of faith.

Entwined in that universality of service is the reality that some will be called directly by God to serve him and take responsibility in specific roles to ‘build up’ the church into attaining the whole measure of Christ’s fullness. Being called goes well wider than full time ministry as a vicar or missionary, as Paul notes in his letter to the Ephesian church.

‘So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Ephesian 4.11

The reading from 1 Timothy enlightens us as to how Timothy, despite his shortcomings, was called by God to one such service of building up churches, and how he should progress with that task.

I’ve loved this bit of 1 Timothy because I have had so much empathy with Paul’s comment ‘Don’t let anyone look down on you because you are young’. It’s at this point that I should unveil my customary prop for a sermon (pair of Jeans).

For me - this passage, together with the story of the Jeans is why I’ve long felt called to be a lay evangelist with a heart for the gospel, more outside the church than inside it. Not always a comfortable position.

But I can’t tell the story of the Jeans without putting it first into the context of the 1 Timothy reading. Paul reminds Timothy that he has the job of commanding and teaching faith in Jesus Christ by reading the scriptures, preaching as well as teaching. He should not lose confidence by being put down by others, but gain their respect by setting an example in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity. He is reminded that his calling and equipping for service was marked by a prophetic message and that it was recognised by the elders when they laid their hands on him as a means of equipping him with the Holy Spirit. And those final words about not being distracted – watch your life and doctrine closely... and persevere.

Everyone’s journey of faith is different, and we are all at various stages, but there will be people in this congregation this morning who are feeling a calling by God to a specific ministry to build the body of believers both in number and in maturity, be that in a big or small way. That feeling may be revealed or heightened as we take on additional tasks prior to the next vicar being appointed. Inevitably our first reactions are to query if it’s a calling and then ponder what the repercussions may be to our lives and to those around us. The reading from Timothy encourages us not to fall into the trap of doubting our adequacy - be it of age, education, brokenness or anything else. If it’s God’s calling, we will be equipped by the Holy Spirit to fulfil it.

So if you think you are feeling a specific calling from God, we can see from Timothy that certain things follow. Firstly, there is some sort of prophetic confirmation of what we are being called to. What form would prophetic confirmation take, often it’s repeated and unsolicited comment

from fellow Christians saying you would be 'good at' something specific, often backed by words from scripture striking home, or it might be in dreams or circumstances aligning to make things possible, probably a collection of all these and more, but always when covered in prayer.

One can expect the calling to be tested, affirmed and supported by leaders in the church. and certainly any calling will result in the laying on of hands or other ways of equipping with the Holy Spirit.

And then there's the doing and living it, often not the most comfortable in terms of the expectations and circumstances – and the need to set examples in living.

I mention these things because as I said the passage from Timothy is special to me alongside my Jeans. Every person's journey is different but for what it's worth, here's a bit of mine to illustrate the point.

I converted from strident atheism to Christianity in my mid/late twenties - in a process that culminated in a dream that left me with no doubts as to the person and purpose of Jesus Christ. In the next few years I grew to understand more of our faith, helped by a homegroup. But then moving to a new church, the new homegroup with established Christians with a great knowledge of theology and scripture left me feeling inadequate and shallow in my faith. Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young – never a truer word. But we moved on to Australia for my work and were probably sent by God for some new and different experiences of church. It was there that I had the strange experience of dreaming the same dream on three consecutive nights: that I went to a church where the elder outside the closed doors would not let me enter because I was wearing Jeans – not properly dressed. On each occasion my remonstrations ended with me saying I was leaving, but shaking the dust off my feet. As I realised later, this was a clear reference to the instruction of Jesus in Matthew's gospel when he sent out his disciples . Matthew 10 v14 'If anyone will not welcome you, or listen to your words, shake the dust off your feet when you leave that home or town. Any prophesy or working of the Holy Spirit must be consistent with scripture.

So that was the starting point of a calling that has left me always feeling uncomfortable and frankly a bit intense towards others when churches have doors closed, both physically and metaphysically. Distinct witness – Yes, but Holy Huddle – No. My role was/is always to look outwards and be out there. Meetings? That prophetic experience of the Jeans then became a commitment to training as a lay evangelist and my calling being affirmed and supported by diocese and parish. Enough of my experience.

But who here feels they may be being called by God – and to what? Is it big or small, is it to full-time ministry, to combating poverty and injustice, to protecting God's creation, to teaching, to evangelism in the work place or community, to healing, to pastoral care, to whatever the Lord is putting on your heart. Our reading today from Timothy is there to encourage all of us to recognise that we may be called, that we are not to feel inadequate, that prophetic signs will be there to confirm the calling, that a true calling will be affirmed by the Church, and you will be equipped by the Holy Spirit for the tasks involved. Uncomfortable the way may sometimes be, but there is no greater honour than doing the Lord's work, being his hands and eyes on earth.