

Sunday Evening Service 7th July 2013 - Kenneth Gray, 2Timothy 4 “Keep on preaching”

If Paul is the pattern for Timothy to follow in his ministry then this passage makes sad reading, looking ahead as it does to Paul's final days and recording what will be among his last words. For Kenneth Paul's message called to mind a minister who preached a sermon entitled “The Myth of Christian Success” at the end of his 37 years ministry. In the course of his ministry he had preached faithfully on every book of the Bible and had been a diligent preacher and pastor yet his ministry had not been successful and Presbytery were even considering closing his church because of the decline in numbers.

If the ‘success’ of Paul's ministry were to be measured in relation to how many of his followers had stood by him when he was in trouble then his ministry too would be considered ‘unsuccessful’. How well Paul knew human nature and how accurately he assessed the weaknesses of the early church! He knew many people had ‘itchy ears’ wishing only to hear they were doing OK but not wishing to be challenged or expected to change their ways. People are the same today. The orthodox position of the church has always been unpopular and it has always been the minority position. The church today needs to be shaken up by God, shaken out of its complacency.

Few people will come out of a church service eager to discuss the message preached with everyone they meet. We have all been discussing Andy Murray's winning at Wimbledon and we have enjoyed sharing the experience with others. But discussing a tennis match will not transform people's lives. As for the Gospel, its message isn't entertaining or amusing but it's life-changing and offers salvation.

Careful Instruction

Kenneth recalled comments expressed a decade ago by Tim Keller where he criticised the church in Scotland saying that ministers were preaching but it was not working, yet their response was to keep on preaching. Having been to America and having read Keller's books Kenneth judged this criticism to be unbiblical. In this passage Paul tells Timothy to keep on preaching. In verse 2 Paul urges *“Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction.”*

We are familiar with seasons. There are seasons for certain sports, certain foods and plants for example, but here Paul is reminding Timothy that the Gospel message is always ‘in season’ regardless of people's readiness or otherwise to receive it. Human popularity is transitory. Paul is saying that things are bad with him and he is about to hand over the baton to Timothy.

Kenneth remembered reading about Billy Graham's daughter having been walking with a friend on a bitterly cold day when they observed a lamb being born in very inclement conditions. Her friend commented that it was not a good time to be born but she replied that there was no other time for that lamb. We might sometimes wish we had been born in another age - perhaps during times of great revival in Scotland. But this is our time - God has placed us here and now to serve Him.

Kenneth did feel, however, that Tim Keller had been justified in saying that preachers were too often unbalanced in how they meted out rebukes and encouragements. When we are full of self pride the Word rebukes and corrects; when we are downhearted the Word uplifts and encourages.

Timothy is advised that ‘careful instruction’ is required. It's not enough to tell people once - they forget too soon - so repeat the life-giving message frequently. Nor is it enough to set people on the right path and expect them to develop on their own, unsupported. Further instruction throughout the journey of faith will be needed. It is a bit like giving people directions to a destination. They may have to keep checking they're on the right road after navigating a couple of sets of roundabouts.

Kenneth observed that another problem in the church is that when people make mistakes and fail we lack the patience to build them up again and we miss the potential to make them even stronger than before.

Myths v Truth

Many people claim to have no time for the church because they say it's all myths and legends. They regard

themselves as 'too sophisticated' for religious faith. Yet many such people place their faith in crystals or horoscopes or other 'sophisticated' magic. The faith vacuum is quickly filled by myths and idols and the exponents of such wrong-thinking are plentiful. Many people, both inside and outside the church, claim that the Bible is unclear, complicated and contradictory. The challenge for us is to remain faithful. If we, the remnant, abandon the faith the Word will be lost to the world.

In it for the long haul.

We must recognise that our life of faith is not a sprint it is more like a marathon or an arduous cross-country circuit. We must not give up at the first hurdle. It is impossible to be a Christian and have a life free of all hardships. We must all develop endurance.

Kenneth meets many ministers who feel discouraged but he suspects their discouragement derives from an innate distaste for hard work. Ministry is very hard work but many who enter it fail to appreciate this and feel crushed by its demands. It is hard for everyone to say a word for the Lord and ministry can be very difficult at times. Even Paul, who truly knew the hand of the Lord in his life, could say in verse 6 *"I am already being poured out like a drink offering"*.

These words can strike our ear as sad as they reveal something of Paul's suffering but they are also inspiring because he clearly still feels privileged to have served the Lord faithfully and without stinting. He continues to look forward in trust *"Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day"*. Furthermore, he holds out the prospect of those same rewards to Timothy and to all of us who remain faithful- *"—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing"*. So Paul's concluding message to Timothy is *"I have kept the faith - now, you go and do likewise"*.

Kenneth remembered watching a very moving TV documentary which examined the rigorous and relentless training régime undertaken by the athlete David Jenkins for several years leading up to the 1976 Olympics. It transpired that Jenkins' training was to no avail as he finished 7th in the 400m race. Jenkins had endured a great deal but there was no medal at the end of it.

We should be willing to endure so much more because we, like Paul, know a Crown of Righteousness has been promised as our reward.