

Sermon Archive 263

Sunday 29 September, 2019

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lessons: 1 Timothy 1: 1-7, 18-20
1 Timothy 6: 6-19

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



The first book-end is his birth. Blood and breathing, a crying out. Coming into the world with nothing in his hands - under a borrowed roof, because he's far from home. Laid in an animal trough, because there is no cradle. And the weird scene of visitors from the East, coming to the baby who has nothing - presenting him with gold and spices. He comes into the world with nothing, but the world starts giving. Take hold, little thing - Generosity is coming to you.

The other book-end is his death. He is laid in a tomb purchased by somebody else. He couldn't afford it. It's one last gift to the man who had nothing, as he leaves them with nothing in his hands. He came, he went, bearing nothing.

In between, of course, there was this remarkable life - a life that really was life. We read in chapter 8 of Luke's gospel, just in passing, that as he went about, doing what he did, women followed him around. Mary, called Magdalene, Joanna and Susanna, and many others who "provided for him out of their means". The women are providing for the man with nothing. I wonder if they snorted when he told the crowds not to worry about what to eat, drink or wear - since God clothes the lilies of the fields. All very well to preach that, my love, when we're providing for you! Another generation of women providing food while the men write poetry and philosophy pie in the sky? No; they follow him because they want to - it's one of the imponderables of the life that is really life - giving, sharing, enjoying, seeking within it the presence of the God who gives life to all things.

Yes, in between the book-ends, between “nothing coming” and “nothing going”, between the sign-language testimonies of empty hands, there is the beautiful gift of the sharing of life.

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The letter of Paul to Timothy is the letter from an older man to a younger man of whom he seems to be very fond. Paul starts it by saying “To Timothy, my loyal child in the faith - grace, mercy and peace from God [be with you].” The letter’s full of little expressions that are kind of honest and homely. It’s full of affection. Paul says he wants to be with young Timothy in Ephesus, but is writing in case he can’t make it for a while. Paul’s got so much to tell him, because he wants things to be well with him. And pardon an old man if he gets a bit preachy or repetitive. He means well - and wants all to be well for the tender young man. Particularly near the end of the letter, (after he’s done all the church bits, organisational bits, how to tell a bishop from a deacon, and so on), it’s like Paul just wants to share a few thoughts so that Timothy can grow into a life that’s really good. So, instead of a deep sermon on any one thing in particular, here are three reflections on a couple of sentences sent from Age to Youth in love and hope.

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One. In love and hope, Age says to Youth, “there’s much to be gained in combining godliness with contentment. Be content with things. If you have food, and you have clothing, allow yourself to feel content. Of course, you could strive for more - to pick up more things before you’re required at the final bookend to put them down again. But why bother - if you can be content right here and now. Timothy, the world will be very good at sowing discontent in your heart. It will make you feel you somehow need more, need it faster, need it updated, need it with the logo on it. Even this brand new world that we’re making Timothy, this little community of faith, will morph into a huge institution with vulgar amounts of assets. One day you’ll find the Vatican people wanting to declare the Franciscans heretics, because the Franciscans were wanting to say that Jesus didn’t own his own clothes. Radical thinking, and dangerous, that Jesus should be without property while the cathedrals

were filling with artworks and income. And as you watch it unfolding, this ambition, this drive, you'll look at the people, and they'll seem trapped, trapped and plunging and tripping - and no one will know why! But you'll know why. Because we leave, as we arrive, with nothing - and in between, there is great gain in being content. Be content. Age says that to Youth, in love and hope.

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Two. In love and hope, Age says to Youth, "fight the good fight of faith". Let there be spunk and spirit. Shake it about a bit. Pick up the old overcoat and shake out the pockets. See what's in there, and what falls out. And if you get a bit angry while you're talking to the United Nations, and the adults scold you and call you a "child", just fight the fight anyway. When were we told we had to be respectful all the time? And measured, and hushed? Or even worse, cynical. No; put the cat among the pigeons - be scrappy and blunt - because truth must be told, and justice must be seized, and planets must be saved - and if you're young, then you can do it. One of the mysteries, Timothy, is that from this wonderful gospel we're found, a tradition will grow - and in that tradition generations of people will attend church services and find them boring. The sermons will be just a little long. The singing just a little bit tired. The benediction a little low in momentum. And the witness in the world will be a little compromised as some of us make unethical investments and others snuggle up to the bomb - or the greenhouse gas. And over it all will drape a cloth of resignation. And in that we'll become content - and it'll be entirely the wrong kind of contentment. But no, you, Timothy, fight the fight. And if you're frustrated, then just go for it. There's plenty of time to slow down later - when we let go of the things gathered up in our hands. I love your youth. I admire your impatience. I wish for you a flourishing of the energy you already and still have. Enjoy the fight! That is what, in love and hope, Age says to Youth.

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Three. In love and hope, Age says to Youth, "In the presence of God, who gives life to all things . . . take hold of the eternal life to which you

were called". If there is no awful tragedy, Timothy, upsetting the sequences of things, then, because I'm older than you, I'll probably die first. You may come and see me in a viewing room, and notice that my hands are empty. Then you'll think, maybe, "that's right, he wrote about that - empty hands". But of memories, they say seem to you to be strangely full. These hands prepared food in the kitchen and puts meals on the table. They played the piano - made music. They poured water into the font and sprinkled it on the heads of babies. They were held up like this every Sunday as the mouth spoke the blessing. They planted plants in the garden. They wrote words. They lifted elderly friends out of their chairs. They ordained elders. They broke bread and held high the cup. They may be empty now - but they're reminding you of life - and things that will be with you even after I no longer am - lasting treasures gifted during the first stage of that thing called "eternal life". Timothy, God gives life to all things. If you look at the world intently (past the emptiness), maybe you will see that God gives life. Age is full of stories of life - about Easter mornings and empty tombs. Age is full of the foolishness of the cross. Age is wanting to say to you that things are more divine than they seem - and call you to take hold of the edges of what is eternal. Age is reminding you that three things actually abide, the greatest of them being love. Enjoy your life. Be loved. Take hold of the blessing into which you were called. Wait for God to dawn - for God **will**. And that is what Age says to Youth, in great love and hope.

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Those were three reflections for us - for us who came into the world with nothing, and who will leave the world with nothing, but who are commencing life that really is life - who are husbanding good things given for our enjoyment, who are called to fight, and sing, and search, and love, and claim what "Generosity" is providing.

To you, God's loyal and loved children in the faith: grace, mercy and peace from God be with you. Take hold of this thing called "life".

We keep a moment of quiet.

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