

*No cowardly spirit*

It's always a rather delicate matter, reading other people's mail, especially when it is personal and intimate. Well, unlike other letters in the New Testament which were sent to churches and meant for circulation, this is true of the letter we read from this morning from Paul to someone called Timothy. This is personal and poignant.

We need to know that this letter was written in extreme circumstances and is fraught with emotion. On the one hand there is the author, Paul, who is a prisoner in the city of Rome. This is not the first time that Paul has been imprisoned there. On the previous occasion he was under house arrest and with a reasonable hope that he would be set free. And in due course he was released and he continued his missionary travels, accompanied at times by Timothy, a young man who he had led to Christ and who had become his companion. Somewhere along the road, however, Paul was rearrested, and this time things are different. No longer the relative freedom and comfort of house arrest: now it's a grim cell and he is in chains, fettered like a criminal, lonely, cold and bored. And this time he has little hope of being released. Persecution of the Christian Church under the emperor Nero is in full swing and it is evident from the letter that Paul knows that his days are numbered, and in all probability he was in due course taken outside the city and beheaded.

In those circumstances Paul is writing to Timothy, his former companion, his co-worker, his beloved child in the faith. And Timothy, too, has cause to be anxious and fearful. He knows that he will be called to step up into a position of responsibility in the emerging church. He knows that Paul is looking to him for leadership after he's gone. He will have a high profile in the Christian movement in this dangerous time. And Timothy is young – we don't know exactly how young, but young to take on the mantle of leadership, and Paul does not try to minimise the risk. In verse 8 he writes, 'So never be ashamed of your testimony to our Lord... but through the power that comes from God accept your share of suffering for the sake of the gospel'.

So this is deeply poignant correspondence, between a man at the extreme of human experience, facing certain execution, and a young man taking up threatening and dangerous responsibilities. And in Paul's words to

Timothy there is one phrase that stands out, one word of encouragement that I want to focus on. It comes in verse 7 which reads, 'for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of love and self-discipline.' Not cowardice, not fear, but love and self-discipline is God's gift to us on times of trial. And it's especially that word 'self-discipline' that I want to dwell on. I am not sure that 'self-discipline' quite gets the sense of the original Greek word. I wonder if 'strength of spirit' might be a better way of putting it.

It's interesting that the root of the Greek word translated here as 'self-discipline' also appears in a story from the Gospels. It's the story of a man possessed with so many demons that his nickname is 'Legion'. This is a man out of control, self-destructing by self-harm. And Jesus heals him, casting out the demons, and we are told that afterwards people found him 'clothed and in his right mind.' He is found 'in his right mind' and that's where the root of this word appears again. From being buffeted and bruised by demonic forces he is now self-controlled, strong in spirit, composed. And if we ever ask what 'salvation' looks like, what it means to be saved, there are many answers that we could give but one would be precisely this: a God-given strength of spirit, a composure in the face of threat and affliction.

Matthew Parris is a well-known British journalist who makes no secret of the fact that he is a convinced atheist. A few years ago, however, he wrote a fascinating piece entitled, 'As an atheist, I truly believe Africa needs God'. And he went on to describe a visit he had made to Malawi, a country fraught with problems, and the extraordinary difference Christianity made there. He writes, 'Whenever we entered a territory worked by missionaries, we had to acknowledge that something changed in the faces of the people we passed and spoke to: something in their eyes, the way they approached you direct, man-to-man, without looking down or away.' Taken with the rest of the article I think Parris was describing precisely this strength of spirit, this composure, this inner strength in the face of adversity that Paul commends to Timothy. And that is something I witnessed last year when I privileged to visit the Mulanje Mission Hospital which we collect for today on this Communion Sunday and for which we are planning a grand fund-raiser for in December which I hope we will all support. I attended a service there and witnessed, in the face of desperate poverty and affliction, an extraordinary buoyancy, a strength and resilience which is truly God's gracious gift.

God does not promise us an easy, care-free life. Christians are no strangers to adversity. But what Paul commends to Timothy is commended to us: a self-discipline, an inner strength to our spirit which is the gift of the Spirit of God. To whom be glory Forever. Amen.

## PRAYERS

Holy and gracious God,  
 as we consider today Paul in prison,  
 facing certain death for his witness,  
 we pray for all prisoners of conscience,  
 for all who suffer because of their beliefs and convictions.  
 And we ask that human rights may be respected  
 and that justice and freedom may prevail for all.  
 We pray today for our brothers and sisters in Christ  
 throughout the world facing persecution for their faith,  
 and we pray especially for believers in Eritea  
 and for other prisoners of conscience in that country,  
 being denied fundamental rights  
 and suffering appalling conditions in prison there.  
 O God bring liberty to the captives, we pray...

And we remember today the Mulanje Mision Hospital,  
 it's medical director Ruth Shakespeare and all its staff,  
 as we pray for the country of Malawi –  
 it's government and those in positions of authority.  
 O God strengthen the spirit of the people there  
 and give them courage and endurance we pray.

And God, as we gather today at your table,  
 we think of those unable to gather with us  
 because of sickness and infirmity.  
 May they know by our care and compassion  
 that they still belong here.  
 And bless all who we know who are in special need today:  
 the fearful, the anxious, the troubled,  
 those fighting temptation...  
 Be near them and give them your strength and peace.  
 And we pray all these things in the name of Jesus Christ  
 our Lord and saviour. Amen.