

SERMON – 6 March 2016

Reading – 2 Timothy 2: 1-13

The letters to Timothy in Ephesus was written by the apostle Paul from his prison cell in Rome. In his letters he is teaching or mentoring his student on following Christ in real life. Our reading is no exception.

Paul starts this section of his letter to Timothy with the words: “You then, my son, *be strong* in the grace that is in Jesus Christ... Tell others what I have taught you. *Endure hardship*”.

At this point in his life Paul has been through a lot for the sake of sharing the good news of Christ with everyone who wanted to listen. The inside of a prison was no unfamiliar place to him.

But not once has this put him off from spreading the gospel. He says: “For this is my gospel, for which I am suffering to the point of being chained like a criminal. But God’s word is not chained.”

Paul’s outlook on his situation was that he might be locked up, but that doesn’t prevent him from still telling people about God, because *nothing* can stop him from doing that, literally not even chains around his wrists! He can still talk. God’s *word* can never be chained.

Paul was a living example of being a follower of Christ and Timothy can take to heart what Paul tells him to do. If Paul tells Timothy to not be put off by anything, to be strong in God’s grace, he can do that because he himself has never let anything stand in his way of proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ. He has been strong all his life. It can be done with the help of and by the grace of God!

Paul is writing this letter near the end of his life. He knew he had to pass the torch to others to carry on what he started. He knew that it wouldn’t be easy for Timothy, or anybody else, to fill his shoes, but he also knew that it could be done with the help and by the grace of God.

No empty words there.

Paul never once said that it will be easy, but over and over he says that it *can* be done, and that actually, it is very rewarding. He never gives Timothy any false hope.

And then he gives three examples from everyday life to illustrate what it means to be “strong” in Christ. A soldier, an athlete and a farmer... It almost sounds like the beginning of a joke! But actually, it’s quite serious – it’s the apostle Paul trying to explain to Timothy, and all of us, what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

What do a soldier, an athlete and a farmer have in common with each other? Hard work, dedication, discipline, perseverance and commitment.

And that’s what we need as followers of Christ as well.

He says that no soldier gets involved in civilian affairs, he rather wants to please his commanding officer. The discipline of the Roman army was severe. Every soldier was compelled to “endure hardship.” The weapons were heavy, and in addition to them, the ordinary foot soldier was compelled to carry a saw, a basket, a pickaxe, an axe, a thong of leather, and a hook, together with three days of rations.

The Roman soldier was expected to keep one thing in his sights, and only one: the service of his commander. He was not allowed to marry, nor could he engage in agriculture, trade, or manufacture. He was a soldier and could not be anything else. No true soldier will even consider straying from this path, because that could result in the loss of others’ lives.

So if you’ve committed yourself to become a soldier, that’s who you’ll be, even when you have time off to spend with your family or go on holiday.

The exact same principle applies to an athlete. Philosophers often compared their task to that of athletes, whose intense discipline and preparation were proverbial. Athletes were pledged by oath to ten months of such preparation preceding their participation in the Olympic Games. The winner’s prize was a garland. Serious athletes are focused. They’re ‘in it to win it’! They train for long hours, make sure that they eat the right kind of food, and sleep for the right amount of hours. Once an athlete is in the zone, nothing can distract them.

But then, if you are a true athlete, you won't be able to ever be someone else, not even when you are not on the playing field, because it will have an influence on every aspect of your life.

Very often, if you stop practising for a while, you have to start all over again, and nobody who's put all their time and energy into training in the first place, will do that to themselves!

And then of course, there are the rules. An athlete needs to follow the rules if he/she wants to win. There's no way around it – if you cheat, you get disqualified.

Paul's last example is that of a farmer. We've got quite a few of them here, and they can tell you better than I can that farming isn't for the fainthearted!

Farming is hard work. It never stops. You can't plant the fields and then just ignore it! You have to always keep an eye on your crops, on the weather, and then act appropriately. If you plant the seeds and then go away on a long holiday, you might come home to no crop at all.

Cows calve or sheep lamb anytime of night or day, cows needs to be milked at the crack of dawn, no exception when you had a late night out. And this never changes. You need to work really hard, constantly, if you want to see the fruit of your labour!

People choose to be soldiers, athletes or farmers - even though it's hard. But it's not only hard, it's also very rewarding.

Devoted soldiers, athletes and farmers all know that winning is not guaranteed. On the battlefield best friends get shot down, in a race a few seconds can make all the difference between that gold medal and winning nothing at all, severe weather conditions could destroy a promising crop in the blink of an eye.

But no true soldier, athlete or farmer will be put off by things like these, they'll just keep going and work even harder.

The exact same thing should apply to us as followers of Christ as well. We choose to believe in God. Not only because we know that there will be an amazing reward at the end, but because he chose us first.

And that in itself is very rewarding! The fact that we know we'll never be alone, that we'll be given the strength and courage we need to make the most of our lives, to stay standing in difficult circumstances, makes believing in God something that we just cannot live without!

But the fact that we believe in God doesn't mean that our lives will be plain sailing all the way. Life on earth is filled with hardship and misery, but that should never put us off or slow us down. As any soldier, athlete or farmer will be able to tell you – quitting only makes it worse.

The amazing thing about believing in Christ is that he did the most difficult bit *for* us!

How fabulous would it be if a soldier was told to take the day off, because someone else came to win the battle! Or if an athlete could not train for a week and still win the gold medal! Or if a farmer could forget to plant the seeds and the crop still comes up! But we all know it just doesn't work like that.

But that's what Jesus did for us on the cross – he did the most difficult part of being a Christian *for* us, so really, we can't complain.

All we need to do is keep our heads up, stand strong and keep going! And we don't even have to do this alone, because through his Spirit God is with us every step of the way.

So if you ever get disheartened along the way, just remember the journey Jesus made on your behalf to keep you motivated!

It's all about our attitude. We can see it as a chore to set an example to others, or we can actually enjoy doing it. We can complain when we are suffering and nothing comes easy for us, or we can see it as a challenge to just give more of ourselves.

We have *nothing* standing in our way – we live in a country where we are allowed to worship God freely and openly, so let's rip off those chains we put around our own wrists and go proclaim the word of God through everything we do and say. When it's easy *and* when it's difficult...

Let's stay focused and motivated, let's persevere and commit ourselves 100% to Christ. Because if we do that, everything else we have to handle will be a doddle!

Paul could say these things with his life hanging on the line, and his young apprentice Timothy would learn this same lesson soon enough.

Let's take this advice to heart this morning, so that one day when we are in a position to pass on advice to the next generation, they can look at our lives and think: "If *he* could do it /if *she* could do it, so can I!"

Instead of criticizing, let's motivate; instead of complaining, let's just get out there and get it done, and leave a legacy of faith that could one day even change the world.

Amen