

18th Sunday after Trinity, 20th October 2019

2 Tim. 4:1-5

Be persistent, whether the time is favourable or unfavourable

There are some people who would say, the shorter the sermon, the better. Some terrible, nameless people might even mutter 'why have a sermon at all.'

This is unsurprising, perhaps. The Oxford English Dictionary gives a wonderful but not exactly enthusiastic definition of preaching: "to give moral advice in an obtrusive way; to moralise; to hold forth, tediously."

And without doubt there are many preachers who are tedious. I recall once attending a church which liked longer sermons than this one: half an hour was the minimum expectation. The preacher had said all that he had to say, twice. He checked his watch, said 'Oh! Ten minutes to go', and said it all again. Preachers can indeed be tedious. They can also be pompous, under-prepared, self-righteous, hypocritical, they can mix their own agenda up with God's agenda – there are so many things that can go wrong with preaching that it is a wonder we allow it at all.

However. We do well to listen to our New Testament reading, from Paul's second letter to Timothy. Timothy was Paul's younger colleague. It looks like he was the minister of the Church in Ephesus, a church founded by Paul, and that Paul was now writing to offer him advice on how to be a good minister. Preaching is one of the things Paul is most concerned about. He knows it is one of the things Timothy will take flak over, one of the things that people will grumble about and perhaps even leave the church over.

And interestingly, his advice to Timothy is *not* – keep it shorter. Make a few more jokes. Smile more often. Steer off the more controversial things, and don't quote too many theologians. Now, those are often good pieces of advice. But for now Paul wants to tell Timothy something different.

Timothy, people *will* grumble about your preaching, he says. They might find people they'd rather listen to, they might even leave your church. But you keep going. Keep on preaching, in season and out of season, no matter what flak you get. Because the real issue here isn't you, it's them, and their unwillingness to hear. Lots of people just don't want to hear what God is saying, and if you're doing your job right, it's is God's Word you're helping to deliver. Think of Ezekiel, think of Jeremiah, think of Jesus himself on a cross and me in prison: if you wanted the crowds to be cheering and applauding all the time, Timothy, you're in the wrong job. So be strong, endure the criticism, and just keep preaching.

Now the danger here is obvious. Sometimes preachers deserve everything they get. I can certainly think of times when I've been stupid in a pulpit, when I've said things that should be shot down. And if every time people objected, I simply said 'Ah well, you don't want to hear the Word of God', I would just be digging myself deeper into stupidity and, I think, into trouble with God. Paul's advice can't mean that critics are *never* right, and should never be listened to.

That said, just because Paul's point could be abused that way doesn't mean it wasn't a good point to start with. If everyone always thinks the preacher is great, the preacher is probably doing a rubbish job. Woe to you, said Jesus, when all speak well of you – so they did to your ancestors the false prophets. You and I should both be worried if the relationship between preacher and people is always wholly easy, wholly relaxed. Because lovely as that would be, it's at least possibly – and the history of God's people suggests *probably* – because we, I, am skirting over the difficult bits. And to be spiritually healthy, those are the bits we really need.

So, for instance, I know how to make most folk here smile. I know that a sermon about how God is wildly generous – about how he welcomes in the broken and the desperate, about how he doesn't need you be to perfect or even just good before He loves you, about how Jesus feasted with tax collectors and prostitutes and lepers, and about how the one thing he condemned was self-righteousness and pride – I know people love that sermon. And it is of course true.

But it *also* true, but more difficult, to say that this wildly extravagant welcome of God brings with it a wildly extravagant demand. God welcomes you as you are, yes, but He doesn't *leave* you as you are: God's love is not just for you to soak up and enjoy, rather it grabs you and turns you inside out: the way you spend your money, your time, how you relate to your partner, your family, your neighbours, the poor, everything about your life. If you really know what it is to be welcomed by God, everything about you changes. And some of your old behaviour needs to be drummed out. It's the preacher's job to say that, and unsurprisingly it is not always welcome.

I can also preach a popular sermon about how religion isn't all rules and laws and traditions. Jesus after all was the great rule-breaker. And to a certain extent that sermon is true – but once again, there's another and more demanding side to the truth. Because when we hear that religion isn't about rules, many of us think that it must be about freedom. No Pharisee, no priest gets to tell me how to run my life, what's right and wrong. I make those decisions. I'm in charge. But the difficult part of the Gospel is this: no, you're not. You're not in charge. God made you, and God has very definite ideas about how you should live, and if you choose to flout your Maker's plan it is indeed your choice, but it will end in disaster. You will be judged - not by me, not by anyone, but by God. It's a preacher's job to remind you of that too, and unsurprisingly it is not always welcome.

And lastly, I can also make people smile by telling them that of course, being a Christian and being a nice person are really the same thing. You hear it again and again, chatting to people. Of course you don't have to come to church to be a Christian. He was a really good Christian, he never hurt anyone you know. She has good Christian values, and that's what really matters, isn't it Vicar? Well: no. Don't get me wrong: being a nice person is a really good and important thing, and it would be good to have more of them. God loves nice people, and He will welcome many of them into his Kingdom. But being nice is not the same thing as being a Christian. Being a Christian is about letting Jesus become the decisive centre of your life. About letting his teaching, and what He did on the Cross and in the Resurrection become the sun around which everything else revolves, the energy at the heart of your life. It involves thought, prayer, effort, struggle and, yes, church. Being a nice person is wonderful, but at best it is just the beginning of being a Christian. It's the preacher's job to say that, and unsurprisingly it is not always welcome.

So as a preacher, my job is clear. My job is to keep on preaching, in season and out of season, even when people grumble and complain – to teach the whole Word of God, the bits we find easy and those we find hard. What's *your* job, as the people who listen? Well, first of all perhaps to pray for me as I do it, that I won't be boring, self-righteous, hypocritical; that I won't mix up my agenda and God's agenda, that I won't do all the other things preachers have so often done. And when I do, because I will, because I'm a sinner, it's also your job – gently, please – to tell me, and get me back on track. Which is going to mean not only listening to sermons and instantly forgetting, but reading them afterwards, thinking about them, questioning them, taking them seriously as part of how God means to communicate with you. And lastly, it's your job to think carefully about how you listen and why you react as you do. You didn't like this, you want to protest at that? Fine, maybe you should. But first ask the question – might the problem actually lie with you? Is it *you* that needs to change, your heart and mind and life and not the preacher's words? St. Paul says that's at least a strong possibility: you would do well to consider it.

I wonder if you noticed that I didn't start this sermon, as is customary, with a short prayer? This week, we finish with it – for all who preach here, and for all who listen. May I speak, and just as importantly, may we all listen, in the name of God, who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.