

Pentecost 15
22/9/2019

Mark the Evangelist

1 Timothy 1:1-7, 18-19a

Psalm 16

Luke 16:1-9

Timotheic

In a sentence:

Scripture speaks of God's honouring of us, and calls us to the honouring of God

'Fake news' has been no small part of the news over the last few years.

Whatever else can be said about it (not least that it is scarcely a *new* phenomenon), the most insidious form of fake news is that which we might have reason to believe is correct. It might not likely be believed that the candidate for election is a child-sacrificing Satanist, but be quite believable that he is philanderer or has manipulated some public process for personal gain. Believability is an important element of 'useful' or effective fake news. It has to be a report not only that we might *want* to believe but that we *can* believe.

We begin our reading of 1 Timothy today by considering the strong majority conclusion in critical scholarship that the letter was not written by Paul, and dates from perhaps as much as a century after Paul's death (with a similar conclusion with respect to 2 Timothy and Titus). The reasons for this conclusion include the language in the letter, and the emphases and the context to which it seems to be written, all of which differ considerably from those in other letters of Paul.

Our point here this morning is not to test the theory – we'll take it for granted. More important is to ask what it might mean for the reading of the letter and of the Scriptures as a whole. In particular, the question of *authority* presses forward – the authority first of the letter itself and then of a Bible which contains such fake news. For if it *is* fake, it may be untruth of that more dangerous type: close enough to what is possible that we might believe it to be true. There was a Timothy, and there was a Paul – a very, very important Paul. What that Paul might have said to that Timothy, then, is itself very, very important. It would seem to matter, then, whether or not Paul wrote this letter.

Indeed, this is a significant *historical* question, in the sense that historians are right to do the kinds of things historians do to establish as closely as possible what is the case about historical records.

Whether or not Paul wrote the letter, however, is not a very important *theological* question. For we must also take seriously the way in which the Scriptures are used in the Churches – or, at least, *ought* to be used. We noted, for example, that the prophet Hosea was not writing to us but to eighth century Israelites. We believe there to be continuities between ourselves and them but we also know that there are great differences. And so we 'translate' and 'interpret' in order that we might hear God speak to us in our own 'here and now'. If it is Hosea we *use*, it is not quite Hosea we *hear*.

In the same way, if Paul did write to Timothy, he was not writing to us, and so we seek to read between the lines to understand more how Paul's exchange with Timothy might matter to us. This is part and parcel of our not being in the 'thick of things' so far as the texts of the Scriptures are concerned.

The rumoured 'fakeness' of such a letter as Paul's to Timothy – its 'pseudonymity' – is not, then, merely a 'literary' conclusion, as if the matter rested only on analysing the language and context for comparison to that of other letters in Paul. Rather, pseudonymity borders on being a theological *requirement* of a biblical text. This is because every text ceases to be what Paul said to Timothy or the Galatians or the Corinthians, and becomes a text addressed to us – independent of the historical personage of Paul.

All Scripture is, *theologically*, pseudonymous in this sense: we read it 'as if' we were the ones addressed by the text, and 'as if' our reading of the text is the address to us of the real or purported author. There is, then, a sense in which – *as forgeries* – the pastoral letters of Paul *perfect* the Scriptural principle. They demonstrate precisely what is required of us as we hear and speak the gospel: they write new Scripture from the authority of the old.

To suggest that Paul might not have written the Timothy letters (among others) is, then, simply to observe that the Bible itself already contains precisely the engagement with gospel truth that we ourselves enter into each time we open it. We read Scripture to discover what God might be saying to us here and now, and we see that the Bible itself contains texts which are doing just that. The pastoral letters are traces of how the gospel was already being addressed to a time and context quite different from that of its original speakers – Paul – and hearers, Timothy.

But in these letters are crucial because, in the end, it is the 'from...to' *address* of Scripture which matters: 'From Paul, apostle of Christ Jesus by the command of God...to Timothy, loyal child in faith...':

There is a hint about this in the name 'Timothy'. While we are confident that Paul had an apprentice named Timothy, at this distance (that is, the distance between the man and his name appearing in the Scriptures), the very name 'Timothy' becomes more significant than the man himself. The name is a compound of two Greek words, the 'Tim-' meaning 'honour' (*timé*) and the '-thy' meaning God (*theos*). Timothy is either 'one who honours God' or 'one honoured by God'. (In the letter the name appears three times: at the very beginning (v.2), where Timothy is identified as the 'to' of the letter, at the end of the introductory section (1.18), and then at the very end of the letter (6.20) – 'Guard, O Timothy, what has been entrusted to you'.)

It was an accident that the man Timothy had this name but it is useful for the purposes of reminding ourselves what the Bible is: it is a word about honour from God to the one addressed and about the honouring of God in return.

That two-way honouring has its content revealed in the opening chapter of the letter. First, there is God's honouring in the gift: 'Paul, sent by Christ Jesus, to Timothy, loyal child: *grace...mercy...peace.*' The 'to' of Scripture always proposes this first, even in the wrath of the prophets. Grace, as mercy for peace, *is* the gospel regardless of the context.

And then, consequent upon the gift, is the exhortation, our honouring of God: rise, stand firm, 'take hold of the eternal life to which you are called.' This, too, is always present: the law by which the grace takes form. This is what the gift 'looks like'.

Whether the 'real' Paul wrote this letter to the 'real' Timothy does not matter here. In the gift and in its consequence, we are all 'Timothy'. We are honoured *by* God in grace, mercy and peace. And we are called *to honour* God: to take hold of eternal things in lives abounding in love which springs from purified hearts, cleared minds and sincere faith.

Let us, then, be 'timothe-ic'. Let us live *from* God's honouring of us, and live *towards* it in our honouring of each other, to God's greater glory and our richer humanity. Amen.
