

Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost, Year C

First Lesson: Jeremiah 31:27-34

(Psalm 119:97-104)

Second Lesson: 2 Timothy 3:14–4:5

Gospel Lesson: Luke 18:1-8

Saint Paul urges Timothy to continue to grow in his journey of faith. That journey is seen by Paul as having its roots in the sacred Scriptures which are the authoritative source of his understanding. This understanding leads to the salvation we find with Jesus Christ. For Paul the person Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of the Old Testament story which anticipates the salvation won by Jesus Christ. Paul is describing the sources of biblical authority to his young friend.

The early church, by its agreement upon the canon of Holy Scripture, interpreted Paul's testing principle as follows: all doctrine must be tested by its submission to the historical witness that surrounds Jesus Christ, the texts of the Bible, consisting of the Old Testament and the New Testament. As we trust in Jesus Christ, we trust the witness to him. We have been convinced by the Holy Spirit of the Jesus Christ we meet in the biblical witness to him. The church's doctrine of the inspiration of the Scriptures rests on the belief that the Holy Spirit has preserved the faithfulness and trustworthiness of the documents and that the Holy Scriptures are the book God wants us to have. They point us faithfully to the center. The Bible derives its authority from its witness to Jesus Christ. Since the historic Jesus of Nazareth is the only Redeemer and the good news is complete in him, therefore there are no hidden new gospels to be found or revealed.

This conviction of the total sufficiency of Jesus Christ underlies the meaning of the doctrine of the infallibility of the Bible. By that doctrine we agree that only the one word which has been spoken in word and work - Jesus Christ himself - shall have final binding authority over our lives and our doctrines.

Every new doctrinal statement, therefore, must be tested by that biblical witness. Every Christian doctrine, therefore, should itself begin with its own willingness to be tested. The Barmen Declaration of the German Confessing Church of 1934 began in just such a way: "Try the spirits, whether they are of God! Prove also the words of the Confessional Synod of the German Evangelical Church to see whether they agree with Holy Scripture and with the Confessions of the Fathers. If you find that we are speaking contrary to

Scripture, then do not listen to us! But if you find that we are taking our stand upon Scripture, then let no fear or temptation keep you from treading with us the path of faith and obedience to the Word of God, in order that God's people be of one mind upon earth and that we in faith experience what he himself has said: 'I will never leave you, nor forsake you.' Therefore, 'Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.'" The word "inspired" (*pneuma* is the word for wind or breath in Greek; *theopneustos* means God-breathed) is Paul's alert to Timothy that he should trust the sacred Scripture (Old Testament) as the faithful witness that reveals and teaches the character of God. Since the word "righteousness" always has to do with the true character of God, "training in righteousness" is training to live and act in keeping with who God is and what God is like.

The basic principle involved here is that the biblical Christian is prepared to order faith and life on the basis of the gospel. Biblical Christianity has Jesus Christ as center. What matters here is the daily walk of the Christian man and woman with Christ by faith. Prayer, simple obedience, confession of our sins, and acceptance of God's gracious acceptance of us are the ingredients of the Christian life that the Bible invites us to enter into and enjoy. As a result of the personal relationship with the living Christ the empowerment of the Holy Spirit in the life of the people of God, the biblical witness draws us into the mandates of the way of discipleship in the world. When it comes to forming the content of faith, the biblical Christian asks this question: "What does the Bible teach?" If the Bible teaches a doctrine, it becomes part of what we confess. Discipleship does not depend on the ability to describe the Bible in exalted language, but rather on how we answer this question: Are we prepared to order how we live and what we believe by what the Scriptures teach? The purpose of the Scriptures is to equip God's people for every good work (2 Tim. 3:17).

Biblical Christians do not worship the Bible; we worship Jesus Christ. The Bible, taken seriously, never stimulates false worship, but by its texts and themes, its history and poetry, its yearnings and prayers, its real people from Moses to John, points us to its Lord. Therefore, when the Bible is truly authoritative for our faith, there is little danger of that faith becoming side-tracked with insignificant themes and cultic curiosities.

Because of the timelessness of Jesus Christ himself, the Bible's witness to his ministry is also timeless. The biblical Christian is not in bondage to the tyranny of the current, to the oppressive pressure of the latest cause. The James part at Galatia troubled many Greek Christians with the "new word" that true Christians should not only believe in Christ but also keep the law

of Moses and submit to circumcision. But Paul had the deeper truth of the gospel to apply to their claims, and out of that controversy the book of Galatians became a declaration of independence for all Christians who have ever been tempted by the latest fad or movement. The biblical Christian free from false gods because the Bible has bound us to the true God whom we know in Jesus Christ.

Biblical faith does not blunt one's ability to be a perceptive observer of the contemporary scene. Paul surely had gospel-sharpened insights into the context in which both he and Timothy were called to minister. He saw it coming because it was already present: "For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths." The gospel has the power to instill in us a sharpened sensitivity and inquisitiveness toward what is happening in our world. Changes and trends provide the context in which we are called to witness to the truth of the gospel. Researching both the riches of the gospel and the characteristics of our times is essential in raising a faithful witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

There is a doctrinal wanderlust that often takes hold of a person. It tends to create its own momentum, and within it an insatiable appetite for the new and different for their own sake. This wanderlust should not be confused with the research instinct that we have been describing, or the hard work of theological inquiry. The restlessness in research is founded upon the whole principle of testing followed by meaningful response to truth discovered, whereas the restlessness of doctrinal wanderlust is dominated by inner moods, by the current immediate impression. Wanderlust is not freedom, though it disguises itself as freedom. In the classic river scene in *Huckleberry Finn*, it is the slave, Jim, who is truly free because Jim knows who he is. Huck at that point in the story is not free because he is simply a young boy adrift on the Mississippi. Freedom to explore comes from knowing who and why we are.

Paul writes to remind Timothy of who and why he is. In a world of change where trends seem unfavorable to the preaching of the gospel, Paul urges Timothy to "proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching. . . . always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully" (4:2-5).

Paul's description of Timothy's world sounds much like the world we have come to call "postmodern." The "modern" world with its confidence in science and reason to solve human problems has been dismantled by its dis-

mal consequences. Post modernism puts its faith in absolute relativism and encourages “itching ears” that attend to “teachers [who] suit their own desires” (v. 3). Paul’s words to Timothy are no less urgent for our time: “Do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully” (v. 5).

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