

According to one biography the last words of actor John Wayne were to his daughter, Aissa. Wayne was in the last stages of cancer, and Aissa asked her father, “Do you know who I am?”, to which Wayne replied, “Of course I know who you are. You're my girl. I love you.”

Whether true or not, we might agree that such sentimental words would be lovely if they were our last words. But of course, few of us know for certain what our last words will be – that is unless we intentionally write them down.

I recall Jean Derryhouse's funeral; Jean had chosen the readings, and I asked the congregation, “Why were these readings important to Jean, what spoke to her, and what did Jean want us to hear through these readings?” I think Jean had taken the opportunity of choosing her last words, and those were words of Scripture.

As I thought about the reading from 2 Timothy this week – which is traditionally believed to be Paul's last letter – his last words – I've wondered, what if we all took the opportunity to write our 'last words.' One of my favourite books is a small tome called “The Last Lecture”. It's a collection of stories and quotes from Randy Pausch. Pausch was a professor of computer science, who died of cancer in 2008. But before he died he gave his Last Lecture during which he shared his thoughts on success and the perseverance that is required to achieve it.¹ The book, which distils some of his thoughts, contains nuggets of wisdom such as:

“Experience is what you get when you didn't get what you wanted. And experience is often the most valuable thing you have to offer.”

“The key question to keep asking is, 'Are you spending your time on the right things?' Because time is all you have.”

“No matter how bad things are you can always make things worse.”

“A lot of people want a shortcut. I find the best shortcut is the long way, which is basically two words: work hard.”

Paul's last letter to Timothy was written while Paul was in a Roman prison awaiting his execution; and yet despite Paul's dire circumstances, the letter is filled with encouragement to his 'beloved child' Timothy – his apprentice in the faith and fellow minister of Christ. Paul wrote to Timothy to remind him, one last time, of all that was most important.

¹ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ji5_MqicxSo

I found it interesting this week to think about the mental picture I have of Timothy. Not his appearance, but who he was, and what he was like. I'd never done this before, and on reflection, I realised that in my minds-eye I had set Timothy up as an exemplar of faith.

In Paul's earlier letter to Timothy, he had written:

Let no one despise your youth, but set the believers an example in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity.²

I believed Timothy had done this somewhat perfectly; he'd never faltered in faith; he'd never lost hope.

But a close reading of 2 Timothy, reveals a more human Timothy, a man who had questions and struggles, and despite their separation, Paul knew Timothy well enough to write and encourage him.

After Paul's usual greeting in verses 1-2, Paul begins his letter by telling Timothy how thankful he is to God for Timothy:

I am grateful to God ... when I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day. (3)

I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you. (5)

Paul is implicitly comparing Timothy to himself. Paul had come from a devout Jewish family; he was the son of a Pharisee and had been raised according to the Torah.³ Paul became "zealous for God" (Acts 22:3), even if his faith and actions were misdirected.⁴ In the same way, Timothy had sincere faith, and he demonstrated this through his service to God and the church.

Some years ago, I went to a leadership training event, where I met an old colleague. At one point we had to do an evaluation of each other; and I was so encouraged by what this colleague said about me and my faith: he said I had a stability about me, a certainty in my faith.

Paul begins by reminding Timothy that his faith was shared by his mother and grandmother; and now Timothy had this faith also. To remember is an important act in

² 1 Timothy 4:12

³ Acts 23:6, Philippians 3:5-6

⁴ Áida Besançon Spencer, 2 Timothy and Titus: A New Covenant Commentary, ed. Michael F. Bird and Craig Keener, New Covenant Commentary Series (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014), 81

the Bible.⁵ The psalms constantly remind Israel of God's acts; the prophets constantly remind Israel of God's faithfulness. Paul commends the church in Corinth for remembering him.⁶ So, Paul reminds Timothy that he comes from a family of faith, and this same faith resides in him.

But then Paul raises a matter of concern:

For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands; for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline. (6-7)

Timothy was a man of faith; he came from a family of believers, and he had an important task of leading the church at Ephesus. Nevertheless, Paul felt the need to remind Timothy to “*rekindle the gift of God.*” The question is not whether Timothy believed, but whether he would be faithful to his calling.⁷

There is also a suggestion here that Timothy had begun to feel afraid – thus Paul's reminder that God has not given us a “spirit of cowardice.” The church in Ephesus was facing difficulties within and without. From within there were challenges of false teaching,⁸ from without there were challenges of persecution.

Furthermore, in verse 8 Paul tells Timothy

“Do not be ashamed ... of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner...”

Had Timothy grown ashamed of Paul, his mentor, who was languishing in prison and facing execution? Was Timothy afraid that he too might face such a future?

If so, then Paul's instruction to not be ashamed makes sense. Timothy did not need to be ashamed of Paul's imprisonment – or the suggestion that Paul was somehow a failure. Paul instead encourages Timothy to

“... join with [him] in suffering for the gospel, relying on the power of God, who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works but according to his own purpose and grace.”⁹

Rather than being afraid, and letting his faith grow cold, and abandoning his responsibilities, Paul encourages Timothy to embrace the prospect of suffering, while

⁵ Ibid., 82

⁶ 1 Corinthians 11:2

⁷ Lewis R. Donelson, “Proper 22 (Sunday between October 2 and October 8 Inclusive),” in *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 4: Season after Pentecost 2 (Propers 17–Reign of Christ)*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 124-139

⁸ 2 Timothy 2:17–18

⁹ 2 Timothy 1:8–9

“relying on the power of God.” We might not like the sound of this – who *wants suffering?* – but we must accept that this is always a possibility.

Similarly, there is always the risk our faith will grow cold, that we might become afraid, or that we might grow ashamed of Christ. In parts of the world, it is difficult to believe in Jesus. Some believers face persecution, imprisonment or worse. In the western world, belief in an all-powerful, loving God, and of a crucified and risen Saviour, is not widely accepted; and while people in the West are not actively persecuted, in some places there is growing ambivalence and distrust.

If we’re concerned about such things, there is the risk that our faith could grow old; we could lose our passion for Christ.

So, how do we “rekindle the gift of God”? Firstly, we choose to keep attending church. I’m not saying this to bolster church attendance, but because the writer of Hebrews says very clearly:

*Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another – and all the more as you see the Day approaching.*¹⁰

Whether this was a danger for Timothy we don’t know. What we do know, is that for Timothy ‘rekindling the gift of God’ meant fulfilling his calling as a pastor and evangelist.

Secondly, we rekindle our faith by being faithful in the things God has called us to do. The greatest gift we have from God is the love, faith, and grace received through Christ,¹¹ and to stir these gifts up we must put them into practice.

I’m not suggesting that working harder is the solution for a flagging faith; I am saying that a hot coal gets colder by itself, and to stay hot requires remaining alongside, and serving with other people of faith.

What also helps, once again, is to remind ourselves of Whom we have believed in. As Paul says in verse 12:

I am not ashamed, for I know the one in whom I have put my trust, and I am sure that he is able to guard until that day what I have entrusted to him.

¹⁰ Hebrews 10:23–25

¹¹ J. Peter Holmes, “Proper 22” (Sunday between October 2 and October 8 Inclusive), in *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 4: Season after Pentecost 2 (Propers 17–Reign of Christ)*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 124-139