

- (1) In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge.

Paul is in the Mamertine prison in Rome, where he was reasonably treated while he awaited sentence. Under Roman law, imprisonment was not considered to be a punishment: rather, it was where you waited until you were tried or sentenced. So it was a bit like being remanded in custody, and so Paul had the freedom to write and send his letters.

We're reaching towards the end of Paul's life. 2 Timothy is the last letter that Paul wrote: it's clearly written as a letter from a mentor to one of his students.

But Paul's charge, starting in the first verse of this passage is impressive. A charge is a speech which sets the agenda for what is to come afterwards, instructing with authority. An example is the Queen's speech at the start of Parliament's year, or a judge's instructions to a jury.

This impressive charge comes from a weary, war-worn apostle, as he stands at the edge of his own day of judgement. He declares the names of God the Father and of Christ Jesus. There is absolutely no doubt that what he is saying to Timothy, and to all church leaders, and to all church members, is being said with great seriousness and great solemnity. And when Paul names Christ, he is named in his capacity of Judge, who shall judge not only Timothy's hearers, but Paul himself, and all those who come after Paul and Timothy.

So, what does the charge say?

- (2) Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage – with great patience and careful instruction.

Paul doesn't ask Timothy to preach from the Word: he tells him to preach the Word. We heard last week how the Word is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness. The word we have translated as "be prepared" can also be "be diligent" or "be urgent". Those are both important words – we must be diligent in preaching the Word, and not anything else, and we must be urgent, because every day more and more people are passing into eternity without Christ.

What does "in season and out of season" mean? Have you ever seen the people who stand on street corners and in crowds preaching a message of repentance or damnation to people who are rushing past and pretending the preacher doesn't exist? If I ask these people why they are making my work as an evangelist so much more difficult by preaching a message they don't want in a way they don't want, this is the verse that is usually cited.

Paul is talking about us! It's not about time; it's not the hearers who might be in season or out of season: it's the speaker.

In other words, we should "be ready" whether we feel like it or not. If we do only what we feel inclined to do, some of us would never do anything.

When the Spirit of God gives you a time of inspiration and insight, you might say, "Following this, I will always be like this for God." No, you won't, and in fact God will make sure of it. Times like those are entirely His gift. You can't give them to yourself as you see fit, and if you say you will only be at your best for God when you feel inspired at

those special times, in fact you'll be an unbearable burden. We mustn't make a god out of our best moments, or we will find that God fades out of our life and will only return when we are obedient in the work He has placed closest to us and have learned not to be obsessed with those rare and inspirational moments He gives to each one of us.

So the preacher or the teacher needs to work on his Christian life at all times. It won't do for Philip or Steve or me to say "God didn't inspire me this week, so there's no sermon. Instead, here is some music."

Of course, there wouldn't be any music either: maybe our musicians weren't inspired to choose any music for us either.

That is what Paul means: in season and out of season. Of course, it does mean that all the leaders in the church need to be aware of God at all times, so that whatever is said is in tune with the message of Christ, as revealed through the scriptures.

That's what we need to do when we follow the instruction to correct, rebuke and encourage. And Paul also tells us that we need to do *that* with great patience and careful instruction.

- (3) For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather round them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear.
- (4) They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths.

Remember that Paul is talking about the church. It's hard to know what examples to choose if I want to pick out some examples of teaching in the church that runs counter to the message in the scriptures. We can start with the people who teach that there are other ways to salvation than through Christ. Christ tells us and the Bible tells us that there is no other way to salvation.

Biblical teaching tells us that the right context for sexual relations is for one man and one woman united in marriage.

We are taught that we have one life only, and after that, judgement. Yet you will find, within the church leadership, people who teach the opposite.

This week, we heard of the death of Chad Varah. Even if you have never heard of him, you will almost certainly have heard of the organisation he founded: The Samaritans. The Samaritans, over the years, has saved the lives of thousands if not millions of people who were suicidal or despairing, and I commend the work of the organisation without any question.

Chad Varah himself was an ordained Anglican minister: in fact, the funeral of a teenage girl he took as a curate was the spur to him to found the organisation.

He wrote at some length about this in his autobiography "Before I die again", the title of which came from his belief in reincarnation, a belief he saw as so important that he alluded to it in the book's title.

Yet he was never censured for this belief, but continued as the vicar of a parish without challenge even though scripture quite clearly states that we die once and judgement follows.

One person I worked with claimed that, as a thought experiment, he could prove the non-existence of Christianity. It works like this:

I state any belief which I believe to be central to the Christian faith, and he can find a leader somewhere in the church who declares the opposite.

So if I say that Christ rose from the dead, Allan will find me a Christian leader who says He didn't. If I point to scriptures that show, for example, that sex outside marriage or abortion are wrong, he will show me leaders that say they're OK.

Remember, I am not talking about the godless or immoral people outside the church – I am talking about leaders in our beloved Church, the bride of Christ.

- (5) But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry.

That's a lot to ask! As Paul concludes the words of his charge, he has four instructions for young Timothy, and for each of us too. Keep your head in all situations. I must admit that I'm not the best at this one. It's easy to keep your head in almost all situations, but there is a world of difference between the two. There are so many people who are imprisoned because of a minute when they lost their head. Be alert. Be sober. Don't lose the plot. What does it mean when Paul tells Timothy to endure hardship? He's certainly not telling Timothy to expect an easy journey. Christianity is not an easy ride and nobody ever claimed that it would be.

Christ himself promised that nobody who left home for His sake would fail to receive a hundred times as much, and with it, persecutions. I think that when Paul is telling us to endure hardship, he is talking about the possibility of persecution, of losing all that we have or all that we hold dear, or possibly even our lives. I do not believe that I am scaremongering unnecessarily when I say that I believe in my lifetime it will be a great danger to one's livelihood or life to be openly known in this country to be a Bible-believing Christian.

There is nothing in this passage or in any other passage of scripture to suggest that things will get any better, and as I look around at the world and church, there is nothing there to suggest that things will get any better.

- (6) For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure.
- (7) I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.

In Roman terms, he's an old man. He's also expecting soon to be executed for his faith, and he's starting to wrap it all up. In a drink offering, the wine was poured over the sacrifice and would go up in steam. It would just evaporate and disappear. And it also means that Paul will be poured out as an offering by having his blood shed. But he would be the first to point out that this is just a way of describing his death: there is in fact no need for any more drink offerings or any more blood sacrifice because Christ's death once for all was enough and more than enough for Paul, Timothy and each one of us sinners here tonight. As Paul looks back on his life, he says, as I hope I will be able to say at the end of my life "I have finished the race, I have kept the faith." Indeed, I hope that everyone here will feel able to say that. If you don't think that's you, why not

come and talk to me or one of the other church leaders or someone in our prayer team afterwards.

- (8) Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day – and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.

In the previous verse, Paul is looking back over his life, but in this verse, he is looking forward to the promise of the crown of righteousness. That is the prize for all those who have lived a life of faith in Christ. The righteous judge will award him the prize, and that's a cause for celebration for Paul. But more than that, we all will also win the crown of righteousness too. That's a cause of celebration for Paul and for each of us too.

It's not a particularly bright outlook for us on this earth, as we see that we will encounter a world and a church with views increasing contrary to the teaching of Christ and scripture, but we have the solid charge from Saint Paul, who started this passage in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and finishes with us all celebrating in an everlasting reward for finishing our race and keeping our faith in Christ alone.

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