

Langton Long - Sunday 2 September 2007

Jennie Rake

"The Bible ... God's Love Letter "

John 1:1-14, 2 Timothy 3:14-17

Introduction

Tim named this morning's theme 'God's Love Letter' in other words - the Bible - Holy scriptures - the Living Word - God's communication with us, his dearly loved children. I have heard the bible described before as a book of instructions, or a road map - and it is all of these, but a love letter homes in on the fact that it is the communication between two parties who love each other.

Love letters

I wonder how many of you remember receiving a love letter? Maybe it came as a surprise... or maybe it was part of your life... separated from your loved one and was an eagerly awaited letter. These are some of the letters David sent me when I was at college. He's kept mine as well, all tied up in a ribbon. I remember the excitement when the post arrived at the hall of residence when I was at college. The letters would all be laid out on a table in the entrance hall and you'd quickly scan them all to see your name - or more likely - recognise the handwriting. If it was a fat envelope I'd know there'd be plenty to read and re-read over the coming days. There'd be descriptions of what he'd been doing - perhaps funny things that had happened - news of the family - sometimes sad or worrying news, as well as words of affection. Perhaps there were plans to be made for the next college holiday when I head back to Ringwood.

Before days of internet and email, those letters and the occasional phone call in the college payphone were the only ways to keep in touch - and how they were treasured! Or maybe there were other letters from very close friends that you've received, when you've been separated by many miles? You'll remember the joy of reading them. For a few moments it's almost like they're in the room with you as you imagine their voice telling you the news that you're reading.

Timothy and Scripture

I wonder if we feel the same way about God's love letter - his word to us? If I'm honest I'll admit there isn't always the same sense of anticipation as when I opened David's letters. Maybe others can identify with that? But if we look at Paul's words to Timothy in the reading, we see that there is much to be learned from God's word...

- * Giving wisdom
- * Teaching
- * Rebuking
- * Correcting
- * Training in righteousness
- * Equipping us for our lives
- * Building up our faith.

Timothy had been brought to read and study scripture from his early years by his grandmother Lois and mother Eunice. It was a regular part of his upbringing for which these two close relatives had taken responsibility... teaching...rebuking...correcting...training...equipping...words that remind us of being at school?

Scripture for the church- then and now

Although Timothy was well past school age, Paul knew it was important to remind him to keep up the practice of reading and studying scripture, for several reasons.

In those days there were many teachers who were promoting their own particular brand of religion. For instance, there were the Gnostics who stressed learning, for the sake of acquiring knowledge.

To quote an entry in yesterday's New Daylight bible notes: *Ephesus, where Timothy lived was an important centre for commerce, politics and religion. Those who listened to Timothy's preaching would not have been simple people, happy with a simple faith in Jesus of Nazareth. They would have been sophisticated intellectuals, endlessly prepared to discuss theological niceties*

and speculations and perhaps inclined to be dismissive of Timothy's gospel message.

In the early years of the Christian church, new believers might easily get distracted by other so-called religions if they were very receptive to gifted speakers, without knowing much about their background.

The abundance of false prophets springing up was spreading their teaching, like weeds springing up in fields of wheat. This teaching was thriving, not because it was springing from a good source, but because it appealed to the natural ways of the people - their vanity and self-centredness. This is so, even now. How many times have you heard the expression in advertising: - *"It's all about you"*, or *"You're worth it!"*? These ideas are not new. Their aim is to put the idea of the individual at the centre.
"Go on, indulge yourself, spoil yourself."

So just as then, when there were many dangers for the receptive minds of Timothy's flock, so now in this world of many faiths and increasingly secularist society, there is so much else on offer for our "itching ears to hear" as Paul would say.

God's word as an anchor

As a young pastor, Timothy needed to keep in touch with the authentic word of God and pass it on to his church. He also needed to remember what he had learned from Paul, and the two letters he received from him kept him on track.

Paul advises him to stand firm, to abide in what he has learned, even though around him ungodliness was increasing.

"What you heard from me, keep as a pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus. Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you - guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us." 2 Tim 1: 13

Paul's warning is for us too. We should never allow complacency to creep into our God-centred habits. Abiding, or standing firm means we must see God's word as an anchor. Ideas that persuade us that

this life is "all about us" not "all about God" are like the strong winds that try to push us, like a small boat, off course. Paul reminds Timothy that he should focus on that true teaching from his youth - knowing that it came from a good source. He also emphasises that he himself has apostolic authority - that the teaching he passes on has Christ as its source, so Timothy can be sure of its truth and purity. This was vital, because Timothy had the responsibility of passing on God's word to others. After all, Christ is the Living Word, the embodiment of God who came to demonstrate God's love by his presence and his teaching.

"The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only begotten son who came from the father, full of grace and truth." John 1: 14

He was indeed God's Love letter made flesh. Paul had encountered Christ in that blinding revelation and then some of the disciples who had spent those three fruitful years with him, so there was a wealth of teaching to then pass onto the new churches that Paul was establishing.

The Work of the word and the Spirit

Paul encourages his reader to drink deeply of God's word and look beyond the words on the page. Reading for the sake of reading has the danger of doing us no good if we do not let it challenge us. It's rather like following set of rules rather than seeking a living relationship with God, our Father. That's where the Pharisees missed the mark. They were very good at going through the motions of religious observance and could probably quote plenty of the rules and regulations, but their hearts did not show evidence of compassionate living. Jesus called them white-washed tombs - they were clean and pure on the outside, but inside it was as if they were just rotten and decaying.

Remember that list of good purposes of scripture - encouraging, teaching, rebuking, training, equipping? That is what our heavenly father wants us to receive from his word. All those words are connected with change and if we resist the challenge of change,

because we think we're there, we know all there is to know, then we are completely missing the point.

Those of us who are parents or who have been teachers know that as children grow they need to be constantly kept on course. The responsibility of parents and teachers is to communicate that. There is need for instruction and discipline. In the same way, God, who wants the best for all his children, wants us to be continually learning his will for our lives through reading and studying his word.

Developing good habits

We need to be careful that in our bible reading we are not just "going through the motions" or "ticking the boxes" or "doing what's required", then carrying on with the rest of our lives as if that passage had nothing to say to us. When we are willing to allow the Holy Spirit to show us what we need to learn, then that reading has the potential for making some difference to our lives. No matter how long we have been reading our bibles I believe there is always something more to learn from God' word.

Many of us with busy lives may be tempted to relegate our bible reading to a few snatched minutes. This is often my own problem and I know I am not alone. I find bible reading notes very helpful in showing me what I need to learn. At the moment I am using BRF's New Daylight, while David is using BRF's Guidelines.... Our son Phil prefers UCB's notes - mainly because they are sent to him free) - but they do contain some excellent illustrations of bible passages each day.

A few years ago I was challenged to read the whole bible in a year using the Cover to Cover guide. It takes you through the bible in chronological order. It was fascinating to do this, but I admit I was not doing much more than reading the texts and feeling proud of having done it!! The truth was, I was so busy with my job, doing my reader training as well as looking after my family, that there were not the hours in the day to dwell at length on my daily readings. Setting myself that target was not necessarily profitable as far as my spiritual growth was concerned, but maybe its something I can

revisit in the future at a more leisurely pace so that I can allow it to speak to me and challenge me.

To summarise

Holy Scripture is God's love letter to us - it's one of the ways he communicates with his children.

Our reading of scripture needs to challenge us and change us, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

We need to develop good habits - and keep them up!

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