

Brancepeth sermon
19 October 2025

2 Timothy 3:14-4:5

Luke 18:1-8

Psalm 121

*May I speak in the name of the Father,
and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen*

Some of you will know that my day job
when I'm not being churchwarden here
is teaching up at the university,
in the Department of Theology and Religion.
That's why I have a cold at the moment,
and will avoid shaking people's hands during the peace -
because a cold is the traditional accompaniment to the
start of every academic year -
a gift that returning students always manage to bring with them.

Now I teach in the area of Christian Doctrine,
looking at ancient and modern interpretations of
the central teachings of the Christian faith,

and one of the verses in today's reading from 2 Timothy
is therefore, I must admit, a bit scary for me.

'For the time will come', it says,
'when people will not put up with *sound doctrine*.

Instead, to suit their own desires,
they will gather around them a great number of teachers
to say what their itching ears want to hear.'

Well, I teach doctrine to all sorts of people,
but how do I know that what I'm teaching is *sound*?
How do I know that I'm not just
saying what people's itching ears want to hear?

In the churches I attended when I was growing up,
people talked quite a lot about what was *sound* teaching
and what was not,
and the boundaries around such *sound* teaching were very clear.

When I was at university, if you wanted to take on
any leadership role in the Christian Union, for instance,
there was a doctrinal basis that you had to sign -

a set of eleven statements that told you *exactly*
what sound doctrine was – the path you needed to follow
if you weren't to lead people astray.

And I'm pretty sure that some of my students in the university here
are still mentally checking everything I say
against a very similar doctrinal basis,
trying to determine whether or not I am sound,
and so whether or not I am an acceptable teacher.

And, to be honest, I'm not sure I always pass that test.

I want to look a bit more closely, however,
at our reading from 2 Timothy,
to try to work out what the author is saying
about where this difference, between *sound* and *unsound* teaching,
actually lies.

And that's going to involve us looking closely at a couple of verses
from the earlier part of the passage.

You might like to have your reading sheets in front of you.

The words I'm going to focus on are the ones where the author,
telling Timothy about the standard of teaching he needs to hold to,

says, ‘from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures,
which are able to make you wise for salvation
through faith in Christ Jesus.

All Scripture is God-breathed
and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting
and training in righteousness,
so that the servant of God
may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.’

It seems, then, that ‘sound’ doctrine, ‘sound’ teaching,
properly rooted in the Holy Scriptures
will have two main characteristics.

First, it will help you grow in ‘wisdom for salvation
through faith in Christ Jesus’,
and, second, it will equip you ‘for every good work’.

In other words, it will lead you into some kind of
wisdom in relation to Jesus,
and that wisdom will then shape how you *live*,
especially how you act toward the people around you.

So that's what we need to understand, if we want to know where this letter places the boundary between sound and unsound teaching.

So what I need to ask is, what is this 'wisdom for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus' in which we are supposed to grow, and how does it shape how we live?

And, at this point, I am going to indulge in something that I normally try to avoid when I preach, and talk to you about an academic controversy, something that scholars of the Bible argue about, and that can make a difference to how we read this particular passage.

You see, when we look at those words 'wisdom for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus', there are actually two rival ways of translating the phrase 'through faith in Christ Jesus'.

You certainly *can* translate them as ‘through faith in Christ Jesus’,
so that they are talking about the faith that *we* have in Jesus,
‘through *our* faith in, *our* trust in, *our* belief in Jesus’,
or you can equally well translate them
so that they are about *Jesus*’ faith –
or, you could say Jesus’ *faithfulness* or Jesus’ *trust*.

That is, you could translate this sentence as being about
growing in ‘wisdom for the salvation
that comes *through the faith of Christ Jesus*,
that is, through the *faithfulness and trust of Christ Jesus himself*’.

So, translation one speaks about the Scriptures,
and the sound teaching that is rooted in them,
making us wise by shaping *our* faith in Christ Jesus;
translation two speaks about Scripture and sound teaching
making us ‘wise’ by showing us Jesus’s *own* faithfulness and trust.

In the first translation, which is the one you have on your sheets,
the wisdom in which we need to grow
rests upon *our* faith in Jesus –
and so we might think that the crucial question to ask is
whether we have the *right kind* of faith in Jesus,
whether we trust him in the right kind of way,
and *whether we believe the right kinds of things about him*.
And that is how this passage has often been read:
Make sure you believe the right things, the *sound* things, about Jesus!

But if we translate the passage the second way,
then the wisdom in which we need to grow
rests upon *Jesus'* faith, that is: Jesus' *faithfulness and trust*.
And the passage is then not so much about
the wisdom that comes from believing the right set of things about Jesus,
as it is about growing in our appreciation of
and our sharing in,
the *character* that Jesus displayed –
Jesus's own faithfulness and trust.

After all, Jesus proclaimed the kingdom of God's mercy and justice,
and he acted that proclamation out in
all the ways he treated the people around him,
in healing, in feeding people, in proclaiming forgiveness.

And he was utterly *faithful* to that mission
even when it brought him into conflict with others,
even when it provoked stark opposition,
even when he was arrested, tortured and executed for it.

He was, as Paul puts it elsewhere
'obedient unto death, even death on a cross';
he was completely *faithful*.

And he was able to be *faithful* in that way because,
throughout everything that happened to him, he put his *trust* in the Father.
he didn't put his trust in the organised might of his followers,
he didn't put his trust in his ability to persuade powerful people,
he didn't put his trust in his ability to work miracles,
he didn't put his trust in his ability to win followers,
Instead, in the words of our Psalm today, he said
'My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth.'

In other words, he trusted in the Father. Always.

Even when his path led him to the cross,
he trusted in the Father – and the Father ultimately vindicated him,
raising him and glorifying him.

Jesus lived a life – Jesus *lives* a life – characterised
by a deep-rooted *trust* in the Father,
and by an unstinting *faithfulness*
to the work that the Father had given him.

So, yes, it does make sense to say that we are saved
by the faith of Christ Jesus – by *his* faithfulness and trust
He lived out that life of faithfulness and trust in the midst of our world
so that we could be drawn to share it with him,
so that we could be enabled to live the same kind of life
so that we could learn to trust God in the same way
to share in the same faithfulness to God's ways.

So when our passage talks about
growing in 'wisdom for the salvation
that comes through the faith of Christ Jesus',

that comes through Jesus' own faithfulness and trust
perhaps the wisdom it means –
the wisdom in which we need to grow –
is fundamentally the wisdom that *knows how to trust God and be faithful*.

Our passage would be saying that
all of scripture is there to teach us that God is trustworthy,
it is there to teach us that God will never let us go,
it is there to teach us that nothing can defeat the love of God.
Even though we might walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
God is there by our side.

And it is there to teach us that we can keep on
faithfully choosing the way of love and justice,
the way of kindness and mercy,
even when it seems to make no difference,
even when the world seems to be going quite the other way,
even when our actions and speech do not persuade others,
because we can *entrust* the future to God.

We can *trust* in God.

This is, after all, at the heart of Jesus' own teaching,
as our gospel reading reminded us.

Jesus kept on telling his disciples to rely upon God,
to turn to God in prayer when they were in trouble,
to turn to God in prayer when they were facing injustice,
to turn to God in prayer when they were in need –
to pray and not to give up,
– not because that would mean instant relief
not because it would solve every problem,
repair every broken relationship,
and prevent every disaster,
but because we are *never on our own* as we face those things,
because God promises to be by our side,
and because God promises that, even if we go the way of the cross,
God is the God of resurrection,
of new life after death,
of vindication after defeat –
the God who, in Jesus words, '*will* see that we get justice'.

That, I think, is the heart of the wisdom that the Scriptures teach us;
it is the heart of the ‘sound teaching’
that Timothy is urged to proclaim:
it is to trust like Jesus trusted,
to be faithful like Jesus was faithful,
it is to read the scriptures for all that they can teach us
about the trustworthiness of God.

And actually, in case you are worrying,
I suspect that this is what our passage from 2 Timothy means
even if we translate it the other way, as being about *our* faith:
it is still, I think, about the wisdom that can grow in us
the more we learn to place *our* trust, *our* faith in Jesus,
who is the faithful one. Because, in the words of our Psalm,

The Lord watches over us –
the Lord is our shade at our right hand;
the Lord will watch over our coming and going
both now and forevermore.

Amen