

2024-01-21 ... 6.30pm Evensong Sermon ... Mrs Jane Rylands

Jeremiah 3:21 – 4.2; Titus 2: 1-8, 11-14

Did you know that there are no churches on Crete dedicated to St Paul? The letter to Titus is presumably why ...

The letter purports to be from Paul to Titus who he has left behind in Crete to complete the job of setting up house churches and in particular the choosing of the local leaders. It is apparently not clear when Paul might have been to Crete which I think is the primary doubt about the authorship.

Paul describes the qualities of these overseers – blameless as God’s steward – particularly necessary because ...

¹⁰ There are also many rebellious people, idle talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision; ¹¹ they must be silenced, since they are upsetting whole families by teaching for sordid gain what it is not right to teach. ¹² It was one of them, their very own prophet, who said:

‘Cretans are always liars, vicious brutes, lazy gluttons.’

¹³ That testimony is true. (Titus 1)

The letter to Titus together with those to Timothy are sometimes known as the ‘Pastoral Letters’ in that they are letters to pastors and so in them Christian leaders find words of example and encouragement for their role.

I think we perhaps have an idealistic vision of the early church based on the description in Acts,

⁴⁴ All who believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵ they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds[□] to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶ Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home[□] and ate their food with glad and generous[□] hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved. (Acts 2)

It is clear from Paul’s letters though that things were not so easy and the church in Crete is an example of the focus that is required to establish the basics.

It is interesting that the place to start is the old men, then the old women. We should consider ourselves told! And they are to pass on with encouragement and with urging the good behaviours expected – starting with being sober! – but also explaining why these behaviours are good – to show up the Christian teachings in the best light.

I was a young adult when I chose Christianity for myself but up to that point I had had many positive points of contact with Christians and church. Particularly important in that slow path to faith were friends and acquaintances of faith. When I reflect back I think that their faith made them attractive to me – I think because they had a confidence to be themselves, to sometimes act against the crowd, possibly a way of life that did not put themselves first.

PTO

Our behaviour is important.

I came across an interesting article when I was researching for this evening's talk summarising a book by a scholar called Larry Hurtado whose specialist area is the early church. His book, called 'why on earth become a Christian in the first three centuries' asks this question because being a Christian brought persecution, ostracism because they were seen as a threat to the social order, and they were often excluded from circles of influence and business.

Hurtado says that Christians had a unique religious identity – whereas religion of the time, the Gods you worshipped, came with the place you were born - Christianity was a choice that anyone of any class or race could subscribe to. And your faith in Christ then became your new, deepest identity. And he highlights 5 markers that were attractive to those who became followers.

1. The early church was multi-racial and reconciliation was an important fruit of the gospel
2. Christians taught forgiveness and withheld retaliation against opponents
3. The early church was famous for its hospitality to the poor and the suffering
4. It was a community committed to the sanctity of life – apparently a particular way that this was seen was that unwanted babies were left out to die and the Christians saved the babies and took them in
5. And it had a sexual counterculture – women couldn't have sex outside of marriage but for men, anyone of a lower social status was fair game. The Christians saw the sanctity of marriage for both partners as a way of imitating the God who gave himself in Christ.

Christianity is beginning to be counter-cultural again although I'm guessing most of us here came to it on the coat tails of its respectability. Even so, the Wesleyan and other revivals found their ground in a similar place to what may have been the case in Crete – the social evil of alcoholism.

Historically this is interesting but what does it mean for us. Well, we could be the starting point for revival, we the old men and women. Paul through Titus would tell us to look to ourselves and then encourage those who are younger:

¹¹ God's saving grace, you see, appeared for all people. ¹² It teaches us that we should turn our backs on ungodliness and the passions of the world, and should live sober, just and devout lives in the present age, ¹³ while we wait eagerly for the blessed hope and royal appearing of the glory of our great God and saviour, Jesus the Messiah. ¹⁴ He gave himself for us so that he could ransom us from all lawless actions and purify for himself a people as his very own who would be eager for good works.

This is what you must say (Titus 2 New Testament for Everyone)

This is what you must say, you old men and you old women!!!