

“FAN INTO FLAME”

2 Timothy 1:1-14

This morning we have re-commissioned those of our congregation who work with the children and young people here at Wade Street Church. It's good to be able to do that – to recognise the work that they do, the commitment involved and the importance of the children and young people in the life of God's people. But, in many ways, those leaders and volunteers are representative of us all. Everyone who is called to follow Jesus is also called to make a difference for him in their different situations – not just in church with groups of young people, but also in our workplaces, our neighbourhoods, our communities, our families. We are all people who have been called and saved by the grace of God and who day by day live on the frontline, that blurred and challenging border between the steadily growing Kingdom of God and what the Biblical writers call “*the Kingdom of this world*”.

So what Paul writes in this letter from which we've read this morning to his young pastor friend Timothy is relevant to everyone who has a calling to live out their commitment to Jesus, the Kingly Messiah: in effect, to all of us. Timothy was in a particular situation – a young pastor, half-Greek, half-Jewish, working hard amongst the people of Ephesus, trying to cope with the challenges and pressures of the place where God had called him to live and work, demonstrating on a daily basis the character of a Christian and trying all the time to live his life to the glory of God. Each of us finds oneself in a particular situation, the place where God has called us to be at the moment, and we, too, try to cope with all the joys and problems of a life bearing testimony to the power of God at work within us. Timothy had a letter named after him in the Bible and has a place in the history of the Church as a pioneering proclaimer of the Gospel. The people who are commissioned this morning have a specific role within the church here, helping children and young people learn more about the way of Jesus. But identifying Timothy or the children's and youth work volunteers in these ways does not mean that they are somehow better, more privileged than the rest of us. We are all involved in the work of the Kingdom and the contribution of everyone is valued by God and given worth by his Holy Spirit.

Each one of us, just as Paul tells Timothy, is “*saved and called to a holy life*”. That is an amazing privilege. Just like the famous Timothy, just like the commissioned youth and children's workers, you and I are “*called to a holy life*” by God. He has identified us, saved us and given us the supreme privilege of living for him. We are called to that life of holiness which should mark us out as followers of King Jesus. Now, we may have in our minds an image of a holy person as the kind of person you see in the illustrations in Bibles, or maybe a saint or a cowled monk or a nun. We may think of holy people as those around whom there is some kind of visible aura of saintliness like a halo, people about whom best-selling biographies are written. But holy really means two things for us, I would suggest. Firstly, that **our lives are distinctive**. Somehow the way we do things, the manner of our conversation, the attitude that our words and behaviour suggest, mark us out as people who are different, who do not take on the attitudes of the world around us unthinkingly and uncritically. And a huge part of that is the second implication, which is that **our lives are lived with real integrity** – we live out the things we say we believe. There is an honesty and a transparency to our lives that means people can clearly see that we speak and behave in a way that is consistent with what we claim to believe. Those two things – distinctiveness and integrity – are vital if we are to follow the way of Jesus. Remember, as we've been reading through the Gospel of Matthew in recent weeks, that Jesus' most searing scorn is reserved for those whose lives may be distinctive, but who act with a hypocrisy which completely disassociates their words and behaviour from their professed beliefs.

It is, as we've said several times recently, a very difficult calling. Being a follower of Jesus is not easy in any way, but we do have help. And Paul reminds us, in these words to Timothy, that God, in his grace, has given us gifts and abilities and power through his Holy Spirit. In Timothy's case, there were specific gifts that were granted him when he was set apart, ordained, by having hands laid on him. We recognised some of those special gifts as we re-commissioned our children's and youth workers. And we are all

granted power and some kind of gift from the Spirit as we commit ourselves to Jesus and as we are baptised.

Paul uses an image here that is very often used when we think of the Holy Spirit – that of a flame. Remember, that’s the way the first apostles described it on the Day of Pentecost. And that idea of a fire, a flame, a light is taken up by Paul here as he tells Timothy that this gift needs to be *“fanned into flame”*. It’s an unusual word here in Paul’s Greek: this is the only time this word is used in the Bible and it has elements of words that refer to resurrection and renewal in it. The picture Paul is using suggests that the Holy Spirit is like a flame within us that we need to keep alight. It needs to be nurtured and kept going. We need to pay attention so that it doesn’t eventually splutter and die. William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army (whose motto is *“Blood and Fire”*) wrote: *“The tendency of fire is to go out; watch the fire on the altar of your heart.”* We talk, don’t we, of people being *“on fire for God”* or *“having a burning passion”* for something or someone. That’s what Paul is talking about here.

You have the Holy Spirit – that Spirit has become part of you by laying on of hands, through baptism, through your declared commitment to Jesus, through the amazing grace of God – so you need to make sure that you keep alive that flame of holiness, that passion that identifies you as a follower of Jesus Christ. It’s something to be confident and proud about – not nervous or ashamed. Notice that Paul twice refers to not being ashamed here (vv8,12) and Jesus himself says in The Sermon On The Mount, that we shouldn’t hide our lamps – our flames – under bowls.

It’s difficult, though, isn’t it. We can often feel very timid about our faith – certainly about letting other people know about it. That might be particularly the case in this generation when faith is something that we privatise and keep to ourselves, something that we don’t want to talk to others about, for fear of offending them or causing others to try and belittle us. But Paul is quite clear here that this Spirit is nothing to do with being **timid** (v7). God hasn’t given us this Spirit to turn us into shrinking violets. He doesn’t want us to hide it away and pretend it’s nothing to do with us. He hasn’t given us, through his grace, this awesome gift of his own Holy Spirit within our lives to cause us to be shy and nervous about our faith. No! says Paul, *“God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline.”*

It is a **Spirit of power** because God is behind it. The God who created this amazing universe and who holds it all together. The God of the whirlwind and the Northern Lights, the God of the ocean depths and the vast expanses of space, the God of the lion and the whale, the God of the thunderclap and the volcano – the God who has created so much power, but who also has the capacity to limit and restrain that power is the God whose Spirit lives within us. Isn’t that an awe-inspiring thought? Why be afraid, why be nervous, why be timid when you are able to tap into that power? As we read time and time again in the Bible, although we go through difficult times and have to cope with all kinds of problems and crises, God’s Spirit within us means that we can never ultimately be harmed. God wants to keep us safe to live with him in his eternal kingdom. Rejoice in that truth!

That might turn us from being timid and retiring into people who are gung-ho and arrogant. But that same Holy Spirit of God whose flame burns within us reflects not only God’s power, but also his love. This is a **Spirit of love**. The God of the awesome power at work in the universe is also the God whose infinite love is at work in the life of his creation too. This is the God who calms the raging sea, who speaks at times in the still small voice that is hardly more than a whisper, the God who reaches out to protect the vulnerable and to offer safety to the threatened. This is the God who demonstrated his love most spectacularly and most incontestably by sending Jesus into this world not just as an example of how we should live but as a means of making possible that life. This is the God whose love was poured out on all humanity as his Son Jesus died horribly on a cross of wood, shattering the power of evil and opening the way back to God for all those who had become alienated through their sin and selfishness.

The flame of that Spirit of love is what should be burning within us and shining out on all with whom we meet day by day. As we fan into flame that gift of God, so our lives should be lived with that same

attitude of sacrificial love that was so amazingly modelled in the life of Jesus. The word for “love” here is that word *agape* – the word we so often mention as being a word for sacrificial, unconditional, unending love.

Finally, this Spirit is a **Spirit of self-discipline**. As we fan into flame this burning gift of the Holy Spirit, so we need to realise that we need to stick at it. That flame, as William Booth reminds us, can so easily go out if we are not attentive to it, if we find our attention drawn elsewhere. Paul reminds Timothy in *v13* that he needs to keep learning and keep putting what he learns into practice. We need to keep reminding ourselves and each other of the gift of God’s grace as we read the Bible, as we encourage and pray for one another, as we show one another that Spirit of sacrificial love. You’ve got to keep at it – not as some kind of burdensome chore, but as a continuing and growing desire to shine for God.

I said that we need to help and encourage one another in that and I just want to mention before we finish the couple of women Paul mentions here. Paul reminds Timothy of the way in which his “*sincere faith*” has been nurtured and encouraged by his mother Eunice and grandmother Lois. We don’t know anything else about these two women, but I’m sure we have some kind of image in our minds as we read their names in this context. I have the image of Elsie, my own grandmother, who was never a great speaker, wasn’t someone who got involved in a lot of evangelism or anything like that. But there was no doubting her quiet, strong faith (and as I’ve discovered a bit more about her in recent months, I’ve realised that that faith needed to be very strong indeed). She was a great example to her grandchildren and faithfully prayed for us until her dying day. Three of those grandchildren are now church leaders, still fanning into flame the faith that Elsie encouraged and prayed for.

Some of you here this morning may feel that you don’t have much to offer any more. Your days of active service and so on in the church are gone. You are limited in what you can do by all kinds of factors, not least, perhaps, age and increasing frailty. You can fan into flame the gift that God has given you by continuing to pray for those who are helping with the children’s and youth work here, and by praying for and encouraging the children and young people themselves. You should have a church list somewhere – use that each day to pray for the young people on it, as Eunice prayed for Timothy, as Elsie prayed for her children and grandchildren (and, no doubt, her great-grandchildren and great-great-grandchildren). Pray that they will be able to fan into flame the gifts that God has given them and rejoice that you are privileged to play such an important part in the life of this church.

For all of us, the challenge remains. Keep the flame of the Holy Spirit burning in your life. As you step out onto the frontline each day, do so knowing that God has, in his infinite grace, given you that gift of his Spirit. It’s nothing to be ashamed of or nervous about. It’s a Spirit that enables you to tap into God’s awesome power, a Spirit that makes real God’s amazing love for you – a love we share with others – and a Spirit that can help us grow and learn as we all develop in our faith.

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Paul reminds us that God, in his grace, has given us gifts and abilities and power through his Holy Spirit to help us live that holy life and he uses an image here that is very often used when we think of the Holy Spirit – that of a flame. He tells Timothy that this gift needs to be "*fanned into flame*". We talk of people being "*on fire for God*" or "*having a burning passion*" for something or someone. That's what Paul is talking about here.

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- This is a **Spirit of power**, because God is behind it.
- This is a **Spirit of love**, because God who demonstrated his love most spectacularly and most incontestably by sending Jesus into this world not just as an example of how we should live but as a means of making possible that life. Our lives should be lived with that same attitude of sacrificial love that was so amazingly modelled in the life of Jesus.
- This is a **Spirit of self-discipline**. As we fan into flame this burning gift of the Holy Spirit, so we need to realise that we need to stick at it. We need to keep reminding ourselves and each other of the gift of God's grace as we read the Bible, as we encourage and pray for one another, as we show one another that Spirit of sacrificial love.

Questions for discussion

1. Is it OK to apply words that Paul writes to Timothy to ourselves today? Why/why not?
2. What do you understand by "*a holy life*"? What are the chief characteristics of such a life?
3. Why is the image of a flame or a light a good way of describing the Holy Spirit?
4. Why are we often timid about our faith?
5. Might talking about a "*spirit of power*" lead to an aggressive or triumphalist Christianity? Is that a good thing or not? Why?
6. How can we best show a "*spirit of love*"?
7. Why is self-discipline so important to us as Christians?