

John Docherty October 23, 2016

I have kept the faith

The theme for today is “I have kept the faith”. As usual, it's taken from the lectionary, and the scripture verses that were read, or alluded to in the children's story, touch on the theme from three different viewpoints.

The first passage, from Jeremiah 14, expresses the dismay of a people that have *not* kept the faith. Their plea is for deliverance from the consequences of that infidelity, and includes a certain amount of bargaining with God.

The second passage, from Paul's second letter to Timothy, is written from the perspective of one who *has* kept the faith, and includes an expression of hope for the reward that is to come.

The third passage, alluded to in the children's story, draws a picture of one man who *has* kept the faith, but is faulty in his expression of self-righteousness, and another man who has *not* kept the faith, and yet finds acceptance in the eyes of God because he acknowledges his unfaithfulness, and, I think we are to infer, has resolved to change his ways.

Although I want to give primary attention to the passage from the letter to Timothy, I'd like to start with this story of the Pharisee and the tax collector, because I think it stands in fairly stark contrast to the other passages, and highlights the dilemma faced by anyone of us who strives to act faithfully in steadfast obedience to God.

The explicit moral of this story, the one given by Jesus himself, is that “... all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

I actually have a kind of sympathy for the Pharisee in this story. In my experience he's always, without exception, cast in a really bad light : he's arrogant; he's self-righteous; he's contemptuous of the tax collector. Jesus certainly uses him as the “villain” in this cautionary tale.

And yet, I have to ask myself : apart from his contempt and arrogance, as demonstrated in his comment that he's glad he's not like other people, shouldn't he be entitled to come before God and offer up what could be read as a kind of prayer of thanksgiving?

I mean, what does he actually say in this parable?

“God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax-collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.”

Well, that's not so bad, is it? You're not *supposed* to be a thief, or a rogue, or an adulterer. You're *expected* to fast, and to give generously. Where's the harm in expressing some satisfaction in the fact that you've been faithful?

It seems to me that we have a very fine line to walk in this regard : we're called to be faithful, but we're not allowed to derive any sense of inflated self-worth from our faithfulness.

In other words, what we're being asked to be and do, is simply live the lives that any of us are expected to live. It's not a question of exemplary saints and damnable sinners – it's a question of simple, ordinary people, living simple, ordinary lives.

It reminds me of a quote from George Carlin that I came across in a cryptogram puzzle during one of our summer vacations :

“People should not get credit for having qualities they're supposed to have. Like honesty. What's the big deal anyway? You're *supposed* to be honest. It's not a skill.”

Or a line from one of Chris Rock's stand-up routines, when he refers to men boasting about never having been to jail (disclaimer – I've had to bleep out some of his choice of vocabulary):

“... they always want credit for some [bleep] they supposed to do. A [bleep] will brag about some [bleep] a normal man just does. A [bleep] will say some [bleep] like, "I take care of my kids." You're supposed to, you dumb [bleep]! What kind of ignorant [bleep] is that? "I ain't never been to jail!" What do you want, a cookie?! You're not supposed to go to jail, you low-expectation-having [bleep][bleep]! ...”

...

As human beings, we're *supposed* to live decent, faithful lives.

As Christians, we believe that that specifically means we're *supposed* to love God with our whole heart and soul and mind and strength.

We're *supposed* to love our neighbours as ourselves.

In other words, we're *supposed* to live by the rules.

In the passage from II Timothy, when Paul says “... I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith ...”, most commentators see this as a metaphor for the kind of discipline and honour expected of those who participated in the athletic

tournaments of the day:

- you were *expected* to wrestle according to accepted rules
- you were *expected* to finish the race without cheating
- we are *expected* to keep the faith we commit ourselves to when we enter into a covenant with God.

We've pledged to strive to follow what we believe to be the truth revealed in this Book.

We've promised to model our lives after Jesus' example.

We've committed ourselves, following the template provided by the prophet Micah, to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God.

And yet ... we all know that “keeping the faith” is neither automatic, nor always easy.

Like the Pharisee in the parable from Luke, we know that it takes discipline, and that, to some extent, if we feel we're doing a pretty good job of it, and compare ourselves with people around us, it may feel like we're in an elite league with few peers.

But, like the tax collector in the parable from Luke, we should also all be easily able to admit that we have fallen short from time to time (if not most of the time ...), and that, to some extent, if we feel like we're doing a horrible job of it, and compare ourselves with people around us, it may feel like we're just lost in the crowd of spectators, hoping to remain as anonymous as possible while the elite few shine.

We've committed to a way of life that should simply be a working out of what any decent human being should be and do, but we know that that commitment isn't perfect.

One of the comments I came across as I was preparing this meditation is an anecdote about a woman celebrating her 50th wedding anniversary. She was reportedly asked : “In all of those years, did you ever consider divorce?” Her answer was “No. Never. Murder, often, but never divorce!”

... I haven't had the courage to ask Mary-Lou which of those options have been the most appealing to her over the 37 years that *we've* been married ...

I kind of hope that there has been the odd moment when she's been glad she hitched herself to this particular specimen of humanity ... but I'm pretty sure I've noticed more than just the occasional moment when she seemed to be contemplating that butcher's knife just a little too intently, for just a little too long ...

The point is that even as we struggle to stay true to the commitments we've made, we find ourselves occasionally slipping into “me” mode, and whining “... it's too hard! I can't do this anymore. Just once, *just this once*, I'd like to put myself first and sort things out the way *I* want to sort them out. Survival of the fittest and all that ...”

“Isn't it time that someone showed *me* a little justice?”

“How about a little kindness toward *me* for a change?”

“I'm tired of walking humbly with my God ... why do I have to always be the one hiding my light under a bushel basket ... a little recognition, please !”

Even the apostle Paul, in this letter to Timothy, allows himself the indulgence of claiming to have fought the good fight; to have finished the race; to have kept the faith. He even boasts that “... From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give to me on that day ...”

That's pretty self-assured.

So how is *his* statement any different than that of the Pharisee in Luke's parable?

Well, I suppose for one thing we could look at the context of this letter.

Among Biblical scholars there's some disagreement as to whether or not Paul is actually the author of these letters to Timothy. Among the commentators I consulted, both positions were represented : yes, Paul is probably the author; no, Paul probably isn't the author.

The arguments against Pauline authorship have to do with the style of these letters as compared to the other writings of Paul; some chronological hints that don't fit too tidily with chronologies we have in the Book of Acts; and some speculation around whether these letters were actually written to respond to certain events and counter certain heresies happening in the evolution of the church some time after Paul was already dead.

Some of the arguments in favour of Pauline authorship also have to do with the style of the letters; or have to do with some of the intimate personal details that are included in the letters.

I'm not a Biblical scholar, so I'm not going to wade too far into those waters. As I read these letters, I have no particular problem accepting them as written by Paul, and, in fact, find them to be a somewhat poignant picture of the man at a particular point in his life if indeed they *are* penned by him.

In the first part of the passage we read, Paul says that he is “... already being poured out as

a libation, and the time of my departure has come ...”

The traditional understanding of the meaning of that phrase, and others phrases in other sections of the letter, is that Paul is probably facing an imminent death. One translation renders it “... I am already on the point of being sacrificed ...”. He's been imprisoned for a second time, and has been abandoned by everyone except Luke.

There's a certain tone of loneliness that pervades this letter, along with a certain tendency to look back, rather than forward. Some refer to it as the “dying” letter, and see in it something of a last will and testament addressed to a young man who will take up his mantle of ministry once he's gone.

He speaks of suffering, of enduring, of imprisonment, of persecutions, and throughout the letter he lists those who have deserted him, or those who have supported him. On some level it's a bit of a memoir, or a summing up of what's gone well and what hasn't / of what's brought satisfaction to Paul, and what's brought pain :

- 1: 15 You are aware that all who are in Asia have turned away from me, including Phygelus and Hermogenes.
- 1: 16 May the Lord grant mercy to the household of Onesiphorus, because he often refreshed me and was not ashamed of my chain;
- 2: 16 Avoid profane chatter, for it will lead people into more and more impiety,¹⁷ and their talk will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus,¹⁸ who have swerved from the truth by claiming that the resurrection has already taken place.
- 3 : 10 Now you have observed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness,¹¹ my persecutions, and my suffering the things that happened to me in Antioch, Iconium, and Lystra. What persecutions I endured!
- 4 : 9 Do your best to come to me soon,¹⁰ for Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica; Crescens has gone to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia.¹¹ Only Luke is with me.
- 4: 14 Alexander the coppersmith did me great harm; the Lord will pay him back for his deeds.¹⁵ You also must beware of him, for he strongly opposed our message.
- 4: 16 At my first defence no one came to my support, but all deserted me.

There's a sadness here. It's a sombre mood, and reflects a letter being written at a time when not only his own life is on the line, but the very existence of this young movement is in question. He personally is beset by persecution, but, by extension, the young church is under fire as well.

Some of those who have been spreading the gospel with him are now falling away. Questionable teachings, and what he refers to as “... profane chatter ...” and “... stupid and

senseless controversies ...” are slipping in to the various faith communities that have been established, and he takes pains to warn Timothy about the dangers of falling into the trap of being embroiled in some of these discussions.

So it's maybe not surprising that as this man takes stock of his life and his accomplishments, alongside his challenges, that he seeks to take some comfort in believing that he's done his best; that ultimately, he has been faithful in trying – in *finishing* the race – not, perhaps significantly, in *winning* the race.

Unlike the Pharisee in Luke's parable, Paul seems not to be lauding his own sterling fidelity, so much as expressing his conviction that this hasn't all been in vain; that God is faithful, even if everyone else is showing signs of infidelity; that the fight was worth fighting, even if things look bleak at the moment and failure may seem to be the end result.

The bigger question here for Paul, and for us, is not whether we are allowed to claim to have kept the faith.

I don't think the important question is how self-righteous or how humble we are in this regard.

The big question is rather : “*How* does one keep the faith?”

Is it in relying, as per the Pharisee in the parable, on not doing the wrong things :

- not being a thief, not being a rogue, not being an adulterer;

or on doing the right things:

- fasting twice a week, tithing one's income

Or is it in relying, as per the tax-collector in the parable, on recognizing that we're all imperfect specimens;

- that none of us can lay claim to faultless faithfulness

- and that we need to walk humbly with God in *that* sense, all the while striving to fight the good fight and finish the race with honour; as any decent human being ought.