

Mount Olive Lutheran Church
5327 W. Washington Blvd.
Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53208-1798

The Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost
2 Timothy 3:14-4:4
October 21, 2007 (Proper 21 C)

“The Word for All Seasons”
by Pastor Mark E. Wangerin

Introduction

The epistle lesson for this Sunday (week) presents us with a challenge. They are the words of encouragement of the Apostle Paul to young Timothy, his son in the faith and his student. In a sense they are the last will and testament of the apostle nearing the end of his life. They are also words of exhortation and warning to the church and so are applicable to our day as well. Finally they are words which call attention to the power of the Word, and as such, can be seen as a good prelude to the Festival of the Reformation, which by God’s grace, we will observe next week. On the basis of Paul’s challenge to Timothy in these words, we will use as our theme: The Word for All Seasons. May the Holy Spirit bless our hearing of His Word and may we grow in grace in it.

I. The Charge

As we examine this text, we will start in the middle (the beginning of chapter 4) then proceed to the end and finally back to the beginning. And so we start with the charge. Here these words again: I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: 2 preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. We do not use that phrase very often in this way: I charge you. You may have heard of a judge’s charge to a jury—giving them specific instructions on how they are to judge a case. That is very much what Paul is doing here. But the Greek word is very instructive. Paul is actually saying: I declare it to you completely, I emphatically witness it to you. And the basic word being used here is “martyr”. A martyr is a witness, yet in the application of that word it came to mean as well an individual who would witness by their death. How very striking to say the least that the Apostle is speaking to Timothy as a martyr, which he would soon become for the sake of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

These words also give us a good indication of why this letter of St. Paul is considered one of the pastoral epistles. These are words primarily for pastors. Preach the word. But they are also words that are applicable for all Christians as they hear the word and have the opportunity to be witnesses to it as well. And the charge is for all times: In season and out of season—when it seems appropriate and when it does not. When people are willing to listen and when they are not. Preach the word. A word to reprove, rebuke, and exhort. Those are hard words. They are a call to repentance in light of the appearing of Christ Jesus who is to judge the living and the dead. But it is also a word to patiently teach. It is truly a word for all seasons.

II. Out of Season

The words that follow this exhortation are a humbling and sobering reminder of a sad reality for the church, for God's people. To put it bluntly, people will not listen to what is preached. The word will be out of season. "For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, 4 and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths." They will not listen to the truth. There is a twofold warning in these words—people will not endure sound teaching and there will be teachers (preachers) who will give them what their itching ears desire. It is significant that the apostle Paul is warning Timothy that this will occur. So soon after the beginning of the Christian church. But throughout the history of the church it has occurred. The truth has been covered up and people have followed their teachers who have led them into myths. That there is heresy and false teaching throughout the history of the church is indisputable. The preachers of sound teaching have often had their voices drowned out by the blather that itching ears desire to hear.

Last Thursday in a discussion with several pastors, a man who is studying to be a pastor related something that happened in a Bible with the leaders of his church. When asked the question, "what is the greatest danger facing this church in the near future?", one of the leaders replied, "Apathy". And that word might well be the best description. Apathy. An apathy seen in those who are so secure that they see no need for any commitment or faith. The church will always be there, won't it? But perhaps even more disturbing is the apathy that allows hundreds and thousands of people to sit rapturously in churches week after week and listen to absolute drivel. Permit me two examples from last week to illustrate.

Last Sunday, when I had a week off, after listening to our radio broadcast, I took the opportunity to visit a church of another denomination. It was a rather sad experience. Oh, the church was beautiful. It had every convenience and modern tool for communication. The church was full. But the service began with the words of the apostolic greeting: "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ ... be with you all" and that was pretty well the last time the grace of Jesus Christ was seen or heard from in that service (outside of a baptism which by its very nature saved things) But from the hymns, the prayers, the readings, and most especially from the sermon there was nothing but fluff and pop psychology and pretty words. There was assuredly no substance there. And I thanked God again for the word that had gone forth from this place over the radio as it has for all these years by God's grace.

Interestingly enough, last Sunday night, Joel Osteen was interviewed on 60 Minutes. He was described as the most popular preacher currently in the United States and the promoter of the "prosperity Gospel." He has 16,000 or so every week in his Sunday worship service. Millions more listen to him on television. He has just published a new book which will probably sell in the millions. But when the interviewer pointed out to him that there was very little mention of God or Jesus Christ in his new book, Joel Osteen wept. Not because of his utter failure and deception as a preacher, but because so many people had told that he had

changed their lives. "The time is coming when they will turn away from the truth and wander into myths." As an old hymn put it so well, "Preserve Thy Word and Preaching, for us this latter day."

III. In Season

But that brings us finally to the glorious sure truth of the word in season. And for this we must turn to the words at the beginning of our text and the exhortation of the Apostle Paul to Timothy: "But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it 15 and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. 16 All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, 17 that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work." Continue in what you learned. Pay attention to the saving words of the Holy Scripture, the inspired and truthful words, the words which make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. For in that simple exhortation is the saving truth of God. All of the thousands of other words spoken. All of the programs, the plans, the hopes and dreams are nothing until we find our center, our life and our salvation in Christ Jesus. Jesus himself said, "You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life, and these are they which testify about me." He who is the way, the truth, and the life, calls us to believe through the Word. And that is most surely a message that is in season. It is a message for the prosperous times when people don't appear to need it, when apathy is the prevalent mood, when people do not want to hear. But it is also the message for times of trouble and distress, in days of sickness and despair, of need and loss. It is most assuredly the message for the hour of our death, for it is the word for all seasons in Christ Jesus our Lord.

I know my faith is founded
On Jesus Christ, my God and Lord
And this my faith confessing
Unmoved I stand on His sure Word.
Our reason cannot fathom
The truth of God profound;
Who trusts its subtle wisdom
Relies on shifting ground.
God's word is all sufficient,
It makes divinely sure;
And trusting in its wisdom,
My faith shall rest secure.

In Jesus' Name. Amen.