

1 TIM 6.11-12: A BAPTISMAL CHARGE

[Chelmsford 8 September 2013 – Scriptures: Mark 8.34-38 & 1 Tim 6.7-14]

According to one American wit, the reason why more twins are being born than ever before is that today children lack the courage to come into the world alone!

Amber, by contrast, isn't a twin – and she certainly doesn't lack courage – she is happy to be baptized this morning, even although she is the only candidate.

What's more, in being baptized, she wants to nail her colours to the mast.

In the words of Paul to Timothy found in 1 Tim 6.12, she is making “**the good confession**” before us all, and that takes guts.

Incidentally, do you know the origin of the term ‘*nauling your colours to the mast*’?

I didn't until preparing this sermon.

The expression was coined in reference to the exploits of the crew of HMS Venerable, at the Battle of Camperdown, fought on 11 October 1797 between the British and Dutch ships as part of the French Revolutionary Wars.

The British fleet was led by HMS Venerable, the flagship of Admiral Adam Duncan.

The battle didn't initially go well for the English. The mainmast of Duncan's vessel was struck and the admiral's blue ensign (or colours) was brought down. This could have been interpreted by the rest of the fleet meaning that Duncan had surrendered – for at that time the lowering of the colours was an acknowledged mark of submission.

Step forward, Jack Crawford, a 22 year-old sailor, who despite being under intense gunfire, climbed what was left of the mast and nailed the colours back to where they were visible to the rest of the fleet. The act proved crucial in the battle and Duncan's forces were eventually victorious. Crawford returned home to a hero's welcome and was given a silver medal and a government pension of £30 per year!

To nail one's colours to the mast, then, takes courage.

Yes, it takes courage to confess our faith in a world where Christians are increasingly becoming a ‘peculiar’ people.

Interestingly Paul in 1 Tim 6.13 goes on to speak of Jesus making “**the good confession**” at his trial before the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate.

I have no doubt that if Jesus had played his cards right, he could have provided Pilate with an excuse to set him free. But Jesus refused to back down, even when the odds were stacked unfairly against him. For when at his trial Pilate asked him, ‘**Are you the King of the Jews?**’ (John 18.33), Jesus did not deny that he was the Messiah, God's Son.

True, he told Pilate that his kingdom was not of this world (John 18.36).

But he did not deny his special calling. Jesus stood his ground – he ‘**made the good confession**’ – he ‘nailed his colours to the mast’.

Today Amber is standing her ground as she nails her colours to the mast, for all to see.

I vividly remember the day when one lady asked me if she could be baptised privately - of a Sunday afternoon, when nobody else was there. But I had to decline.

For baptism by definition is a public event. As Paul writes to Timothy, baptism is the moment when we make “**the good confession before many witnesses**”.

Baptism is the occasion when we declare that Jesus is Lord - Lord not just of the world, not just of the church, but also of my life.

It is the time when we declare before all the world our love for Jesus and our desire to serve him.

This is what Amber is doing this morning.

She will declare to all and sundry that she loves the Lord Jesus and is resolved to follow him. And that takes guts.

Of course it is not just baptism which takes guts - it also takes guts to be a Christian

Let me tell you: Christianity is not for wimps

For Christianity is about following Jesus - and that takes some courage.

Jesus said on more than one occasion: "**If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me**" (Mark 8.34).

I.e. Following Jesus involves

- going his way, whatever the cost.
- going against the stream.
- being different - being his.

This morning I want to explore something of what it means to follow Jesus by reflecting on what Paul had to say, when he reminds Timothy of his baptism.

Listen to a modern paraphrase (Peterson, The Message) of this charge: "***Lust for money brings trouble and nothing but trouble. Going down that path, some lose their footing in the faith completely and live to regret it bitterly ever after. But for you, Timothy, man of God: Run for your life from all this. Pursue a righteous life. Run hard and fast in the faith. Seize the eternal life, the life you were called to, the life you so fervently embraced in the presence of so many witnesses. I'm charging you before the life-giving God and before Christ, who took his stand before Pontius Pilate and didn't give an inch. Keep this command to the letter and don't slack off***"

1. RUN FOR YOUR LIFE

In the first place, Paul says: "*Run away from lusting for money*".

Don't make money your god - it will screw you up and destroy.

In a society where the Saturday draw of the national lottery is hyped up to be the event of the weekend, I believe that we need to heed Paul's warning.

Running after money doesn't liberate, it enslaves.

It's like drinking salty water - the more you drink, the more you want

More generally, Paul says: "*Run away from evil, in whatever guise it may appear*".

Instead run after goodness.

Following Jesus has an ethical dimension.

These days ethics seem to have gone out of the window.

- We see this in the way people have ceased to take evil seriously. Child-abuse and wife-battering apart, we are prepared to tolerate almost any vice. We have become so broadminded that we have almost made a god of our broadmindedness.
- We see this in the way people tend to write off as narrow-minded people with strong

principles. People who dare to question moral laxity are viewed as bigots. Goodness is no longer virtue - it is rather something to be poked fun of. The upshot of all this is that the 'good life' advocated by the British media today is a life totally at odds with the guidelines God has given us. Money, sex and power are the gods most people worship today.

But Paul says: "**Run for your life away from all this**" [GNB, 'Shun all this']. Instead Paul calls you, Amber, to run after goodness.

To go Christ's way is to adopt a new and far more positive lifestyle.

This lifestyle, Paul says, involves the pursuit of six virtues in particular:

1. **righteousness** i.e. a life which is characterised by justice; fair-dealing with other people, even if we don't benefit as much from the deal
2. **godliness** : i.e. a life where God is to be at the centre - not pleasure, promotion, fame, wealth or power
3. **faith**: a life which is marked by faithfulness - **integrity** (REB). Followers of Jesus are people who keep their word
4. **love** which motivates us to serve others rather than self
5. **endurance**: i.e. patience in difficult circumstances. "*The virtue which does not so much accept the experiences of life as it conquers those experiences*"
6. **gentleness** i.e. patience with difficult people. Barclay: "*It describes the spirit which never blazes into anger for its own wrongs, but which can be purely and devastatingly angry for the wrongs of others*"

Following Jesus is quite a challenge, to put it mildly.

Being a Christian involves more than "easy-believism" - it involves adopting a new lifestyle.

It takes effort - it takes perseverance - frankly, it takes guts

Yes, "*run hard and fast in the race of faith*" (Peterson)

2. FIGHT FOR THE FAITH

Not only is there an ethical dimension, there is also an intellectual dimension to following Jesus. Paul was concerned that followers of Jesus not only run hard in the race of faith, but also that they fight for the faith.

The underlying Greek word here in 1 Tim 6 could refer both to running and to fighting.

So the NRSV translates Paul's words to Timothy as, "**fight the good fight of the faith**" i.e. the apostolic faith enshrined in the apostles' teaching.

Paul urges Timothy to '*fight for the truth of the faith*'.

Following Jesus involves doing battle in the world of ideas.

In the words of Apostle Peter, we need to "**give an account for the hope**" that is in us (1 Pet 3.15) : i.e. we need to be able to explain and to defend our faith.

To do this, we need to engage our intellect, to use our minds.

Let me say loud and clear: following Jesus does not involve intellectual suicide.

Rather the very reverse. John Wesley: "*It is a fundamental principle with us that to*

renounce reason is to renounce religion, that religion and reason go hand in hand, and that all irrational religion is false religion"

To put it another way: We don't become Christians because it makes us feel good, but rather because in the Christian Gospel we have discovered the truth which underlies all reality.

Jesus said: "**I am the way, the truth, and the life**".

But Amber, it is not enough to know that what you have discovered is true

Paul calls you to share your knowledge of the truth with others.

Paul calls you - indeed us all - to engage in the battle for the minds of your/our contemporaries.

This battle for the mind takes place in various places.

- For you Amber the battle for the mind will take place at school
- For some the battle for the mind will take place at university
- For others the battle for the mind will take place at work
- For yet others the battle for the mind will take place in the pub or over the garden fence or in the home.

The battle for the mind will take place at various levels

- For some it will involve arguing at a fairly deep level with intellectuals
- For some it will involve engaging at a thoughtful level with friends
- For yet others it will involve exposing the shallowness of the thinking of the proverbial "man or woman in the street"

But wherever and whatever the level, we need to face up people with the truth as it is in Jesus.

- I have a book on my shelves entitled *Evidence that demands a verdict* - a reminder that the evidence for the Christian faith, honestly faced, is compelling.
- Or in the words of another book on the so-called intellectual objections people raise to the Christian faith, *It Makes Sense*.

Following Jesus involves using our minds for him - it involves not only telling people about Jesus, but about persuading them of the truth about Jesus

Fight the good fight of the faith - Amber, you are called to engage in the battle for the mind.

3. EMBRACE LIFE

Thirdly, Paul reminds Timothy that there is an experiential dimension to the Christian life.

Yes, following Jesus involves a way of living, it involves too using our minds, but it also embracing life - seizing and enjoying the life God offers us in Jesus.

Take hold of the eternal life, to which you were called and for which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses

In the first place, following Jesus involves getting a hold on eternal life itself.

The fact is that as we are, we shall die. Indeed, "*we begin to die as soon as we are born*"

(Voltaire). All of us are born with a halter around our neck.

And there is nothing that we can do about that. We now may be able to clone a sheep, but we still cannot find the secret of life.

But in Jesus there is life - life which goes beyond the grave. In the words of Paul to Timothy: **Jesus.. abolished death and brought life and immortality to light** (2 Tim 1.10)!

Therefore Paul writes: "**Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called**".

For heaven's sake don't miss out on God's greatest offer ever.

But Paul wasn't simply urging Timothy to take out an insurance policy for the future.

Timothy had been a Christian for quite a number of years - to him Paul was saying:

"Embrace the life that is yours in Christ and enjoy it to the full".

The fact is that the new life God offers us in Christ is not simply life beyond the grave - it is a new quality of life in the here and now.

Eternal life doesn't begin the day we die - it begins the day we put our trust in the Lord Jesus and begin to open our lives us to God's Spirit.

Here, I believe, is a word for you, Amber.

Live your Christian life to the full in the here and now.

Breathe in deeply the new life of God's Spirit.

Don't be afraid of spiritual experience.

If you are like any other people I have baptised, then I know that today you will be on a spiritual high - don't be afraid of enjoying the occasion.

There is a place for experience - there is a place for enthusiasm (indeed, lit means "God in us").

Allow God to fill you with his Spirit and embrace with both hands the life that is yours in Christ.

So far this morning I've been preaching primarily for Amber.

However, I believe God there is a word for others too.

- There is a word for Christians - for those who have already surrendered their lives to Jesus - God says to you too "*Run for your life/Fight for the faith/Embrace life*"
- There is a word too for non-Christians - not least in the injunction to "**take hold of eternal life**". There is more to life than money, sex and power. God sent his Son to deal with our basic problem, the problem of sin and death. In Jesus God offers you and me a new start, he offers us life - life that begins now, and life that goes on beyond the grave. Here is an offer that no rationally minded person could ever afford to lose.

Yes, it's tough being a Christian. But thank God, there is a reward.

In our case, it's not a silver medal or a government pension, but rather life in God's kingdom.

Or as Paul put it: "**Take hold of the eternal life, to which you were called and for which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses**" (1 Tim 6.12.)