

TJW, HT, 11.5.08, 9.15am & 11am, Titus 1.5-16

Last week's sermon started by talking about two different places where you might have been on holiday.

Can anyone who was here remember what they were?...

Crete - because that's where a man called Titus was, when he was sent the letter called 'Titus' which has been kept for us in the Bible - because it turned out to be a letter which is part of God's on-going word to us. Over a few weeks we're looking at Titus together, asking God to speak to tell us through it.

In fact, do open your Bible up to Titus.

And have a look at chapter 1, verse 5 [READ]. The apostle Paul was the one who wrote this to Titus. Some new Christian churches had started up on Crete, and Titus was a Christian leader who'd been left behind there to make sure that these churches all had good leaders. That's Crete.

And the other place where you might go on holiday, which we mentioned last week, was...?

Blackpool. Why Blackpool? Well Blackpool is good for lots of things, including....

Blackpool rock. It says Blackpool at the top, Blackpool at the bottom - and Blackpool right the way through the middle.

And this short letter to Titus is just the same. Wherever you cut into it, you'll find the same message running right through it.

And do you remember the message that runs through "Titus rock", that we saw last week? It's this:

The vital thing for every Christian church is this: to be growing in trust in the Lord - in knowledge of God's truth - and that's a truth that leads to godliness in our lives - and also growing in the hope of eternal life.

And those four things are laid out right there at the beginning of the letter, like the top of the stick of rock - do you see that there, in the very first verse? [READ 1.1-2a].

Now, in the rest of chapter one, the apostle Paul lays down for us what that main message is going to mean for these church leaders whom Titus has got to appoint.

So what we've got here, in verses 5-9, is very clear teaching on...

1. The leaders the church needs -

...who they are, and what kind of people they should be.

Paul has left Titus on Crete to appoint people called 'elders'.

It's clear from the rest of the Bible that these weren't necessarily all going to be old blokes - but people of standing and leadership in the church.

In our terms, here at Trinity, our 'elders' are: me and Andy Winter.

We share some of the ministry of 'eldership' with the Churchwardens, Barbara and Tim - and in a way, also with the Church Council.

Now did you notice that Titus' job is to appoint in every town elders - plural. Many of us have been used to the idea of church leadership as a one-man band - one vicar, one minister, who's in charge of everything.

But you can't find that in the Bible.

Everywhere you look in the New Testament, each church has a group of leaders.

That's why, here, it was the Church Council that took the decision to plant a new church.

That's why I'll be able to go on sabbatical tomorrow without a worry. I may carry the ultimate responsibility for this church - but it's led, as it should be - by more than one elder.

Now, what kind of people should be elders?

Well, what counts most of all is their character: their lives should be above reproach.

Paul says this twice - it's the key thing. See verse 6 [READ verses 6 & 7].

It doesn't mean they've got to be perfect. But it does mean that a person's character and behaviour is the biggest qualification for being an elder.

They don't have to have a university degree - they don't have to have a good job - they don't have to look impressive. But they do have to be godly.

(Remember the message running through Titus? If God's truth is really in your life, it simply will lead to godliness.)

If the fruit isn't there, that means the tree's dead.

And where is our godliness tested most? At home with our families.

You can kid everyone else you're the nicest person in the world.

The neighbours think you're friendly; your friends think you're great company. But it's the people you live with who know the real you.

We can probably all think of at least one person we know who seemed decent on the outside - but then some shocking truth came out of what they were really like at home.

And Paul says: the testing ground for who will lead the church-family well is this: Who leads their own family well? Who is godly at home?

Paul spells this out really clearly - if you turn back three pages - in 1Timothy, chapter 3. Look at 3.5 [READ].

If you knew someone who had lost all control of their own 3-year old, would you recommend them as a leader a toddler-group? Probably not.

A man who's had affairs, even as a Christian - a man who's not taking full responsibility to bring his children up to know the Lord - who's shirking that task - these are the kinds of people who should never get near leadership in a church.

If they can't be trusted to be faithful to the Lord in the own families, they can't be trusted to lead God's family.

That's why Andy and I must never hide our family-lives from you - because it's our family-lives that are the testing-ground for our fitness to be elders.

Back in Titus, verse 6 probably does not say that if your children sadly grow up and turn away from the Lord then you shouldn't be an elder. It's talking about your control of your children while they're still under your care.

Elders must be godly at home. They must also be godly in behaviour. Read verse 7 [READ verses 7-8].

What kinds of people are the ones who often get promoted at work - or who get ahead in local politics?

They're often the arrogant people - who like talking themselves up.

They're the people who like to bully others, to get their own way.

In the church-family it should be the very opposite.

The leaders should be the ones who don't push themselves forward.

And did you see that twice it said that elders should be self-controlled, and disciplined?

This letter says that all Christians should be self-controlled - and it says it about six times. And leaders, all the more so.

Someone who can't control their tongue - who can't stop after a couple of drinks - that's someone who should not lead the church.

A character that's above reproach. Godly at home. Godly in behaviour.

One famous Scottish minister of the 19th century, a man called Robert Murray McCheyne once said: "The greatest gift I can give my congregation is my godliness."

And you might say that the greatest gift a congregation can give their ministers is to encourage them in godliness.

But character isn't everything. An elder must also hold firmly to the message of Jesus Christ. See verse 9 [READ].

A church-minister who no longer believes and teaches what the Bible says has no business staying in his job.

As a church-family we can never consider ourselves partners with any other church whose ministers have moved away from what the Bible clearly teaches.

What would happen to a golf-club president who one day started hacking around on the putting-greens with a cricket bat, digging great divots while trying to putt? He wouldn't stay in that golf club for very long - he no longer has any faith in how to play golf.

So another great gift that a church-family can give their ministers is to encourage them to stay sound in their faith. To give them the space to nurture their own relationship with the Lord - to read the Bible and pray for themselves, not just 'professionally'.

I'm very grateful that I'm often given that space here.

And do you see that it says here that the elder must hold to the trustworthy message... "so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine."

If you're a believer, I trust that you find the preaching of the Bible week by week an encouragement. If you don't - tell us, so that we can make it better. If you do - encourage us in it.

One of the key God-given jobs Andy and I have, is to preach and teach God's truth - in church, and one-to-one - so that we will all be encouraged in following Christ.

And so often, whether or not someone is encouraged depends on the attitude they come with, doesn't it.

If I've decided that some film I've been persuaded to see is just going to be rubbish - I usually conclude that it is rubbish - because that's my attitude. But if I decide it's going to be good, I'll often really enjoy it. You get out what you put in, don't you.

It's the same with the teaching of sound biblical doctrine.

The Christian who comes to church with the attitude, "What will God have for me this morning in the teaching, to encourage me?" - that'll be the person who leaves encouraged - because their heart is looking for the right thing.

Godly in life - sound in believing the truth, and teaching the truth.

The qualifications for an elder are just what we saw at the beginning of the letter for every Christian, aren't they: "growing in knowledge of the truth that leads to godliness."

But elders aren't just there to positively teach the truth. They must also **(2.) deal with wrong teaching**, when it crops up in the church.

That's there at the end of verse 9 - see that? - they should "refute those who oppose it".

And that's what the rest of the chapter focuses on - reading there from verse 10 [READ verses 10-14].

There's no need to be absolutely certain what this wrong teaching in Crete was. Anyway we can't be certain, because the Bible doesn't tell us in detail.

These wrong teachers came from within the churches, and they had a Jewish background. You can tell that because it says they were 'the circumcision group', and they were following 'Jewish myths'.

They were also telling people - as verse 14 puts it - to obey 'merely human commands'.

We've already looked at 1 Timothy once. Let's go back there again, to get some more clues about this wrong teaching - back three pages - 1 Timothy chapter 4. Look at the beginning of that chapter [READ 4.1-5].

Here were people who believed something that doesn't make much sense to us.

They thought that if you were going to be really spiritual - really belong to God - you had to avoid sex, and avoid some unclean foods - because those things were just physical, and dragged you away from God.

Paul says: that's dangerous nonsense - God has made sex and food for us to enjoy them, in the right ways. It may well be that Titus was faced with the same kind of wrong teaching.

So these were people who were adding to the true message of Jesus.

They weren't saying: "all that stuff about Jesus dying for you is rubbish."

They were saying something like: "Jesus dying for you great. But to be a real Christian you've got to believe all the extra myths we've added to the Old Testament. And you've got to follow our extra rules of behaviour."

Paul's answer to these people is simple and profound - and it's in verse 15, back in Titus chapter 1. [READ 1.15a].

You can eat any food you want - it'll be pure to you, says Paul - if you are pure. And how do we get to be pure?

All you need to be pure in God's eyes, is Jesus. Turn over to chapter 2, verse 14 [READ].

This is the truth that elders must teach. This is the truth that leads to the godliness that Christians must grow in. Every single one of us has covered ourselves with sins. We just cannot approach a pure, holy God, as we are.

But when Jesus died, he took on himself all God's condemnation for our sins. And if we unite ourselves with him by trusting him - he washes us clean. And he gives us his purity in the eyes of God, so that we can stand secure with God.

You know those ads that say: "Bold, 3-in-1. I don't need a washing powder and fabric conditioner and a (whatever). Because Bold does it all".

You don't need Jesus plus anything, to be pure before God.

But maybe the bigger danger in the Christian church today is not adding to the message of Jesus, but taking away from it. In many churches you'll hear the message that everyone is fine before God basically as they are - although a little trust in Jesus will make you a better person.

That is equally as dangerous a message as adding to Jesus.

And Paul says, at the end of chapter 1, that people who teach Jesus plus anything - and, we can add to that, the people who teach that you don't really, really need him to die for you - are disobedient to God, and unfit for doing anything good.

The church needs elders - people of the right character. People of the right conviction about God's truth.

Pray for your church-leaders. Help them to be who they should be, and to do what God tells them to do. Why is this vital? Because holding to God's message about Jesus is what we've all got to do - not adding to it, and not taking anything away from it.