

## TJW, HT, 4.5.08, 9.15am & 11am, Titus 1.1-4

After the cold and rainy weather we've been having in the last few weeks, you might feel that being told to spend the next few months on an island in the Mediterranean would suit you down to the ground. I've never been any of the islands in the Med myself, but this week I met someone who's been to Crete twice a year for the last 20 years. They never go anywhere else on holiday, they told me, because it's so nice.

Now, anyone here who's ever been to Crete - you'll be able to picture where a man in the Bible called Titus was - because he was on Crete, when he received a letter from the apostle Paul.

That letter is preserved for us in the Bible, as part of God's Word to us. And for a few Sundays, starting today, our sermons are going to be looking at this letter, called Titus.

So I recommend getting a Bible, and opening up Paul's letter to Titus so that we're ready to look at it together.

Look with me at chapter 1, verse 5 [READ].

The apostle Paul spent a lot of his life going from place to place, telling people about Jesus, seeing them become Christians, and then moving on. So from this verse it seems that he's been to Crete with a team of people, including Titus. They've seen some Christian churches start up.

Now Paul has gone off somewhere else, and he's left Titus behind - not to spend six months on the beach - but to make sure that all

these new churches have elders - that is, leaders - appointed to them.

And then a little later Paul writes this letter to Titus, to encourage him to keep going with his job - to tell him the key thing that these young churches will need, if they're going to grow strong, and stay strong.

Paul normally begins his letters in the Bible with a greeting - a kind of extended 'hello'.

But he's not just being polite. Often he stuffs the meat of his message into this greeting - and then spends the rest of the letter filling it out. And Titus is no different. Look with me at the very first verse [READ 1.1-2a].

That's the heart of the message of Titus in one sentence.

Let me spell it out - in four simple parts.

God had given Paul the job of furthering the faith - you might say - deepening the faith - of God's people.

And how does faith get deeper? Well, says Paul, by furthering their knowledge of the truth - giving them a richer knowledge of the message of Jesus Christ.

And what impact should this message have? It's a truth, he says, that leads to godliness.

That word 'godliness' means: a life devoted to God - a life where our behaviour, our attitudes, our thoughts - are moulded by devotion to God.

Deepening faith - through a richer knowledge of the message of Christ - leading to a godly life - and (the fourth part, in verse 2), growing in the hope of eternal life.

I can show you very simply how these four key elements keep appearing together in this letter.

In fact, Titus is like a stick of Blackpool rock. Wherever you cut it in the middle, you find the same message running right through it.

So, in verses 5-9 of chapter 1, Paul tells Titus what kind of people he should appoint as leaders.

See verse 7 [READ]. Leaders must be godly.

And verse 9 [READ]. Leaders must have a rich knowledge of God's truth.

In the next paragraph Paul warns Titus why leaders like this are needed. They're needed because they've got to stand up against some people who are going around Crete claiming to be Christians - but who are teaching the wrong message, and living dishonest lives.

See that in verse 11 [READ].

How do you spot these people? They don't know the truth of God's word, and there's no godliness in them. Do you see those four elements from the first two verses cropping up?

Let's keep working our way through the stick of rock:

In chapter 2 Paul tells Titus what to teach people of different ages - 2.2 [READ]. Sound in faith, and godly in life.

Verse 3 is the same, but now to older women [READ].

Teaching the right truth, and living the right life.

It's the same in verse 6 [READ 2.6-7].

The young men must be godly, by being self-controlled - and Titus has got to teach them the truth of the faith.

And then in the rest of the letter come two key passages, which spell out what we've seen in the first two verses.

These are the juiciest bits in the stick of rock (if you see what I mean).

The first two verses of the letter were the trailer. Now comes the main feature - and Paul gives it to us twice, in different words.

First, over the page - chapter 2, verse 11 [READ 2.11-14, expounding].

Then the same teaching, in different words - chapter 3 verse 3.

He starts by describing the truth of the faith [READ verses 3-6].

Then he shows how this teaching should give us a firm hope of eternal life - verse 7 [READ].

And then he reminds Titus that this faith and this truth and this hope must lead to godly living - verse 8 [READ].

That's the message that runs through Titus, like the word 'Blackpool' through a stick of rock.

But what impact should it have on us? That depends on how long you've been a Christian.

Titus is a superb letter to get into if you haven't been a committed Christian for very long. It was written to an island full of new Christians, to help them get straight with what's most important. These four things are now the foundation of your life - these are the things to strengthen, to build on.

And Titus is also a great letter to get into if you've been a Christian much longer, but if you know that you need to get back to doing the basics well.

Whenever the England cricket team haven't been doing so well - which does happen from time to time - what do you hear the management and the captain say?

"We didn't do the basics well. Cricket's a simple game. Bat well - bowl straight - don't drop your catches. We've got to get back into the practice-nets, to put these things right."

For someone who's been a Christian longer, reading Titus is like getting back into the nets, back to the practice pitch - to make sure that the basics are right.

So here's the question that God gives us as we look through Titus in these next few weeks:

In which of these four basics do you need God to do work in you?

Is it deepening your faith - your trust - in him?

Is it getting a richer knowledge of his truth, that's there for us in the Bible?

Is it making sure that the truth that's in our heads infiltrates our lives, leading to real godliness?

Or is it growing in your hope - your expectation - of eternal life?

You might feel: I tick all four of those! Well, maybe pick one, and ask the Lord to show you through these next four weeks what you've got to do, to grow where you need to.

In fact, let's just take a moment now. In the second part of this sermon, we're going to look at these four elements a bit more, and see how they should fit together in our lives.

But for a moment let's be quiet, and ask the Lord to show us where he most wants to do his work in us. You might like to have those first two verses of Titus open in front of you as you pray.

[TIME TO PRAY IN QUIET].

Let's go back to the very beginning of this letter.

Paul says that his aim is to give Christians **a richer knowledge of the truth.**

Where do we get that knowledge of God's truth from?

Look carefully here, from verse 2 [READ verses 2-3].

God gave Paul his message to preach.

But Paul (along with the other apostles) couldn't stay around for ever - so God made sure that their message was written down accurately for us in the Bible.

A richer knowledge of God's truth in the Bible is not an add-on for those who fancy it. It's not like marshmallows on the top of a hot chocolate - you'll only ask for it if you've really got a taste for it.

No - a richer knowledge of God's truth in the Bible is the chocolate in the hot chocolate. It's the fundamental thing. There's no mature Christian life without it.

What stops us immersing ourselves in the Bible, so we grow in its truth.

Sometimes it's just laziness. Sometimes it's a lack of confidence in ourselves - will I really understand it?

But Paul was appointed by God, and the Bible was written, so that we can really have exactly what we need - a richer knowledge of God's truth.

But what is this truth for? It's not just so you'll be able to answer the questions on religion in the pub quiz.

What does it say at the end of verse 1? This is a truth **that leads to godliness**.

This godliness is a devotion to God lived out Monday to Sunday.

One practical example of godliness in this letter is self-control.

Do you see that in 2.2? [READ]. And in 2.4? [READ 2.4-6].

And again over the page in verse 11? [READ 2.11-12a].

Four times in a few sentences.

It means: controlling myself not to blame someone else, when it was my fault... not indulging all my appetites - for pleasure, for sex, for food - for a buzz one kind or another.

It is very hard for us to control ourselves, in order to obey God.

Every bit of advertising you see says: "you can have all the luxuries you want now. Why wait? You deserve them."

God is very wise: he knows that one thing guaranteed to steal away our godliness is a lack of self-control.

And do you see that it says back in chapter 1 that God's truth leads to godliness. Not: "it really ought to lead to..." - but: "it just does lead to...". If you say that you know God, the apostle Paul will ask you: "Where's the godliness in your life? If there's no godliness - that must mean: no true knowledge of God in you."

God's truth isn't just academic. It's a truth that will change your life, when it's really in you.

I can think of a few people I know who've become new Christians in recent months. All of them have told me about something that's changing in their lives - they're less materialistic - or they're more patient with others - or less bothered when things don't go their way. They didn't particularly work at it - they just find it happening, the more they come to know God.

Why's that happening? Because the truth of God that they're learning is a truth that leads to godliness. If it's really in your head, it won't just stay there. It will work itself into everything about you.

A richer knowledge of the truth that leads to godliness...  
and also a growing hope of eternal life.

Paul's aim, he says, was to further the faith of Christians - verse 2. -  
in the hope of eternal life.

You know, don't you, that this Christian hope is not the vague sort of hope that we usually talk about... "I hope summer will start soon." "I hope that Leicester City won't get relegated this afternoon" - that kind of useless hope.

This hope is a sure expectation. And why is it so certain? Verse 2 again [READ]. God promised it at the beginning of time. And he's still keeping his promise.

Isn't it much easier to fight a battle, if you know there are good things on the other side?

How much easier God has made it for us to grow in knowledge and godliness - because he's already promised us a certain hope of eternal life that no one can snatch away from you.

Do you see how these verses teach us what 'faith' is?

Faith is not just a strong sense that God is with me and that everything happens for a reason. That is not Christian faith.

Real Christian faith is trust: trusting God enough to want to grow in knowledge of his truth.

Faith is seeing that truth produce godliness in my life.

Faith is growing in hope.

So do you see how in the end these verses are actually more about God, than they are about us.

And the God they show us is trustworthy.

Did you notice that phrase in verse 1? - we are "God's elect", if our trust is in Christ. He chose us, because he wanted to make us his own. He does not lie. He has promised from the beginning of time.

Why is it worth growing in faith? growing in knowledge of God's truth? growing in godliness? growing in hope? Why devote my life to that?

Because of God. Because he chose us. Because he made us a promise before he even created us.

Because he's spoken his promise to us in preaching, and in the Bible. Because he is... do you see this repeated in verses 3 and 4? - because he is our Saviour. That was why Paul left Titus on Crete.... that is why God preserved this letter for us....

To deepen the faith of the people who already belong to God.