

***St Titus – a good pastor –
and like all good pastors, a man of his time faithfully pointing to Jesus***

Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, for the sake of the faith of God's elect and their knowledge of the truth, which accords with godliness, in hope of eternal life, which God, who never lies, promised before the ages began and at the proper time manifested in his word through the preaching with which I have been entrusted by the command of God our Saviour;

To Titus, my true child in a common faith:

Grace and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Saviour.

This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you – if anyone is above reproach, the husband of one wife, and his children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination. For an overseer, as God's steward, must be above reproach. He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain, but hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined. He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it. (Titus 1:1-9 ESV)

From time to time, the church commemorated events and people along side of the focus on Jesus. If we divide the year into roughly two 6 months blocks of time, the Christian calendar looks at the life of Jesus (Advent to Pentecost) and then from Pentecost onwards until we return to Advent we have the life of the Body of Christ or the work of the Holy Spirit. But just as we have public holidays and yet still celebrate special moments as well – birthdays, anniversaries, remembrances of those departed – so within the Christian calendar there are moments to pause and reflect on early Christians and early discipleship. Different churches use different calendars – there's no biblical roster or regulations we called by divine mandate to remember – and a relatively new commemoration for us is Titus, not the author of the New Testament book that bears his name, but the recipient.

Today is the last day of a three day commemoration of clergy – with 24th January remembering Timothy and 25th January, the Apostle Paul – particularly his conversion on the road to Damascus – and now today, Titus. I've no idea why this has occurred – whether Timothy and Titus are to be viewed as the companions, associates, students of Paul – the second generation of clergy from the apostles – and so you have Paul in the middle. Or is there any link with their nationalities whereby you have Paul whose parents were Jews; Timothy whose mother and grandmother were Jewish and who were Christian while his father was a Gentile – so 'mixed' parentage; and Titus' parents who are both Gentiles, hence he is a Gentile. As you will recall the early church really wrestled with how the Gospel was to be for all people; how the mission of Jesus to go into the world would actually work; and how to treat and regard and what to expect of those who came to faith – Jew and Gentile.

We know little of Titus but with what we know, it strikes me that he was a walking 'in your face' challenge to the Judaisers who threatened to turn the Gospel into a new law. Whereas Timothy seems more meek – perhaps that was due to his youth – Titus seems more a leader. Piecing together the references in the New Testament we guess at the following – that he was a convert of Paul's, perhaps from Antioch and though not mentioned by name was possibly among those who went with Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem to clarify the matter of the Gentiles in the Church.

If this is so, then Titus is a living example – a proof that the Gentiles can come to faith in Jesus Christ and serve him faithfully and in Titus' case, in ministry with Paul. For Paul and Titus the charge that everyone must become the people of Israel first on their path to faith in Jesus was rejected not from a squeamishness about circumcision (Paul had Timothy circumcised to help Paul with his work with the people of Israel – Acts 16:1-3) but because it challenged 'justification by faith'. So Titus, the Gentile believer, and Paul's subordinate or assistant provides, I think, a living witness to the Church as it made its decisions at the Council of Jerusalem – a decision that backed Paul and Titus.

We lose Titus to history for a few years but he surfaces again on Paul's third missionary journey when Titus is sent to Corinth twice if not three times to deal with problems the congregation had with Paul as they went 'off the rails' on a number of matters – including congregational infighting, sexual immorality that was eyebrow raising even to permissive Corinth, and enthusiasm leading to drunkenness at Holy Communion. He may have been the letter bearer of both 1st and 2nd Corinthians. He travels between Paul and the congregation and spends time with the congregation sorting the mess out as Paul would have wanted with considerable success. He was also vigilant and encouraged the Corinthians to resume their collection for the needy in Jerusalem. He seems to be a man able to work on his own.

Maybe that's why we don't hear much about him for the next time we hear of him more years have passed and now we're possibly in the early 60sAD and he is in charge of a church or maybe churches in Crete. This is the context of the letter to him from Paul – giving him guidance and instructions about church life, leadership, the importance of sound doctrine, and the necessity of sanctified living in response to the Gospel – the good works we don't need to do for our salvation but which we do as an outflowing of our faith. In the letter Paul also wants Titus to join him in Nicopolis – the man of action is needed it seems.

Our last reference to Titus is in Paul's 'imminent death' letter to Timothy – 2 Timothy – written shortly before Paul's death in which he mentions that Titus is in Dalmatia (modern day Croatia). From there church history and tradition take over and we have Eusebius in the early 4th century – the author of our only ecclesiastical history of the early church – stating that Titus was the first bishop of Crete.

So what to make of our brief summary of a person whose name we knew but probably little else? Our text today – the opening verses of Paul's letter to him – gives us, I think, a good idea – that whatever position he held – the Greek words we translate for elder or pastor and for bishop are both used so we'll say that he had oversight over the flock – the congregation – and he was to appoint others to this task – that we can say that Titus was a pastor – a good pastor – and like all good pastors, he is man of his time faithfully pointing to Jesus. Titus was obviously a messenger – a bridge – a go-between for Paul and the Corinthians – he carried messages both ways. But of course in a deeper sense and when he was 'on his own' in the field, he was the visible link to a hidden truth – that Jesus Christ is Saviour – that God is merciful and he has saved us through Jesus and through the work of the Holy Spirit people are washed clean (the circumcision 'made without hands' Paul would tell the Colossians – Col 2:11) – justified by grace. His tools were words and water, bread and wine and whether he was pointing to the truth of Jesus or correcting error, his words were consistent to the truth, 'confessional' we might say today as he transmitted the good news rather than creating it. His art was in speaking this unchanging truth of Jesus into the changing times and places in which he lived whether that be in evangelism, church administration, or mediation. He was a pastor and demonstrated what pastors should be as we assume he demonstrated the qualities Paul told him were necessary for those he would appoint – not arrogant, quick tempered, drunk, violent, greedy for gain – but hospitable, good, upright in behaviour (not perfect for that was impossible but not causing a scandal).

Now after nearly 2,000 years with lots of opinions and versions of church organisation, structure, personnel, and hierarchy (even among Lutherans around the world – let alone looking at all Christian groups), the notion of remembering a pastor a long time ago seems rather irrelevant. We have the structure we have – we might say – you win some and you lose some with pastors – what's the big deal?

Two things.

One, there is still a need for pastors in the church to speak God's unchanging word into the changing world no matter the decade or century. All organisations require oversight of some sort and pastors are called by God into a role Jesus authorised because each generation still needs to hear the Law and the Gospel, to receive the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, to be the one Body of Christ as people receive the body and blood of Jesus; and the world still needs to hear truth about

Jesus and the refutation of error. The visible pastor with his gifts and talents, flaws and sins still brings the hidden Jesus to people in Jesus' name, never his own.

Two, pastors and congregations need to encourage men to consider whether the Lord of the Church is calling them to this task. This means understanding the role socially – relationally – as one of service with responsibilities. The truth is that while pastors can never build a church – not really, it is always the Holy Spirit's work – they can certainly damage it by their sin. And it means from the congregation's side of things that pastors are not elevated or denigrated – they're not Saviours and hopefully they're not scourges – and any thought of liking this one or not that one is pushed aside, because we're all here for what is hidden – Jesus who comes to serve us and raise us up in confidence and joy and strength to live serving those around us. Too often congregations live by sight and their emotions – nice when things are going well but that is just as dangerous as when things aren't – for what binds us together in the church is God's Word and the confession we make to it whether in the pulpit or the pew. That is the starting criterion by which we all judge our life together as Christians in our congregations – faithfulness to God's Word above all else – and hopefully that faith is active in love – the starting point for Christian living.

We remember Titus today as a pastor – by all means read the letter to him and get a sense of his world – and we thank God for the office of the ministry as each combination of pastor and congregation always seeks faithfulness to God's Word lived out in love.