

2nd October 2016

Preacher: Jennifer Potter

HYMNS: **25** **“God is here! As we his people”**
 “Faith of our fathers, living still”
 566 **“Take my life and let it be”**
 660 **“Called by Christ to be disciples”**

READINGS: Luke 17: 5-10
 2 Timothy 1:1-14

“FAITH OF OUR FATHERS (AND MOTHERS) LIVING STILL”

What makes us the people that we are? Each of us gathered here this morning is a unique individual, all with individual gifts, all of us with individual quirks. What forms us? What makes us, us? In the past few weeks we have had several babies born to parents in this congregation. When we see the new baby or a photograph of the baby, we look for resemblances. Yes, she has her Mum’s nose or the shape of his face is just like his Dad and his granddad before him. As human beings we always look for those resemblances.

We inherit our DNA from our parents and from the family line back into the mists of time. It is becoming fashionable these days to have one’s DNA analysed so that one can become aware – often with great surprise – of one’s origins deep in the past.

DNA, family likeness – both physical and temperamental – are part of our inheritance but there is more to it than that. The place where we have been brought up – our schools, our friends, our mentors, our church family all have their influences on us, too.

I was born and grew up in Yorkshire but spent a lot of my life in Southern Africa. Leslie grew up in South Wales but lived in Haiti in the Caribbean. Both of us are different people than we would have been if we had stayed within the environment in which we were brought up. Most of you can replicate our experiences to a greater or lesser extent. The debate about whether nature or nurture have the greater influence in making us who we are, continues.

But we are all fascinated by questions of our own identity and the influences on it – that is why programmes like “Who do you think you are?” are very popular. That is why we here at Wesley’s Chapel get many visitors from all over the world looking for their Methodist roots.

So to our reading for today – words from the Apostle Paul at the end of his life and incarcerated in prison to his young protégé, his son in the faith, Timothy. For Paul Timothy represents the new generation of Christian leaders – all those who were

willing and ready to advance the Christian cause. So Paul is eager to encourage and empower Timothy to carry forward his mission and ministry with energy and enthusiasm.

It is in this context that Paul reminds Timothy of his own history, of all that has made him the person that he is. Paul writes to Timothy, “ I have in my mind a clear picture of your sincere faith – the faith which first came to live in your grandmother, Lois, and in Eunice, your mother and which, I am confident, lives in you as well.”

This passage, if we think about it, is quite amazing. Timothy, in these very early days of Christianity was a third generation believer. He had listened to the stories of Jesus at the feet of his mother and grandmother, the prayers of the church had been transmitted to him so that the faith was strong in him.

Do we know what generation Christian we are? For some it will be recent, for others there is no way of knowing it is so far back in the mists of time. Yet what is true for the majority of us is that we did receive an inheritance of faith from the generation before us – often in very different contexts from where we are living now. For some in places where Christianity was new and growing – Africa, Asia and parts of South America and for others in places where Christianity is tired and, in some cases beleaguered, like this country and other parts of Europe.

Today we are receiving new members by transfer whose family backgrounds have been in very different contexts – Sombo from Angola but also from Zambia where her family had to flee from the war, Monika from Germany, Judith from a Primitive Methodist background in Derbyshire, Valle from Nigeria and Kofi, Fidelis, Dudu and Akua with their various Ghanaian backgrounds.

May the words we sang at the beginning of this service be true to our experience here at Wesley’s Chapel:

“May we find in fuller measure
What it is in Christ we share.”

We all bring our particular experience of faith, we try to work out how to put that into action in the present context in which we live and we seek to pass it on to the generations following on from us. We all have our ‘Loises’ and our ‘Euniceses’ and we in our turn become the Lois and the Eunice of our generation and for the next generation. Paul reminded Timothy of his family heritage of faith – a living faith in Lois, his grandmother and Eunice, his mother. It was a totally supportive and positive influence.

As I was preparing this sermon, the radio was on in the background and suddenly I was aware that there was a conversation about the Orange Marches in Northern Ireland and the violence and conflict that these have occasioned. Our Christian heritage from our families is not entirely positive and wholesome. Christian communities, like other communities, have a history of using religion to bolster conflicts between opposing groups of people. This is an inheritance that we do not

need – this is an inheritance from the past that has to be challenged by the Gospel of Christ. The Catholics and Protestants of Ireland know this in their heart of hearts but false loyalty to previous generations has had a corrupting influence. Our inheritance of faith from our family has to be held up to the standards of the Gospel.

Back to Timothy – Paul reminded him of the faith he had inherited in his family but he also reminded him of something else – let’s listen to it again,

“Timothy, I now want to remind you that God gave you a gift when I laid my hands upon you and that you must bring it back into blazing fire! After all, the spirit given to us by God isn’t a fearful spirit, it’s a spirit of power, love and prudence.”

So for Timothy, as far as us, there are two major sources for our faith – our inheritance from our family of birth, our friends and church family on the one side and the gift of faith and the gifts for faith that we have received from God, on the other side.

The Church is the place where faith is kept alive and passed on – sometimes particular churches do that well, others do it in a mediocre fashion and others do it poorly. Yet the Church remains the Body of Christ – the place where Christians support and encourage one another, the place where the gospel continues to be preached.

The Church in every generation needs the Timothys and the Timotheas – those who will continue to pass on the faith, to preach the gospel and live a life of compassion. The Church, every church, this church needs to be working to nurture the coming generation of leaders – we are seeking to do this as we approach a time of transition here.

Being a member of this, or any other church, is more than having the place as a spiritual home, having a pastoral leader and receiving a monthly copy of Window on Wesley’s. Being a member – both long-standing and new – is to recall continually that your faith is a gift from God – given to you with other gifts for the building up of the people of God. Seek out your gifts and, in the words of Paul, ‘rekindle them, bring them back to a blazing fire.’

Perhaps the most challenging matter for all of us is how we transmit our faith in our family context. 21st century Britain is a difficult environment in which to do this. Faith is as much caught as taught – it is a way of life that should attract people, appeal to people, even our own children. So this means that our faith has to be much more than attendance at Church - it needs to be something that permeates our lives, our speech and our actions day by day. Young people are never so critical as when they see hypocrisy – ‘do what I say, not what I do’ will never work.

Faith is like love- it cannot be forced, it has to be freely and willingly embraced. God does not force us to be his followers – he acts in love towards us and waits for us to respond. This is the model for how we deal with our own families and the children for whom we have responsibility. As we sang at the beginning of our service,

“Here our children find a welcome
In the Shepherd’s flock and fold.”

All of us, children and adults, newcomers and old-timers, cradle Christians and new converts, cradle Methodists and first generation Methodists are called to be the Body of Christ – building one another up, nurturing our own gifts and those of others so that the world, the people we interact with, may believe.

“Here the servants of the Servant
Seek in worship to explore
What it means in daily living
To believe and to adore.”

In a few moments we are going to share bread and wine, as a family shares a meal around the table This ritual comes down to us from the very beginnings of our faith. We are doing what Jesus did with his very first disciples. It is a reminder to us that Jesus suffered so that we might be brought into God’s new kingdom as co-workers in his eternal project.

This ritual is as central to who we are as our biological DNA – it gives us the encouragement and strength to be people of faith in our generation.

“Here as bread and wine are taken
Christ sustains us as of old.”

Thanks be to God. Amen