

If I were a wise man or if I were even a man with a modicum of sense in my later years, I would choose to stay away from any text in Holy Scripture which, in light of my own physiognomy, mentions ears! Yet, fool that I am, I deliberately choose this lesson because it speaks to yet one more essential part of our common ministry upon which I have centered my addresses to the Society over the past three years. In 2016 I spoke about the fact that, though we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart because it seemed to address the general despair which many felt about the Church in that time. Last year I spoke about the issue of not neglecting the gift that is in you by the laying on of hands, as a reminder of the power of the office imparted to us. Both of these matters touched deeply upon the office of ministry to which we have been called, the pastoral responsibility we bear as guardians of that office and the way in which we live that office out within the common life of the Society. Which brings me to this third reflection from Paul's second letter to Timothy, a final reflection in a way since Paul now knows that his time is limited, what Thomas Oden calls Paul's "death cell imperative" and he wishes to pass on to his young protégé, this summary of his charge for the future. "In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and dead, and in view of His appearing and His kingdom, I solemnly urge you: proclaim the kingdom; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke and encourage with the utmost patience in teaching." And then there is that bit about the itching ears!!!

But as powerful as this whole text is, with its charge and weight of responsibility, it is the opening words which strike me most forcefully. "In the presence of God and Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead..." Judgment tied to the office of ministry seems to be a strange at first blush but only if we misunderstand the accountability that is also an integral part of that same office. I have participated in any number of ordinations down through the years and I never fail to be struck by the words found in the LBW rite for ordination when the Bishop, immediately prior to questioning the candidate standing before them, says very clearly, "Before Almighty God, to whom you must give account..." There is, without a doubt, to be a judgment and an accounting for our stewardship at some point and if that thought alone does not give us pause for serious reflection...if that doesn't scare the heck out of you...then I don't know what will. For in that accounting I firmly believe that we who are entrusted as stewards of this office, we who are shepherds of the sheep and guardians of the faith, we will be held to a higher level of accountability and judgment than those we serve. Whatever we may think of the office of ministry today or those who hold that office – and here I am forcefully reminded of the scandals that have most recently been brought to light in the Catholic Church although they are not alone in sin-filled human behavior - in the end this office we hold remains accountable not the judicatories who oversee us, nor to the media who loves to challenge us or to our friends who fail to understand why we do what we do or even to our parishioners whom we serve but rather to the One who judges on the last day. Or, as the commentator Mathew Henry wrote, "The best of

men need to be awed into the discharge of their duty.” This is both a salutary warning and a word of encouragement so that we may, at all times and in all places, understand our proper role as stewards of the mysteries of God, a steward who will, most definitely, be called to account.

And then Paul turns to the specifics of the charge for Timothy and, by extension, for us. There is no doubt that this charge is curt and terse for there is little time left when one is in jail awaiting execution – that death cell imperative again! First preach the Word. We are called to be guardians of the faith but not hoarders of it. The Word is meant to be preached not kept on the shelf like some precious gift. Preaching is at the heart of our life and office, preaching the Word is our primary calling and preaching is at the core of our very identity. And this is where I would wish that we had a little less Lutheranism in our body and perhaps a little more charismatic life among us because it would be at this point that our sisters and brothers in the Amen corner would be shouting out “preach it brother, preach it!” But then even we staid Lutherans know in our hearts and souls that our charge and our calling is to preach it, preach it and preach it again!

But what Word is it that we are to preach? While serving as Dean in my Synod and assisting with congregations in transition, I was always struck by the congregational profiles which put at the top of the list for a new pastor one who was a “good preacher.” Now by good preacher they did not mean someone who could exegete the Christological ramifications of John’s Gospel nor one who could explicate the doxological implications of the perichorisis of the Holy Trinity. No what they wanted was a preacher who was not boring. That simple! And they surely did not want a preacher who would make them uncomfortable by challenging their prescriptions for what made a “good church” nor did they want someone who confronted them with uncomfortable facts – that the sick are to be cared for, the poor supported and the imprisoned visited. They did not want a good preacher who would challenge the moral and ethical values of our world and our society and say that, in the end some things are wrong, indeed they are a sin! And they were definitely not asking for a preacher who would, if I might use the old adage, comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. No they wanted a good preacher who will preach what they think they need to hear and believe.

But that is not the way of Paul. Regardless of whether his hearers wanted to hear it or not, Paul preached “in season and out” and damn the consequences as his place in that prison cell now attests. And while Paul, immediately following our text for today, addresses his condition in that prison, he knows that the preaching admonition is not about him. Indeed for Paul it was never about him but rather always about the Gospel. And therefore preaching is not to be about us, about me, about my story. Thomas Oden, in his commentary on this text puts it so well when he says, “There is no hint here that preaching is thought of primarily as self-expression of subjective experience or feeling disclosure or autobiography or “telling one’s story” so as to neglect Scripture. Only Scripture equips preachers rightly to tell their own stories.”

And if it is not your story, except in the context of Scripture, then that which we preach must be that which is given to us and not burdened down with idiosyncratic amendments or

individualistic additions. The canonical Word as received by the Church is to be the substance of our preaching – nothing more and nothing less.

And there is urgency to this preaching. Think of a doctor who must attend to his or her patient whether that patient is ready or not, willing or not. So too the preacher! If we wait for that time when we think it is most fitting to address an issue, when the time seems more appropriate or prudent for us to make our case, then we will always find a way to postpone that which must be preached. True our preaching is called to be responsive to the times but it is not for us to determine when such a time is most suited for proclamation. And Paul is once again our example. This was not the best or most suitable time for him to be preaching to Timothy, bound in chains and thrown in a death cell as he was. But lack of convenience should never diminish the necessity for preaching.

But we know only too well my brothers and sisters that some of our hearers have come to believe that they cannot hear one more word of truth. What they want instead is a confirmation of their own beliefs, their own assumptions, perhaps even their own illusions. For such people there will come a time when sound instruction will no longer be tolerated. And if such a warning was evident in Paul's day, how much more evident is it among our churches today. The hunger for novelty will not go away. Witness how too many of our church bodies, across so many denominational boundaries, latch on to the latest preacher, the one most willing to pamper and titillate, and use them as the model for the rest of us to emulate...as though to say this is the magic bullet for which we have been searching. And the itching ears of the flock are always eager to be tickled with one new sensation after another. And to compound the problem, individuals are then chosen for church leadership who are able and willing to scratch those itches, fulfill those marketplace cravings, teach according to the current and prevailing passions and not because they have any intention of witnessing to the apostolic faith.

And make no mistake - the hunger of those itching ears is insatiable. Witness the rise of more and more of those hucksters who promote the so called "Prosperity Gospel." Or the growing number of purveyors within our own tradition who promote a world without sin and guilt and a theology based on our expression of self. "Naked and unashamed" may make seminary students feel good in the moment, but it is nothing less than a pampering by theologians and seminary administrators to the itching ears of those who should know better. The steady supply of teachers for these forms of idolatry will increase as they seek to supply their own desires. But then when our own cravings and projections and passions are substituted for the Word of God, what can we expect? Our call is to speak a word of truth in the midst of this chaos; to proclaim the apostolic faith to those itching ears even when they do not want to hear it; and to "convince, rebuke and encourage" no matter what may come.

So be steady my sisters and brothers. Keep your wits about you for now is not the time to be caught up in the maelstrom of those so called theologies which seek to pamper to self instead of

growing closer to God. And be ready to endure suffering, contempt and abuse in various forms, for those of us who hold firm to the Apostolic faith will most certainly experience such suffering as we are shunned by our colleagues and marginalized by our judicatories. But then we are called to be evangelists, proclaimers of the Good News. And as evangelists we are not called to be mild and meek in defense of that same news but rather to serve as soldiers ready to march toward battle, awaiting our order to move so that the Kingdom might be defended.

All of this, Paul implies to Timothy and by extension to us, does not happen without work, study, prayer and meditation – all supported by God’s grace. The Church must be led and Timothy and you and I are all reminded that we are to stick with the work of being an evangelist through thick and thin – especially when there is more of the former than the latter. We know this my sisters and brothers, we understand this and our Society supports and strengthens us for the work we have done and will continue to do. Therefore I pray that we will do nothing more or nothing less than “proclaim the kingdom” in and through the office of ministry to which He has called us and that He would continue to bless the ongoing work of this Society so that this office can be supported for the sake of the Church. May the Lord God grant this unto us all. Amen