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Christ Church West Wimbledon
Sermon : Last Sunday after Trinity
Sunday 23rd October 2022

LAST SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY 23 OCTOBER 2022

The two wonderful letters of Paul to Timothy which we have been reading over the past few weeks are addressed to St. Timothy, one of Paul's most faithful co-workers. Together with the Letter of Paul to Titus, they are called Pastoral Epistles because all three deal principally with church administration and the growth of heresies and were addressed to individuals rather than congregations. Some scholars doubt Paul's authorship of the letters, some regard the epistles as in the tradition of Paul but not written by him and other scholars are certain that they are indeed written by Paul.

The First Letter of Paul to Timothy insists on the need to shun unorthodox teachings and reiterates the qualities expected of bishops and deacons. It exhorts Timothy to fulfil his duties faithfully and to instil in his congregation traditional beliefs and respect for one another. Timothy is encouraged to lead a life of exemplary conduct and is given rules for church order and discipline both for the group as a whole and for the individuals that compose it.

The Second Letter is very intimate and personal and is regarded as Paul's final letter. In it, Paul urges Timothy to "*guard the good treasure entrusted to you, with the help of the Holy Spirit*" and to accept his share of suffering "*like a good soldier of*

Christ Jesus". He is further encouraged to *"have nothing to do with stupid and senseless controversies"* and to avoid people *"of corrupt mind and counterfeit faith"*. After reminding Timothy that *"from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you"* Paul asserts two important truths: *All Scripture is inspired by God, and it is profitable to us for our spiritual development*. Paul begins his final chapter of this second letter with some very powerful words, which we heard last Sunday: *I solemnly urge you: proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favourable or unfavourable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching*. Thus Paul sums up his life of some 30 years of service to God and Christ as he writes: *"As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully"*. And as the disciples of today we can only say Amen to that.

One important point to make. At this time in his life, we have to remember that Paul was in his second imprisonment in Rome which was much more severe than his first: he was held in chains with few visitors, and he felt his death was imminent – as was indeed the case for he died soon after. Which is why our passage today begins: *"As for me, I am already being poured out as a libation, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith"*.

The time for my departure has come. Well, I have to announce to you this morning that the time for my departure has come. Not, I trust, to my imminent death but to my retirement after over 45 years of ministry. Let me explain. These days clergy generally retire at the age of 68 and must retire at 70. I came to the parish over 5 years ago in April 2017, I am approaching my 69th birthday and, having recently bought a home in the city of Norwich, plan to retire in the New Year. I have therefore written to the Bishop of Southwark tendering my resignation which he has accepted. I will be here to help lead our Christmas services and my last Sunday will

be on 8 January as we celebrate the Epiphany. I then hope to move house later that month.

I know some of you will not be surprised by this announcement – whilst others of you, who might possibly benefit from a trip to Specsavers, think I am much younger than I actually am! I came to the parish over 5 years ago in April 2017, and it was on the understanding that it was inevitably going to be for a relatively short period of time. It has, of course, been a time in our world history that few of us could have predicted – both as we endured the extraordinary trauma of Covid and as we recently saw the end of the Elizabethan reign. In terms of our church life, it has been a very full five years. But human beings are nothing if not resilient and we seem to be moving onwards and upwards – and I know that will continue for Christ Church both during the time of vacancy and then when a new vicar is appointed – someone whose name I am certain is already known to God. Mind you I recently heard the story of a vicar who announced he was leaving and was quite touched to find one of the churchwardens sitting in the church crying. “Don’t get too upset. There will soon be another vicar here and I’ve no doubt they’ll be a lot better than me.” “Oh no they won’t” came the reply “the last vicar said that when he went and it wasn’t true”.

But joking aside, in the next few weeks, there will have to be some careful planning to try to ensure that Sunday morning services are covered, at a time when spare clergy are as rare and precious these days as NHS dentists, and to ensure that some tasks can be shared out amongst everyone. In particular I know that you will be as supportive as you possibly can be for our two wonderful Churchwardens, on whom the ultimate responsibility for the life of this Church rests. They, along with the members of the Church Council together with the Archdeacon will be reflecting on what sort of person this church needs as its next vicar. I am sure at some point they will invite your views and that you will be ready to offer them. As many of you

know this is a very special church congregation which I know will go forward and flourish. When I left Potters Bar to move here the bishop said: "The vicar is leaving. God is not". The collect for today seems very apposite both for you and for me with which I finish:

"Merciful God, teach us to be faithful in change and uncertainty, that trusting in your word and obeying your will we may enter the unfailing joy of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.