

SERMON, LUKE – DA morning – 2 Timothy 4.5-17, Luke 10.1-9

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

When I arrived in my last parish, I had two non-stipendiary priests. One was an NHS manager, the other a consultant in rehabilitation medicine. Last time St Luke's day fell on a Sunday, I got one to preach in the morning and the other in the evening and had the day off. Today, I should have got some of you who know more about health and the NHS to have spoken about your experiences through all this – and I'm sorry I didn't (and I'm not just sorry because now I've got to go it myself).

In Colossians 4.14, Paul describes Luke as his “beloved physician”, in Philemon he is described as a “fellow worker”, and then we have this mention in Paul's second letter to Timothy “only Luke is with me”. We have the Gospel that bears his name, and we link that to Acts of the Apostles – both books are written to the same person, “Dear Theophilus”, both seem to be written by the same hand. Tonight at Evensong we'll look at the Acts passage, and as you can see it is a first person passage – “we tried to cross to Macedonia”, the author, presumably Luke, is there with Paul.

In 2 Corinthians 12, Paul refers to his “thorn in the flesh”, implying some sort of medical problem, recurring illness – we don't know what – but it may be that Luke spent a lot of his time supporting Paul as a friend and as a doctor. When you think about Paul's life and journeys, they were physically demanding – then you add in the times he was beaten, stoned, punished, his body must have taken quite a battering.

When Paul was writing his second letter to Timothy, or to be precise when he was dictating his letter to a scribe who would write it down, it sounds as if was tired and feeling his age. Now I'm not going to suggest that at 58 I am that bad, not quite ready for my time of departure yet – but I've had lots of these conversations over the years. Often in residential homes – “why am I still here?” I usually responded with the joke about “why do bishops have long lives?” “Because the Lord doesn't want them to join him.” But I've learned that usually, though humour will help, there is an underlying seriousness.

Ruth Barkaway was a St Edmund's lady who died earlier this year, and she had been in a residential home for three years – she moved in not long after I arrived. She was fed up with it, and often told me she wanted to die. Yet she had a family across this world, and she saw pictures of two more great grandchildren in those three years, she persuaded another of her grandchildren that she should have a church wedding and told grandchild, in no uncertain

terms, why church was important. When she was having a good day, she was a joy to care for – she had been a nurse, and on one occasion not long after she arrived she was moaning at me about the quality of nursing care some of the carers had. I pointed out to her that she had the skills and the patience to help these carers become better nurses, that she understood the pressures on them, and that she should pray for them rather than moan about them. I think she took my words to heart, and when she died I had the manager telling me how wonderful she had been with the young people. I took her communion every three or four weeks, and I benefitted from her love and friendship. It meant a huge amount that, a couple of days before she died, when I wasn't being allowed into the Home, her daughter was. And Ruth asked daughter if she could phone me so we could say "goodbye" and I could give her a blessing. OK, I was tears for a while after we'd finished our call, but what a privilege, to know that we had kept the faith together.

We all try and keep the faith together. It's actually what an Annual Parochial Church Meeting is all about. We had plans as to how we were going to build on a Bicentenary – and everything has been blown out of the water. But we're here, and we keep going, and we proclaim the love of Jesus.

It's been a difficult week. Geoff and Vicky didn't expect to have to dial 999 on Thursday morning, I didn't expect to have to spend the day with police and fire investigators. I ended up climbing the tower with the fire investigator and the forensic photographer. Their excuse was they wanted to see whether the arsonist had thrown a lighter or anything on the nave roof, actually they just wanted to see the view. It was quite amusing – we went through the window which leads onto the north nave roof (up there), and the window shut behind us. Fortunately we managed to reopen the window to get back to the ladder – we would never have lived it down if we'd had to get a fire engine out to rescue us! It was a fun day, but I was shattered on Friday. We got off lightly, and we're very grateful – yesterday's wedding congregation knew nothing about it. There's work to be done, and it will cost us a bit, but nothing too expensive in the great scheme of things. We've kept the faith, fought a good fight, and got through another week in this race we're on.

And if the gas pipe had fractured and the whole church had gone up in flames, we would still have worshipped today. It might have been in the Village Hall, or the school hall, or standing round the War Memorial – but we would have worshipped. This is only a building, and God's worship does not depend on a building. I only worshipped with Ruth in a church building on a handful of occasions, most of the times we worshipped together was in her room in the residential home. She missed church, she missed music and choir – but you don't need any of those to worship God. The Church has learned the power of

zoom, the power of the internet, learned the lesson that God is everywhere – and a challenge of the next few years will be whether we keep all our buildings if Christians are worshipping elsewhere.

Paul wasn't thinking about buildings – he was realising that his worship of God on this earth, in this life, was going to be replaced by the worship of God outside this life, off this earth – in however we picture heaven. I hate the picture of heaven we sing about in a certain carol

Not in that poor lowly stable,
With the oxen standing by,
We shall see him; but in heaven,
Set at God's right hand on high;
Where like stars his children crowned
All in white shall wait around.

I don't want to spend eternity “waiting around” as if it's some sort of railway platform and the train is late. I'm never sure how I picture heaven, though there are two young men I'm desperate to see again, but the musician in me has the vision of heaven in the harmonies

Yea, Lord, we greet thee,
Born this happy morning,
Jesu, to thee be glory given;
Word of the Father,
Now in flesh appearing:

That'll do me.

I love the way Paul has a vision of heaven, and then is back with people. Some have gone, but others are here. Luke is with me - yes, that's what matters. O, and get Mark as well – can you imagine being in the same room as Mark, Luke and Paul. Imagine being a fly on the wall as three of our bible writers were there together. O, and I want the cloak, the book and the parchments. Do you imagine an old man needing his cloak to keep warm, and the book and the parchments because there's more he wants to read. (I could make a rude comment about my wife sat in her corner with her jumper, her books and various pieces of paper – but she might read this sermon on line, so I won't use the word “old”).

And sometimes old men aren't very forgiving – even when they're apostles. “Alexander the coppersmith” – you do wonder what he'd done to upset Paul, why Timothy was being warned against him. I do hope that someone was brave enough to sit down with Alexander and sort the disagreement out – such a shame if it went on and on and on.

We enjoy a faith which is other worldly, and which is here and now. Where some individuals will be remembered for years, and others are just passing through. I married Will and Karen yesterday – they have connections here, but they live out near Doncaster. They might be back next year to have a celebration with a packed church since we could only have 15 yesterday, or I might never see them again. I can be annoyed I had to give up a Saturday lunchtime for them, or I can be pleased that a lovely couple brightened a difficult week. I learned a long time ago that doctors are good at brightening difficult weeks.

I may never meet the person who thought it would be fun to burn down our shed. I can be so angry that my blood pressure rises, and I hate him – or I can hope and pray that he gets the help he needs to sort out his mental state and become a decent member of society. I hope and pray that a doctor can help heal him.

I hope doctor Luke gave Paul the help and support he needed, as long as he needed it – and I hope Luke got the support he needed. It is worth reminding ourselves that, as far as we know, Paul didn't have a natural death, drifting off to sleep, the end of a life well lived. Traditionally he was killed at the hands of the Emperor Nero and his henchmen in 67 AD. Luke may simply have been one of many Christians around the Emperor who heard of the death of his friend, and mourned as we all do. He may, of course, have been with Paul – perhaps he got the job of preparing Paul's body for burial. We don't know.

That may be too sober a note to finish on – but this is a year when it does us no harm to remember that there is a price paid by those who care. Keep praying, keep loving, keep being political – because the funding of our NHS is a political issue – and may we all be healers of our broken and divided world.

Those of you who read yesterday's facebook post will know that in the foyer of Addenbrooke's Hospital in Cambridge is a memorial plaque to David Kindersley, a calligrapher and sculptor. It has a quote from Idris Shah, a teacher in the Islamic Sufi tradition. "It will pass, whatever it is".

I've walked past that plaque on many occasions, and pondered. It seems a very good text for where we are now. "It will pass, whatever it is".