
The Good Treasure

2 Timothy 1:1-14

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on October 3, 2010 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

Put yourself in James B. Duke's shoes. You have money, but you want to turn that money into lasting good. You have social influence, but you want that influence to contribute to the kingdom of God. You know a lot about business, but you want to translate that knowledge into something closer to the core of the human spirit.

Now put yourself in the shoes of William Preston Few. You love the Methodist church, and see its virtues as extending beyond the domain of personal faith and parish ministry. You love scholarship, and have a vision of how the liberal arts can form the undergraduate imagination and how professional study can train the graduate vocation.

It's a happy meeting. It's easy to see how Duke and Few were able to give one another precisely what each wanted: the vision of a university and the resources to make it possible. But there was one precious thing that neither of them had that's at the heart of our reflections today.

And the clue to that one precious thing lies in the architecture of Duke's West Campus. A large slice of idealized medieval Europe rapidly sprang up in the center of North Carolina. The architecture is a huge statement about what Duke and Few sensed they lacked. Building a campus that looks like a huge medieval monastery is a bold signal that this is a place that is so serious about learning that it inscribes it with the aura and discipline associated with religious faith, and so pragmatic about religious faith that it will employ its imagery to promote human wellbeing as best it knows how. What could possibly be lacking? In a word, tradition. Tradition isn't something one can borrow or simply acquire, as Duke and Few well knew. The architecture is saying, "We may not have a tradition, but out of ancient faith and earnest scholarship, we're sure going to form one as fast as it can be done."

Tradition is a powerful word. One of my seminary administrators liked to use that power in the way he led the seminary. If we'd done something once before, he would say, "It has been our tradition..." If we'd done something twice before, he would say, "It has always been our tradition..." If we'd never done something before, he'd say, "Don't you think it would be wonderful to have a tradition of..."

When the Second Letter to Timothy was written, the early church was entering its third generation. These were the people who'd known the people who had known Jesus. In other words it was about as far into its history as we at Duke are into ours. And the opening words of the letter are all about what it means to receive, cherish, and pass on a tradition. Paul's term for tradition is, "the good treasure." I want to look carefully with you today at what Paul says about the church's tradition, in order to investigate how that tradition might differ from what it means to be a university.

For Paul, this good treasure means something about the past, something about the present, and something about the future. Let's look at each one in turn.

Paul tells us several things about the past. He tells us God saved us and called us. This salvation and vocation is focused in Jesus. Jesus did something *for* us by abolishing death, but invited us to *participate* by revealing the light of new life. So the events of the past have an objective and subjective dimension. God did what only God could do – that's the objective part. But God invites us to be part of what God is doing. That's the subjective part. Our tradition is a balance between what God has done and what we have done too.

Paul makes this personal by recalling that Timothy had been shaped in faith by his mother Eunice and his grandmother Lois. I wonder if you had or have a grandmother, and whether she was influential in shaping your faith. In my household we have a rule. Parents do the routine, the habit-forming, the discipline, the

homework, the everyday. Grandparents do the candy, the treats, the fun stuff. That makes granny the ideal person to share the Christian faith. When did Christian families start assuming that faith was essentially about routine and discipline and homework? Christianity is fundamentally about joy and wonder and things to look forward to. If you're a grandparent, you're the best person in the world to tell your grandchildren about forgiveness and eternal life and all the fabulous candy of the gospel.

Having described the way tradition refers to events of the past, Paul moves on to give an account of how tradition requires certain actions in the present. You need to *remember*. Studies of human memory show how poorly most of us recall events we think we remember vividly. Over time our minds forget crucial parts of the story and invent other parts by conflating various incidents or allowing our own prejudices or other people's suggestions to alter what we perceive. Tradition is different from memory, because tradition is about practising in the present the wisdom derived from the past, not simply rehearsing the past. As one scholar put it, tradition isn't the dead faith of the living – it's the living faith of the dead. That faith is like a fire burning slowly and silently in its warm but hidden embers. Paul tells Timothy, "Rekindle the gift of God that is in you." That's what our worship together does: it takes historic words and events and rekindles them so we all catch fire with the gift of God. By setting them to music, by making them speak in the sermon, by giving them ordered shape at the communion table or in procession, we're rekindling the tradition and making it live and set us on fire.

A man went to visit a monastery and after dinner the abbot invited him to join the monks as they had an hour's social time before concluding the day with the late night prayers. The abbot said to the visitor, "We often tell each other some jokes. Listen." The visitor took a seat and listened. One monk said "74" and the whole company chuckled and chortled. Another monk said, "37," and again the rest giggled and smiled. "What's happening?" said the visitor. "We all know each other so well," the abbot replied, "that we've heard all the jokes, so we can just say the number and everyone recalls it. Would you like to tell one?" The visitor nervously thought he should try. "165" he said. All the monks fell off their chairs with laughter. "What did I do?" the visitor wondered. "Ah," said the abbot, radiant with happiness. "We haven't heard that one before."

Imagine being the bearer of a tradition held as tightly as that. What that story reminds us is that you can't have tradition without community, and you can't have community without tradition.

But Paul makes clear that tradition isn't just about remembering our past. It's about remembering our future. The heart of the Christian faith isn't just that Jesus saves us from our past by forgiving our sins. It's also that he brings immortality to light by abolishing death. In other words he creates our future. For Christians, Jesus isn't just a historical figure who said and did some cool things in the past. He's more than anything the figure we shall meet face to face on the last day. In Jesus we've seen the future. That's the Christian hope. But it also explains the three most telling words in this passage from Second Timothy.

The first word is suffering. Paul is suffering and assumes Timothy will do so. The second word is shame. Paul isn't ashamed, even though his faith has put him in prison, and, again, he encourages Timothy not to be ashamed. The third word is trust. Paul trusts Jesus, but he also trusts Timothy. We all think trust is a good word but trust only comes to life when it's put under strain. To trust someone is to believe even when they're an hour late and they haven't called to say that there's a good reason and you should still wait for them. To trust someone means that even when everyone's saying horrid things about how they've behaved or what they've said you put those stories on hold because you assume from your prior knowledge of them that there's another and very different side to the story. To trust someone is to give them your money, or your secret, knowing that they'll be tempted to misuse it, but believing that it's safe with them. Do you find it hard to trust? To trust means to realize there are more important things in life than being in control. It's to dare to invest your heart and wellbeing in the unknown future. Trust is when tradition is put to the test. If tradition doesn't create trust, you wonder if it's really worth very much. And Paul's tradition is under terrific strain from suffering and shame. If your tradition, if your Christian faith, has never caused you suffering and shame, I wonder if it's really worth all that much to you.

When I was a child my mother would kneel by my bed each night and say to me, “I know you get teased at school. I know people laugh at you because you go to church. But your daddy is a pastor. He has a very important job to do. And in everything you do and say and in everything I do and say we must make sure we make his job easier, not harder, and be good examples of what he stands for.” That’s the way I discovered I was part of a tradition. Some people say you shouldn’t make your children suffer for your principles. But I say, you don’t know you’ve got principles until you start to suffer for them, and if they’re worth anything your children will want to suffer for them too. A tradition only matters when it shapes how you think about the future. Belief in the forgiveness of sins and the resurrection of the dead make Christianity laughable, in the school playground or the university classroom, but the shame is part of the glory, and it’s in the suffering that you discover the trust.

And that brings us back to the tradition of the university. In the 75 years since the days of James B. Duke and William Preston Few, our university has certainly built some deep traditions. On days like today we find ways to rekindle those traditions, and shake into flame the embers of our past. We have longstanding traditions like gathering in the Chapel for Baccalaureate, newer traditions like tenting for basketball tickets, and emerging traditions like interdisciplinarity and civic engagement. These traditions embody our convictions about past and present, that knowledge and study should be distilled through encounter with the poor, dialogue with other forms of learning, the enjoyment of our bodies at play, and the truth and challenges of faith. These and other traditions name the ways Duke turns knowledge into wisdom. They are Duke’s good treasure.

But the modern university finds one thing very hard to talk about. And that is the future. Sure we are awash with strategic plans. Sure we fully expect within so many years to be the best at this and excellent at that. But we find it much harder to talk about what our whole life together is really for. Paul, alone and in prison 2000 years ago, found it easier to express what his life was really for, and why it was worth all the shame and suffering, than we do, all 35,000 of us who are members of this university buzzing around this campus every day. We don’t have a language for talking about the future. We all know the undergraduate in her final year of college who makes herself so busy with study and societies and social life and service so that she won’t have to face the haunting question of what she’s going to do after college. In many ways our whole university is like that senior. We’re tremendously busy, but I wonder if we make ourselves so busy lest anyone might ask us what it’s all for.

In other words, it’s doubtful whether the modern university can genuinely constitute a tradition in the same sense as the church does as Paul describes it – and that’s because a tradition is fundamentally the foundation for hope, a foundation that justifies the suffering and sustains us in spite of the shame. But if we say the university is not the church, what then is it? What are we celebrating on Founders’ Weekend? The university is not a tradition in the fullest sense. But it *is* a precious and unique and vital institution. It’s a fertile soil in which traditions may develop and flourish and grow. The role of the university in the fostering of traditions is to offer scrutiny and criticism and evaluation and comparison. The university is a critical friend to every tradition that comes its way. Because part of what it means to be a tradition is to cultivate an ongoing discussion of what the goods represented by that tradition truly are, and whether that tradition is as worthy an embodiment of those goods as it could be. And that discussion is what the university is best at. Without the university it’s not clear how any of us would sort out the fine traditions from the bad ones, and find our way to the good treasure.

Today we celebrate the meeting between Duke and Few that made this university possible. We express our gratitude for the intersection of church and university that makes this Chapel possible. We spotlight the interactions between Christianity and other traditions that make Christians review their understanding of past events, renew their conduct of present practices, and restore their commitment to future hope. Today we kneel beside each other’s bed, like my mother used to do, and gently whisper, “Are you a good example of what your tradition stands for? Are you living a life that inspires others to endure the suffering and the shame? Because I’ll tell you a secret. You’re the good treasure.”