

## Great Missenden & Little Hampden New Year 2010

*Almighty God, lead us into the coming year we pray. Grant us the gifts of faith and good courage. In Jesus name. Amen*

I guess it has become a bit of a tradition. Each New Year –a card -not a motto card -but a text card. You get mottos out of crackers, but you get texts out of the bible. Put it another way -the bible gives us promises, commands, enlightenment, exhortation. Rather importantly the bible does not give us mottos!

This year I have chosen a very simple sentence and it is by way of an exhortation. It is in the 2<sup>nd</sup> letter that Paul wrote to young Timothy -2<sup>nd</sup> chapter verse one ***‘Be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus.’*** -Or to quote the whole verse: “ You then, my child, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus.’

It’s a good practical text.

None of us is strong enough -we get very weak and frail, tired and worn out -physically, mentally and spiritually. So anything that puts us in the way of being strong, stronger, is very helpful to us.

So lets spend a few moments getting to grips with these words and get their meaning and truth into our experience. We’ll look at them very simply -and ask and answer three questions.

- Where is the need? -The need is for strength.
- Where is the strength? The strength is in grace.
- Where is the grace? The grace is in Christ Jesus.

This 2<sup>nd</sup> letter to Timothy is Paul’s last letter and from a human point of view it has a warmth and depth and richness that is very endearing. Also it is of course a personal letter -not written to a church but to an individual. Whereas the 1<sup>st</sup> letter was mainly about church administration and practicalities -this letter is more of a heart to heart, and you really feel the true human character of both Timothy and Paul himself emerge as you read it.

And it comes through very clearly that Timothy was not a strong man. The verse about his taking a little wine for his stomach’s sake is justly famous, but it’s also obvious that he was a timid and fearful man -the church at Corinth had to be warned not to take advantage of him. I

remember my Dad telling me about Donald Guthrie who taught him at London Bible college -he called Timothy 'Paul's most reluctant successor whose weaknesses are as apparent as his virtues.' So not a strong man either physically or emotionally.

Yet -he was called, by God, to this particular ministry.

So it is clear -God doesn't call people to serve him because they are strong. God doesn't call anyone to follow him -to be a disciple because they are strong, naturally strong.

Don't look at naturally strong, forceful, aggressive, successful people and say they'd make marvellous Christians -God doesn't work that way. He takes weak people and strengthens them -and in the end that's all of us. Just as we are all imperfect -and need to find it out, so we are all weak where it counts, and we will discover it and it will draw us to come to God for strength.

So then- Timothy as man in need of strength -not naturally strong. It's a funny thing -natural strength. In the Christian life people who are strong forceful personalities can so easily become aggressive, harsh, insensitive, self-righteous. You might even say that their natural strength is their weakness.

Can you see -all of us need God's strength -whether we feel strong or weak.

Alright -but strong to do what? What is it that Timothy needs to be strong for? What is it that we need to be strong for in this year we begin?

If we look at the context of the whole letter the first thing we notice is an emphasis on endurance. The word itself comes frequently and the images Paul uses back this up. He is talking about the endurance needed by a soldier, an athlete, a farmer. These people have to go on going on in spite of pain and setbacks -and they have to do it patiently. There were plenty of folk who had let Paul down -deserted when the going got tough. I believe that Paul as an old man saw more and more what a great thing it was to persevere as a living Christian -a living, growing Christian. Anyone can endure as a dead or stagnant Christian. I guess you can go on calling yourself Christian and keep coming to church, but to continue living, growing -that's something else. If that is happening in your life in spite of the setbacks, the accidents and illnesses, the financial troubles the family problems the heartaches and disappointment -at times the tragedies -now that needs deep strength.

Where is the need? The need is for strength -strength not just to do some great things for God, but strength to keep going -to keep growing. That's what you and I need for 2010.

At the end of this letter, among his last recorded words the old apostle says: 'The time has come for my departure. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.' He had endured as a living growing Christian -to the end.

We can't do that on our own. It can only be in God's strength. God's strength in every dimension -physical, emotional, spiritual.

Before leaving this point can we sharpen it up in one particular way that I personally find helpful. The great command of God is to love. Love him, love one another -and God's strength is to strengthen us to love. We need strength to go on loving -for love to endure -to go on loving against all the set backs -to love -for love to grow -to become deeper - more mature -more realistic -for love to cross new frontiers -go through new barriers. For love to rid itself of all self pity and whinging and self indulgence -to go on loving with a giving, forgiving, growing, practical, powerful love.....for that we need God's strength.

Very well -I face this New Year 2010 and I feel tired and worn out before I start. Where is the need? The need is for strength. We are not strong people. We need God's strength to endure as living, growing Christians -put the same thing another way -we need strength to go on loving and for love to grow.

Second question. Where is the strength? The strength is in grace.

Strength is as a result of some input. Physically if I aim to be strong there has to be input -there has to be the right sort of nourishment -nutrition - without that I simply get more and more feeble.

The greater the demands there are on my physical strength the more good input I will need. In times of emergency the body can draw on unsuspected reserves -to a surprising degree, but we can't go on doing that for ever -even the reserves become exhausted.

In our text we are told that the nourishment we need is something called grace.

Grace whatever that is can be taken in, digested and then translated into energy. We are to be strong in grace.

This isn't quite what we might expect. We might think that needing strength we'd be told to be strong in the Lord's mighty power, or strong

in the irresistible force of the Holy Spirit -there are texts along those lines elsewhere -but here our strength is to be found in GRACE.

It's not that obvious to explain -I've read around it a bit and no-one really deals with it very clearly. Let me give it a whirl.

Firstly; if strength is in grace then it is for every Christian -every child of God -you and me. There is no elitism here, no special blessing for 1<sup>st</sup> class Christians. Grace makes a Christian a Christian and grace keep a Christian a Christian. No grace no Christian. So strength is not some exotic blessing for the super star -it comes through grace -which is our birthright -we may be young or simple, poor faulty and frail -but we can all be strengthened by grace. If strength is in grace then I cannot earn it - nor can I forfeit it. Grace cannot be bought -we have nothing valuable enough with which to purchase, earn, or deserve God's grace.

Can you see how liberating this is -and how hard? The strength that we receive from God isn't only given to those who deserve it.

Let me make it personal -because like the rest of you I struggle with this. For example: on Saturday evening -or early Sunday morning when I am praying about the services here I pray for strength for the day -I pray to be enabled for the task -and yet a little voice in my head says -don't be silly -think how weak and useless you've been this week -think of all the stuff you haven't done and all the mistakes you've made -why should he help you out?

But of course the strength and the courage comes -and God proves to me that it doesn't work that way. If strength is in grace then the weakest Christian can pray for it -and look for Gods to give it freely -precisely because it is grace.

And if strength is in grace then it is a gracious strength. There are some folk whose spiritual strength seems to be abrasive, aggressive even -with little awareness of the hurt it can do to others. Their faith is strong and their stand uncompromising -but their strength is not a gracious strength. These folk often make a big noise standing firm on their principles -but remember that the strength of Jesus was a gracious strength -a strength strong enough to be tender and compassionate. As milk has the flavour of mountain herbs so, if strength feeds on grace then it will prove to be gracious -gracious to others and gracious to ourselves.

So if strength is in grace -it is available, it is unearned and it is gracious.

One more question -we've asked where is the need? The need is for strength. Then where is the strength? The strength is in grace. Now finally where is the grace? The grace is in Christ Jesus.

Our text is very clear. It tells us exactly where to look if we want to find grace. Where it is hidden -where treasured, where we can be sure to find it. In Christ Jesus. That is where God has put his grace -where he has put his grace for us.

There is no need to follow false trails or search in the wrong place -God has treasured up all his grace in Jesus.

Here is if you like the essence of Christianity -yes in a sense God's grace flows through all creation and everyone's life is touched by it in many ways -but it is in Jesus himself that we are told of the 'fullness of the godhead' dwelling in him.

It's the essence of the essence -God in Christ, and Christ in you. That's it -God in Christ and Christ in you. For the strength, for the grace we need we should come to him -come with faith -open our hearts to *him* -that is God's way.

And so then how do we translate this from theory into a daily practical reality.

When you see this text on your fridge what then? I think it is actually quite simple. ASK!

Let the words prompt you into prayer -just a couple of words -and ask for the strength you need -don't take it for-granted and don't feel fearful because of your weakness.

We began by looking at these words as an exhortation -but of course it is also a promise. The strength that flows from the grace of Christ is unlimited and unconditional -Remember the icy pavements we've just had? Imagine trying to walk along a steep incline with your best Sunday shoes on -slipping and sliding, worried that you'll break your leg any moment. Right beside you is someone with chains on their shoes offering you an arm. If you take their arm you'll be safe -but it's up to you!

There is a lovely Ignatian way of reviewing the day which also really helps with this. Think of what you needed strength for -what you asked God for and then allow yourself to be truly thankful for the amazing way in which you actually did have the strength and courage for your needs.

You asked for strength -he gave it -be thankful!

Including being very aware of what a great thing it is to endure -to go on going on as a living and growing Christian. To some this might sound dull, they'd rather perform a few miracles and convert a few thousand people. Sometimes when that fails to happen straight away they fail to endure. It is right to go on going on, and it is a great thing to go on loving in spite of all the setbacks. *To fight the good fight, to finish the course, to keep the faith.* Realize it is a great thing and needs great strength –ask God for it specifically -the strengthening grace of Christ Jesus.

Well -here is our text for 2010. Each of us will look at it many times this year -and often when we are worn out, jaded, weary and whacked -and it will encourage us to bring ourselves to God anew.

Towards the end of the book of Daniel in Chapter 10 (17-19) Daniel has to say ‘My strength is gone and I can hardly breathe. Then (he says) the one who looked like a man touched me and gave me strength ‘Do not be afraid ...Peace! Be strong now; be strong. And when he spoke to me I was strengthened.’

May that be our experience throughout 2010 -

***‘Be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus.’***

Amen

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