

GOD IN HISTORY

Timothy seems to have been a lucky chap. Paul tells us in today's epistle that his faith was passed on to him by his grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice. In fact, we are not so different. Like Timothy, we didn't invent our faith from scratch; the Gospel has been handed on to us too. Whether it was our parents who started us off, or the influence of a particular mentor, or being inspired by a welcoming Church community, our faith didn't come out of the blue. We received it from others and then began to make it our own, just as they had to do, as well as the generation before them, and so on, right back to the beginning. We are the present-day representatives of a community that has continued without a break to the apostles.

It's quite a thought. From the time of Jesus, people like Lois and Eunice and Timothy have passed on the good news of the Gospel through the generations in an unbroken succession until the present day. In each age, Christians have born witness in all sorts of different situations, and have helped to bring education, healing and hope to people and nations throughout the world. And now it's our turn.

Jesus promised his followers that the Holy Spirit would lead them into all truth. The Church is not just another human institution, like, say, the County Council or the National Health Service. Certainly it has many of the characteristics and problems that any human organization has. But the Church is also a divine society, animated and guided by the Holy Spirit – the Holy Catholic Church, as we say in the Creed. Over the years, it has often failed to behave as a community formed around the Christian Gospel should do. Sadly, the Church is always fallible because it's made up of people like you and me. But wherever Christians are, we are blessed with the presence of the Spirit of God uniting us, and in the power of the Spirit we can joyfully celebrate the Good News and bear witness. Part of our task today is to be open to the guidance of the Spirit so that we can discern the way forward for the Church in our own age, just as previous generations have tried to do. In the power of the Spirit, the Church carries the message of Christianity through time. When people suggest that it is possible to be a Christian and not be a member of the Church, I ask them to consider how the Good News of Jesus Christ would have survived through all the ups and downs of history if the Christian Church hadn't continued to celebrate, teach and

pass on its message? We need the Church, and the Church needs each one of us, to continue to bear this witness in our own times as well as for the next generation.

The Gospel is for everybody, and the Church exists to serve, celebrate and witness to it. So at all costs we should avoid the mistake of regarding the Church an exclusive club for religious people. Jesus didn't say "God so loved the Church". He said "God so loved the world that he sent his Son". Archbishop William Temple once remarked that "the Church is the only organization that exists for those who are not its members." Christians like us are called to offer our different gifts so that together we can all worship and witness in and for the world today. If we are going to be effective, we need to enter fully into today's world with all its joys and sorrows, and learn to love it in the way God does. Christianity is not a world-denying faith; it is fundamentally world-affirming. We know this because God chose to enter into human nature in Jesus, hallowing all humanity and the life of the world in the process. Today we continue to celebrate his Easter victory accomplished once, in Jerusalem 2000 years ago, but effective for all time and for all people. So when we sing the hymn, "God is working his purpose out as year succeeds to year", we are affirming our part in this continuing purpose. Our society is the arena for God's transforming purpose, and as Christians, you and I are to be signs of this, and called to celebrate it – which, of course, is what we are doing here in church this-morning.

And don't imagine that we are on our own in this, either. We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses - those who have gone before us. When we say in the Creed, "I believe in the Communion of Saints", we are not just referring to group of particularly holy people from the past. The Saints are all of us. As we worship it's good to develop a strong sense of being surrounded by all those who have gone before us. And once we do, we will never think of human history in quite the same way again. History is much more than the stuff about Kings and battles we learnt at school. It's all around us. Whenever we look round this building and see the memorials on the walls, or walk round the Churchyard and reflect on the number of people who have been buried here, we can be aware that these are not just anonymous people from the past whose bones are gradually turning to dust. These are people like you and me who have lived and loved in this place, struggled and celebrated and passed on the love they received, the faith they lived by, and are now one with us in a great cloud of

witnesses. Whenever we worship, we join with them in celebrating the triumph of love. Let's learn to appreciate the contribution that those who have gone before us have made to our life, and realize that they are still just as much a part of the Church of God as we are. Every age of history adds to those who make up this great throng. We worship with Angels and Archangels and with all the company of heaven. If we believe this, the past comes alive, and God's presence and activity in history becomes real to us.

I spent my first years of ministry in the North East, where in the sixth century, figures like Aidan, Cuthbert, Hilda and Bede were transforming their world through the civilizing influence of the Gospel. When I was ordained in Durham Cathedral, I found myself robing next to the case where Cuthbert's Pectoral Cross was displayed. It's not just that time telescopes in moments like these – though, of course, it does! What actually makes the difference is the momentous realization that Cuthbert and his contemporaries really are one with us, and we are one with them in the Communion of Saints. That's what God's involvement in history means.

However, we are living in times where few people believe that history has meaning and purpose. One result of this lack of faith in God's providence is a general and pervasive anxiety about the future. Over recent months it has felt as though we have been enveloped in a cloud of negativity and cynicism. The entire Brexit debate, for example, seemed to be conducted as though it was a contest between competing menaces. In our world, good news is rarely news. Newspapers tend to report plane crashes and divorces, not take-offs and happy marriages. But for those with eyes to see it is perfectly possible to recognize the Spirit of God at work around us. Did you know, for example, that every indicator of global trends – measuring starvation, poverty, child mortality, literacy, women's education, democracy, violence, death in war – shows a steady improvement? Is that not worth celebrating? And do we not believe that God has had some hand in this? Of course, quite rightly, we worry about the conflicts in Syria and Afghanistan, not to mention, in our own country, Brexit, the NHS and other concerns, but nevertheless we should resist the idea that everything, everywhere, is falling apart. It's just not so. The pessimism and fear that seems to be so prevalent at the moment reflects an outlook which takes no account of God's providential care for his people and his world. In this Eucharist we are witnessing to

a more hopeful truth, a truth that we need to renew each day by our trust in God's love for us and for his world.

This is God's world, and he is working out his purposes within history, as he has done since the dawn of time. Imagine what a difference it would make if everyone believed it! Just as Timothy owed so much to Lois and Eunice, each of us owes a debt of gratitude to those who passed the faith on to us. We are part of this inheritance, and in our turn are passing it on to those who follow us. God works with his people through time and history, and he has the whole world in his hands. Let's pray that we, as well as those who follow us, may be inspired to trust in the providence of God, and in the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.