

GUARD THE GOOD TREASURE

Stuart Mennigke - 3rd October 2004

Luke 17:5-10; 2 Timothy 1:1-14

On Wednesday past the SABC carried the first in a series called '*The Apprentice*' - 16 young entrepreneurs are selected by the billionaire man to spend 13 weeks in teams with tasks, all in the race to become the one who got to be president of one of the billionaire's companies for a year. The reason? – to learn from him and follow in his footsteps – maybe to become very wealthy also.

Well, it was the same night I began reading the lessons for today which find Timothy as an apprentice to Paul ... and of course the association with the movie was there - this young Greek man Timothy - whom Paul had led to Christ during his first visit to Lystra, who had then joined him on his missionary travels, and was even with him during his house arrest. So, they were very close - so much so, that Paul made him the co-sender of his six letters. An impressive young chap by all accounts. The 2nd Timothy letter is written during Paul's second imprisonment - this time not in the comfort of house arrest, but in a dungeon. He no doubt sees that the end of his life and ministry are close, and reminds and encourages Timothy in these profound words. Not 'learn from me and become very wealthy' but : "***Hold to the standard of sound teaching you have heard from me ... and ... Guard the good treasure entrusted to you with the help of the holy spirit living in us***". 'Vs 13 & 14

It is a charge to be a good apprentice – to live the good news, but it is also a charge to discern between what is good and what easily appears to be good.

Change is one of the things we humans find most difficult – for many reasons, but one of the chief one's is that we fear that we will lose what we have planted/designed/struggled for. Hence Paul's charge. He knows once he is gone, the temptation to water down the work he has established will be great – mainly because following Jesus is following a pattern of suffering - not just of glory - and none of us really wants to struggle with the challenges and tough stuff of being followers/apprentices.

Once we invest beyond the initial stages in the Christian life, (or for that matter any worthwhile cause in which we believe) we begin to have to choose between good and apparent good. Between the treasure and the place that houses it. Paul knew it. And he knew it through having invested totally in the treasure itself. Most worthwhile causes take us through suffering to get to the kernel and then (maybe) the glory. It is why Mandela can be hailed as wise and prophetic - and why he consistently sees the other side, the opposite view without being threatened by it. He knows the treasure. One of the things which suffering brings, is a focus on the real issue, rather than on the things which surround the issue. Paul was the same – he seemed to get to the depths of life's issues ... lived the treasure which was inside him – and it flows out in his writing.

And the treasure of course, is Jesus – not what surrounds him, not what we put in place to preserve Jesus. Once we discover and come to know the treasure, it's about

sharing what you hold inside you – not about investing in what protects the treasure. It's a difficult one. Paul didn't say to Timothy – protect the space around the treasure – but *guard what's inside you*. (Interestingly, Timothy wasn't an apostle, (like in 'Bishop' who's work is about guarding the sheep and the church) but a kind of apostolic delegate perhaps to remind the apostles of what they needed to focus on ...

Not wrongly I suppose, ... our human tendency is to immortalize the **place** of suffering, the **jail number**, and so on ... and make museums of them. Not wrong, because hopefully in posterity - it leads people to the truth itself. But when you listen to the person who's suffered for what many judge as worthwhile, you'll always hear them point to the issue itself, not the peripherals. And with it, always comes greater tolerance. You'll recall the parable Jesus told of the hidden treasure in the field: ... *"When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy, went and sold all that he had, and bought the field"*.(Matt.13.44)

Our biggest challenge in the spiritual life is to focus on ... **the treasure ... not the field**. The reward is found through investment in the treasure. Jesus is constantly drawing us away from focus on the field, to focus on the treasure in the field - himself.

In a recently published interview with the Franciscan author Richard Rohr, he said:

"It may seem scandalous, but I am really convinced that Jesus did not come to found a religion. I really think he is a universal message of vulnerability for the liberation of all religions." He said: *"that if the soul does not learn vulnerability, if it thinks it can dominate reality by ideology and answers, moralisms and morality it just gives people an over-assured sense of superiority."*

He went on to say: *"There is a terrible righteousness abroad today – an inability even to **talk** to the opponent. Jesus is the reformer of all religions – inviting us all on the path of vulnerability."*

Now, he was referring to religions at each others' throats. But the same is true of us in society, business and in the church itself.

We all have all kinds of things to be right about and to assert - boundaries to protect – (religious, parish, suburb, theological views, power, position, money, buildings, who's in and who's out, worthy and unworthy, sexuality issues, gender issues. And they come from the need to guard the field, not the treasure. *"So, if I see myself as the protector of my 'container', I can't admit mistakes publicly, I have to pretend, so I go down a path not of a chosen, but a necessary deceit."* (Rohr)

So, we have quiet voice and smug smiles of assurance of power and victory from America - or is it Bush? who makes himself the custodian of freedom?/maybe truth?/his truth? ... and so he is convinced that he has to protect the world from the enemy – of terrorism/or is it Islam, or what? It's the protection of power, place, republicans ... what? Of course, we know that part in our (South African) history – which is now almost totally destroyed, but lived at one time to protect the ideology. It became the focus, and anything which got in the way was destroyed ...

When I am sure of the treasure within, I can allow the opposing view, the dissenting view, the conflict, the disharmony – and try to learn what it teaches me. With hindsight now, we can see what Paul told Timothy to guard against – the (more immediate) threat against Christians, the arguments around formation of the Christian creeds and then what we still live today – the church, its ministers and people – protecting our denomination, our way of doing it, our boundaries, our power. Like Rohr, it may be scandalous to say, but the present centralization of authority we see in many Anglican and Roman Catholic provinces, arch/dioceses (personally I don't think ours is excluded) works against Jesus' message of vulnerability. The church may be trying to guard something – the question is: "Is it the good treasure"?

It's why Jesus urges the disciples not to think of themselves more highly than they ought to... (in the gospel Luke 17. 10) ... not a false humility, but one which is in place because we are reminded who we follow – this treasure – who is not a success story, but a vulnerable person.

A gospel of vulnerability – of admitting that we can be wrong. A gospel of power of a different kind – of being free to belong to a suffering Lord. A gospel of guarding a good **treasure entrusted to us** – which is a person, not a cause. *Do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, or of me, his prisoner ... but join with me in suffering for the gospel ... relying on the power of God. (vs 8)*

Some ancient words from Saint Romuald:

“Beloved Jesus, Jesus most kind.

My sweet honey...unspeakable desire

delight of the saints, bliss of the angels”

(Peter Damian : On the life of Blessed Romuald: chpt 13)