

Old Master? 1 Timothy 1.18-2.15



Every now and then a new ‘old master’ comes to light in the art world. ‘Head of an old man’ is a small, rather charming painting in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, which was attributed to Rembrandt when I was a student. But then the experts had a look at it and decided it wasn’t actually by the man himself — just a copy of a lost original. And then they had another look with the aid of a dendrochronologist (tree-ring counter!) who worked out that the wood panel it’s painted on comes from the same tree as an early painting by Rembrandt from 1630 — so it could be by him after all. So it’s now on display again while the experts wrangle over who actually painted it. Ultimately it stands or falls as an artwork (whoever painted it) by the quality of the painting itself.

1 Timothy is a bit like that painting. Many experts believe it’s not actually by Paul himself, more “school of Paul”, you might say. It certainly comes from somebody who admires Paul and wants to make sure his legacy is preserved and passed on to the next generation. It treats Paul as an example to follow, a revered ‘Old Master’ whose insights we don’t want to lose (1.16). It contains lots of great verses, things that Paul certainly would have agreed with — and probably said, many times, to his younger friends and associates: like the bit in ch.1 about how Paul’s astonishing career as a missionary and church-planter is a testimony to God’s ability to work with unpromising material (1.12-17). As our old friend Brian would have said, it’s not a case of “There but for the grace of God go I” — but “There with the grace of God go I”. How do I know that *Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners* (1.15)? Because he saved me!

Then there’s the bit about *fighting the good fight* (1.18). I like the way this letter is addressed to Paul’s younger colleague Timothy, encouraging him to have the confidence to be himself, to be the person God has called him to be — even if some of the older church members think he’s a bit too young for the job (4.12). The two *Letters to Timothy* have a lot of wisdom about growing up in the shadow

of a great leader, learning to trust that God has called you even though you don't feel up to the job. Timothy is a bit like Joshua in the Old Testament, desperately conscious that Moses was a hard act to follow — so God says to him, “As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you. . . . Be strong and very courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go” (Joshua 1.5-9).

There's some good advice for churches in 1 Timothy too. *I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgiving be made for everyone, for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity* (2.1-2). Prayer is one of the fundamental tasks of the church — not just for ourselves, but for the world God has put us in. That's why we have a team to lead the intercessions in church, reading the papers and keeping an eye out not just for our own needs but for the needs of the wider world. ‘Kings and all who are in high positions,’ especially: presidents and prime ministers and council leaders, having to make decisions that affect the lives of millions. They need our prayers. And there's a great hope tucked away there: *This is right, and is acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour, who desires everyone to be saved* (2.3-4).

But the next bit is one of my least favourite parts of the Bible (no surprise there!). Is this really Paul speaking? Whoever wrote this did not approve of a woman exercising a teaching ministry in the church — or even of my professional job as a university teacher. *Let a woman learn in silence with all submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent* (2.11-12). Women are allowed to exercise a ministry as ‘deacons’ (3.11) and perhaps as ‘widows’ (4.9-10) — probably a ministry among other women. Whoever wrote this wants the church to be a strictly segregated society.

Did Paul write this? Is this the Paul who supported Phoebe as his patron (Romans 16.2), who greets a whole list of women as team-mates and fellow-workers in the church (Romans 16; Philippians 4.2-4), who expects women to have a ministry of prayer and prophecy (1 Corinthians 11.5) — as long as they keep their heads covered? The Paul who said, “In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female” (Galatians 3.28)? It's not surprising there are different opinions in the church, when there are such different opinions in the Bible itself.

What are we to make of it all? As my dear mother-in-law used to say, when the discussion got a bit ‘airedated’, “I'm glad I'm only a simple believer”. And that's the point, really. The Bible is not a monolithic system of regulations, but a conversation with different voices, speaking in different times and places. God

doesn't speak to us with a trumpet-voice from heaven, but through the voices of ordinary people — ordinary everyday saints — who were part of their own times and places, and sometimes saw things differently. Paul's vision of God's new world didn't convince everyone, even in his own time — and it's taken us a couple of millennia to catch up with its full implications. (I'm not sure we're even there yet!) Meanwhile we have to keep praying for God's grace to continue to work in our fallen world, and bring us all at last to the unity of his kingdom:

*Behold how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell together in unity!
It is like the precious oil upon the head, running down upon the beard.
Even upon Aaron's beard, running down upon the collar of his clothing.
It is like the dew of Hermon, running down upon the hills of Zion,
For there God has promised his blessing, even life for evermore. (Ps 133)*

God bless, Loveday
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