

Sermon on 1 Timothy 6: 6-19
Fine Speech. Now What Do We Do?

I haven't tried you out with a movie for a while.

If I remember correctly the last one I referenced was *Chariots of Fire* which upped my average a bit for ones you've actually seen!

Anyway, who of you have seen Mel Gibson's stylised account of the life of William Wallace, *Braveheart*?

It's the story of Scottish struggle for independence from England in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

And in those days the referendums were a little more brutal than they are today.

There's a scene in the film set before one of the big battles where Gibson as William Wallace gives a rousing speech about freedom.

You know the kind, fight the invaders, shake off the yoke of slavery, raise your arms in battle, your actions will live on, that kind of thing.

All very inspiring and emotional stuff.

You can hear the strangled strains of the bagpipes blowing out Scotland the Brave in the background.

Once the speech is done Wallace returns to his line with his lieutenants.

As he settles back in to survey the scene ahead one of them says to him with a little irony in his voice:

'Fine speech. Now what do we do?'

Fine speech. Now what do we do?

I wonder if this is the way some of us feel when we leave church on Sundays?

Whether or not the sermon is 'fine' is perhaps another story, but that we come out thinking:

okay I've heard all the good talk about love, and compassion, and Jesus giving himself away.

About a God of love and the empowering of the Spirit etc etc.

It all sounds good on paper, but now the battle is ahead.

I have to face the actual world.

I actually have to figure out what I do and how I react and who I am.

It's okay to sing about forgiveness and grace in church, I like the hymns after all, but out there singing won't cut it.

Out there there's violence and fear and agendas all around within which I might get caught.

And apart from that there's just the normal living of life to do.

Bills to pay, mouths to feed.

I'm not sure whether all this stuff we talk about each week can actually cut it out there.

Perhaps like the rich young ruler we might think – I'm not sure Jesus, give it all away?
Really?

Don't think so.

Can't be right.

This is not fancy land, I need my money to live.

So we're left with a dilemma.

A tension.

What do we love and grace and compassion and non-violence, these central themes of what it means to be Christian that we talk about all the time once we go out from church?

When the battle comes it will be won by those with the best army, biggest weapons, best commanders, not those who just hope for freedom.

It's wishful thinking and little more surely.

Fine Speech. Now what do we do?

Christians are often accused of not living in the real world.

Seen as idealistic dreamers.

Utopian imaginers who don't give heed enough to the harsh realities of life.

It's kind of like that very famous photo of the man standing in front of the tank in Tiananmen Square.

One might say while it's certainly a powerful image, the reality is that the tank could simply crush him if it wanted to.

For all his noble protest, it would prove fruitless in the face of raw naked power.

It would win the day.

Right? Or would it?

That photo has become one of the iconic images of the 20th C representing with great symbolic force the paradox of humanity.

There is a helpless, unarmed, single person, staring down a line of tanks which for all he knows are about to crush him.

And who of us does not feel a twinge of inspiration looking at that photo?

And sensing the courage and indifference to fear of that single man's stand?

That there is a nobility there that powerfully transcends its immediate context and shows us something profound about ourselves?

So, who really has the power there?

Where is the real life?

The real insight?

Every week when we come here to worship Jesus, we are worshipping the one who stood in the way of the Roman tank column.

We are worshipping a dying man who was crushed, done away with and seen as but a meaningless speck in the deserts of time.

Yet it is in him we find our hope and in him the world has received its greatest challenge to the normal way of doing things.

No-one in all history has impacted the world as Jesus has.

And all his followers left him at the crucial point and he literally had nothing.

So again, who really has the power?

Where is real life? Real hope? Which way, really is the real way?

In Paul's first letter to Timothy, nearing its conclusion, we find this magnificent passage which likely contains Timothy's ordination charge.

But as for you, man of God, shun all this; pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness. ¹² Fight the good fight of the faith; take hold of the eternal life, to which you were called and for which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses. ¹³ In the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, I charge you ¹⁴ to keep the commandment without spot or blame until the manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁵ which he will bring about at the right time—he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords. ¹⁶ It is he alone who has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see; to him be honour and eternal dominion. Amen.

A wonderful exhortation to faithfulness we can't help but be moved by... but then the writer goes on...

As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. ¹⁸ They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, ¹⁹ thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.

That they may take hold of the life, that really is life.

Paul is saying here, don't be confused about what is really real.

The allures of the material world and the assumption that it is in its normal power dynamics that the deepest reality is to be found are illusions.

Similarly, it is an illusion to think that the way of love is okay to speak about in church, but has no real place in the rough and tumble of normal living when we're confronted with the ugliness of our own humanity.

The life that really is life is found in taking love, grace, peace, forgiveness, the things of the Kingdom, out into the world and resisting any suggestion they are fancies which don't really belong.

It is exactly those things that are the most real, the most life giving, the deepest things there are.

Jesus didn't die on another planet. It was in our world.

And in his death he effectively said, violence, hate, powerplays will never have the final word. Love and self giving will.

Fine speech, now what do we do?

The simple answer is, we live it.

We let our words become lives.

We live as if Jesus is really risen from the dead.

That it's not just a nice story we tell ourselves as an emotional crutch.

That it's not just what we do around Easter and Christmas times as a pleasant tradition.

We live in the light of Christ, for he is risen, and reigning with God that we might know hope and joy.

We still stand on the battlefield of the world of course.

Faith isn't escapism.

We don't get transported out of the tough choices and demands of living in our difficult time.

It won't always be easy.

Staring down tanks is an extreme for sure, but by way of a symbol it's true for us all in different degrees.

Yet the life of faithfulness is eternal.

It stretches out into God's forever time.

Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness.

Fight the good fight of faith. Christians need to live in the real world, I agree.

Yet it's Jesus, not the world, that shows us what real life really is.

And real life is cross shaped.

Like you I've attended a few funerals in my time and without exception grieving families don't talk about what their loved ones amassed in material goods.

Or how well they were able to bend things for their own purposes.

They speak of love and loss.

And even in the most difficult of funerals, relationships, human connecting is at the fore in some way.

Often people struggle to articulate what they felt or what they will miss, but the tears speak louder than words anyway.

In one way or another if I'm preaching I try and impress upon people that on days like that we see what is really real in life and it has nothing to do with possessions or worldly power.

And that perhaps if they could see how central and deep love between people really is, the love that they themselves know is real at such times, they might lift their eyes for a second from their daily routines and consider whether that fact points to something, a presence, a love, even deeper still.

'I'm not much into the God stuff.', is a comment I often hear from people who barely know why they've come to a minister for a funeral.

You loved your Father didn't you?

You miss him, you feel his loss. Well then you kind of already are.

Perhaps when you go out of the church today, take some time to read this passage again to yourself.

To let it speak to you and remind you that living the life of faith in Christ is the most real life there is.

That writers like Paul, along with hymnwriters, poets, novelists, even filmmakers time to time, have come in some approximation to reflect that life in words is itself an incredible gift.

There are actually many fine speeches which point us to Jesus dotted over the landscape of history.

And if you find yourself thinking, when you read, but now what do we do?

Words are fine and nice, but here's a concrete problem.

Perhaps when you're confronted with difficult people or situations, hopefully never tanks, but you never know, you'll remember that the words are meant to become deeds, and the deeds reflective of a way, and the way, a life.

And that it's the most real life there is.

And that if it requires you to look silly, or to give something away, or to relinquish control, or to sacrifice your own agenda, that's exactly what Jesus did.

And God raised him from the dead forever to live.

In doing so, you would be drawing closer to him, and he, you.

And his love is eternal, and his presence constant.

Fine speech, now what do we do? We live in the real world at all times of course.

It's just a matter of realising what the real world, the real life, really is.

In Jesus' name. Amen.