

At first glance, you might not think you have very much in common with St Timothy, the recipient of our Epistle lesson for today. After all, Timothy was quite different from anybody here. A young pastor, probably not even 30 years old, living and ministering in the city of Ephesus during the middle of the 1st c. A.D. Hardly a historical or cultural context that we're familiar with.

And yet, many of us here probably have more in common with Timothy than we think. Because the New Testament is primarily the story and teaching of apostles. People who had a direct, one-on-one encounter with Jesus. Either during his earthly ministry, like Peter, or because they were family, like James, or in a miraculous encounter, like Paul had on the road to Damascus.

But Timothy isn't an apostle. No, as we read in this lesson, Timothy is just a young man with a Christian mother and grandmother. A mother and grandmother who passed on the faith to him. Who made him go to church and read the scriptures and say his prayers. Who did the things that good Christian mothers and grandmothers are supposed to do for their children and grandchildren.

And now, because of their hard work to raise a faithful Christian man, Timothy is a pastor. And one of the most trusted confidants to St Paul himself. And will one day serve as the Bishop of Ephesus. Timothy is not an apostle. He's not a convert. He's just an ordinary guy who was raised in a Christian home, like most of us were.

The story of St Timothy is, in many ways, our story. And so we should take note of St Paul's words to Timothy in his letters. And I find the last verse of our Epistle reading to be of particular importance: *“By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you.”*

St Paul describes Timothy's faith as a deposit that his mother and grandmother entrusted to him. This is banking terminology here. You go to the bank, you make a deposit into your checking account, and you trust that the bank will keep it safe.

That if it is used, it will be used for good purposes, like giving out mortgages and loans and investments. That if you come back to the bank, it will still be there waiting for you to withdraw. And if you should die, that deposit will be passed on to your heirs. This is how deposits work. It's how they've always worked, even back in the time of Paul and Timothy.

Timothy's faith is a deposit that his mother and grandmother entrusted to him. They didn't take him to church and read him God's Word and say prayers with him day after day, through his entire childhood, for him to take that deposit of faith and throw it in the trash. They didn't entrust him with this precious gift so that he could carelessly let it be stolen from him.

And having it stolen is definitely a risk. After all, one of the ways that Jesus describes the devil is that he is a thief who comes only to steal, kill, and destroy. What does the devil try to steal? The deposit of faith.

And so Paul's words are deadly serious. Guard the good deposit entrusted to you. Guard it as the incredible treasure that it is. Guard it because there are those who will try to steal, kill, and destroy it. Guard it because it was entrusted to you. Entrusted by those who taught you the faith in the first place.

These are Paul's words to Timothy. They're also his words to us. Guard the good deposit entrusted to you. Guard it because you will be attacked.

And that attack won't be pleasant. Go back to an earlier point in this lesson and Paul writes, *“Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God.”* Yes, guarding this deposit of faith will mean suffering.

Paul is proof of this suffering. He's writing this letter from a Roman prison. He's in that prison because the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem trumped up false charges against him and tried to stone him on the spot. He avoided death at that moment. But his life has been a continuous string of suffering and imprisonment ever since. And he fully expects that any day now he will stand trial and be sentenced to death.

Paul is no stranger to suffering. But it is all worth it, in his mind. For he is not a prisoner of the Jews or of the emperor. No, he describes himself as a prisoner of the Lord. Because there is nothing he would rather do than share in suffering for the gospel. And he wants Timothy to know, that's what it means to guard the good deposit.

Did Timothy guard the good deposit? We don't know from Scripture, but according to Christian tradition he did. According to tradition, Timothy faithfully served the church of Ephesus for the rest of his life. Eventually, he became bishop of the city.

And then, at the age of 80 years old, he saw a parade for the goddess Diana marching through the streets. He ran outside, condemning their pagan worship and calling on them to repent. And in response, the crowd beat him, dragged him through the city, and stoned him to death.

Timothy guarded the good deposit entrusted to him. And he suffered for it. Would you be willing to do the same? Would I be willing to do the same?

I don't know. But, thankfully, it's not really my call to make. Because you'll notice that Paul doesn't just tell Timothy to guard the good deposit by his own strength or conviction. He says, *"By the Holy Spirit who dwells in us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you."*

And this isn't the first time he's made a qualification like that. He says earlier, *"but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God."* It is God who saved us. God who called us to a holy calling. Not because of our works, but because of his own purpose and grace. A purpose and grace found in Christ Jesus, who has abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.

That is where Paul's strength to be a preacher and apostle and teacher came from. That is why he is able to suffer. Paul couldn't guard what was entrusted to him. But he knew the Holy Spirit could and would guard until the Last Day what had been entrusted to him.

Timothy couldn't guard what was entrusted to him. But the Holy Spirit who dwells in him would. We can't guard what is entrusted to us. But the Holy Spirit who dwells in us will.

So if this is all the work of the Holy Spirit, do we have any role in this at all? Well, yes we do. We fan into flame the gift of God.

The faith that the Holy Spirit works in us is like a piece of charcoal in an empty fire pit. It doesn't look like much. Just a grey lump of ash. At first glance, you might not think there's anything there at all. But blow on it, and you'll see it glow red hot. Surround it with wood and kindling, fan it into flame, and in a matter of seconds, you'll have a roaring fire, from just that little lump of seemingly dead charcoal.

Each and every one of you has that gift of God inside of you. And all it needs is a little fanning to become a flame. For Timothy, it was when Paul laid his hands on him at his ordination that fanned into flame that gift of God, so that he was ready and eager to share the Gospel.

For you, maybe it's something else that fans the flame of faith in you. The point is that God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control. A spirit that led Timothy to preach a message of repentance, even when he knew they might stone him for it. A spirit that led Paul to travel to Rome and preach to the emperor himself, even when he knew he might be crucified for it.

A spirit that keeps us self-controlled, so that we, like Lois and Eunice, might be good parents and grandparents to our children and grandchildren. So that we might entrust to them a good deposit of faith. Fan into flame the gift of God and you will see that flame spread to all those around you.

Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from St Paul himself, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus, and the Holy Spirit will dwell within you. Guarding that good deposit until the Day when our Savior Christ Jesus appears again and our days of suffering for the gospel will finally be at an end. Amen.