

*Itching Ears*  
*2 Timothy 3:14 to 4:5*

In the reading from the Epistle, Timothy was encouraged to preach the central tenets of Christianity to the congregations for which he had oversight. He was to do this whether people were prepared to entertain those tenets or not. This suggests that many people were not so prepared. They had, we read, itching ears, and as a result had rejected the confessions that defined the Christian faith. They had wandered away to myths that seemed to them to be more in accord with their desires. What were these myths to which the Epistle refers?

The myths to which the Epistle refers, according to scholars of the bible, revolved around what was a major competitor to Christianity. The way of thinking that was a direct competitor of Christianity for the hearts and minds of people was a phenomenon called Gnosticism. There were many varieties of gnosticism around in the first and second centuries but all the varieties were characterised by a common view of God and humanity. Gnosticism held that there is an absolute separation between God and the world. God dwells in a spiritual realm, and the gap between that realm and the world of flesh and blood is virtually unbridgeable. Moreover the world of flesh and blood is so flawed and absurd that there can be no reconciliation between it and the far distant spiritual realm that is the home of the divine. The flawed nature of the world also meant, according to the gnostics, that the remote God could not have created such an imperfect world. However although there could be no reconciliation between the flawed world and the glorious realm of the remote God, the gnostic systems claimed to have discovered special knowledge by which a special few could make the journey to the realm of God. But this knowledge was only available to those who were spiritual enough to receive it. Not all human beings were spiritual enough and, therefore, these lower types could not be entrusted with the secret knowledge about how to get to the remote God. The gnostics also held that imprisoned in the inferior human body, inferior because it aged and died, was a divine spark of which most people were unaware. At death this divine spark headed back to the wholly other God.

It is important to know that gnostics arrived at this privileged knowledge about God by interior and intuitive means. This is to say that they arrived at what they believed was authentic knowledge of God by going into themselves or, as might be said today, by getting in touch with their inner and more authentic selves - with their divine spark so to speak. In this respect gnosticism has a contemporary form of expression in what is generally called 'spirituality'.

Having set out, albeit briefly, the doctrines of gnosticism that were widely held in the ancient world, let us now consider what Christianity taught about God. In direct opposition to gnosticism Christianity held that God created the world and it was good. God created the world in order, if I may put this way, to house the men and women he made in order that there might be beings who could receive, and respond, to God's love. This creation of God, according to Christian teaching, remains good even though it has become infected by sin. If you struggle with the notion of sin think of the deliberate bombing of hospitals in Aleppo, an event which is just the most recent in the long history of human atrocities.

In response to the mysterious tragedy of sin God did not walk away from his creation in disgust. Instead his loving nature became a human being. God's loving nature is embodied in the person of Jesus Christ who exemplified divine love even to the point of being prepared to die as an object of hatred. Furthermore Jesus Christ is raised only as the first one of all people. Resurrection to life in an other world, a renovated and transformed world, is God's purpose for humanity because he *is* love and true justice. The great German theologian Jürgen Moltmann wrote:

I would think that resurrection life gives the broken and the impaired and those whose lives have been destroyed space and time and strength to live the life which they were intended for, and for which they were born....I think this for the sake of the justice which I believe is God's concern and his first option.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> J. Moltmann, *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology* (London: SCM,1996), 118.

Finally, Christianity holds that knowledge of God is given to us by God. You do not have to be one of the spiritual or intellectual elite to know God. This is because God has chosen to encounter men and women in Jesus Christ, his embodied loving nature. No one is excluded from - and please note the way I put this - no one is excluded from being known and accepted by God. Have you ever thought how wonderful such a knowing is even in purely human terms? I can spend a lifetime narcissistically trying to know and accept myself and the weekend magazines of papers usually have articles that offer ways to explore yourself. But to to be known and accepted by another is a gift beyond our ability to give it a value. In countless ways over the centuries people have expressed the view that they been known by the God who is not remote, but who present in the world in Christ Jesus. It is why John Newton wrote the words, "I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see."

This, then, is the message that Timothy is urged to proclaim to the congregation. He is to do this, he is told, even when people will not listen and, instead, wander away to myths that were some form of gnosticism. When they are ordained, Ministers of the Uniting Church are asked:

Do you embrace the faith and unity of the holy, catholic and apostolic Church, as set forth in the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, expressed in the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds and described in the Basis of Union? In your life and work within the Uniting Church will you be guided by its Basis of Union.....?

Paragraph 3 of the Basis of Union states the Church "preaches Christ the risen crucified One and confesses him as Lord to the glory of the Father." It goes on to say that "in Jesus Christ God was reconciling the world to himself." Paragraph 3 also states that "God gave his Son to take away the world's sin." This is only a taste of a long paragraph but it is enough to show that Ministers of the Word in the Uniting Church have a similar vocation to that of Timothy.

In every generation gnosticism has been present. In one form or another it is present in our society and perhaps is present in various branches of the church. But in order that new generations may one day again write “I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see”, preachers, guided in our case by the Basis of Union, must persist in proclaiming the good news whether the time is favourable or not and whether people listen or not. This what we learn from the Letter to Timothy.

**Rev I. Ross Carter**  
**Pentecost 22, 2016**