Christ Church Cathedral, Victoria BC 6 October 2019

2 Tim. 1.1-14

Luke 17.5-10

2 Tim. 1.7: For God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but a spirit of power and love and self-control.

It is good to be with you. I first visited Canada around 15 years ago, in the middle of some testing times for your province of the Church, and there have been testing times since, as you know only too well. The Anglican Church of Canada is a part of the Anglican Communion that I've always admired for showing the best of Anglican virtues.

And among the best of the Anglican virtues is that we have our rows in public. There are parts of Christ's Church Universal that pretend that there is no possibility of having total disagreements on matters of faith and then still stay as part of the same Church. That is not the Anglican way, and I rejoice in that fact. Ours is not a comfortable way to live out the Christian life, but it is honest. Along with the writer of the Epistle to Timothy, we look to a God who did not give his Church a spirit of cowardice, but a whole load of other gifts of the spirit, some of which he names, some of which he doesn't.

The gifts that he does name are power, love, and self-control. They amount to the gifts that divided Christians need for coping with conflict. The reverse of cowardice involves courage and thoughtfulness. Conflict can be misunderstood. It may involve pain and bring scandal, but it is as much a sign of health as of sickness. In human life, conflict happens when change happens: all moms and dads will know this from the years when their children grow up. Children cannot remain children;

they mature and become adults, and the experience is often painful for both parents and children. But the growth needs to happen.

For Christians, built into the very foundation doctrines of the Christian faith are great claims which in human logic seem to be in conflict. God is made human; the Lord of all Power and Might is born helpless in a stable and dies helpless nailed to a gallows. The simple effort to understand these corner-stones of Christian faith sends us furiously arguing as to what they might mean. That's before we start arguing about the far more trivial rows that have troubled the Church in the last few decades.

If you think the Church is faced with difficult times now, then you should look back to some of the earliest doctrines in its history, the letters bearing the name of the Apostle Paul, and you will find conflict even in those brand-new churches of believers. Our reading from 2 Timothy stopped just in time before we heard the writer launch into an angry rant: read on from what we heard, and you will find out. 'You are aware that all who are in Asia turned away from me', Paul complains, and then he names names. We don't actually hear about what that particular row was about.

Indeed, you can start reading about any period in Christian history, and the arguments sound as loud in the past as in the present. It can get you down. I remember one session as a young scholar, in my first job in a theological college, when I was teaching about some depressing and intricate set of rows in the early Church, and one poor student asked in despair, 'Where is the good news in all this?' I told him that the good news was that the Church is still there, after nearly two thousand years.

Still, this is not a recipe for sitting back and nodding wisely when a fight erupts in the Church, whatever it might be – and you will know what yours are. Conflicts must be dealt with in a grown-up way, and we must find ways of sorting them which produce real maturity and growth. In contrast to tabloid newspaper editors, Christians cannot afford to think in headlines: we are called to what you might call thoughtful holiness. And we are called to discipline. Discipline is not a fashionable word, I know, and it may conjure up the wrong sort of image – 'short, sharp shocks' was a favourite phrase of some English politicians a generation ago. But discipline is a much richer word than that image implies. And it is built into our identity as Anglicans, because our Church has built into its DNA a system of discipline which we kept in our Reformation half a millennium ago: Anglicanism involves government by bishops.

That has meant many different things in the course of Christian history. Nowadays a bishop's government is balanced by the decisions of the whole people of the Church around him or her. That's not so much a new development as a very old one: it's like much of the story of the very early Church, as far as we can recover it. Yet Anglicans still have a discipline. We need to think about what sort of discipline that is.

Christians are people under discipline because it comes from outside ourselves: our faith lies in a creator God. Christian discipline will be shaped by its starting-point, God made human in Jesus Christ – Word become flesh, in our Christian technical language, the Incarnation. The Incarnation is an expression of love. The Christian life is founded on the Incarnation and therefore on love. If love is the basis of the way in which Christians live, this has an important consequence for Christian discipline.

Love cannot be an unchanging system of rules. Systems which are built out of pure, neutral patterns can only operate on a system of unalterable rules. Make one mistake at the computer keyboard, and the laptop won't let you into its system: connect the wrong wires in a plug and you're in trouble. But Christian discipline is not of that character, because the Christian faith maintains that creation is more than a pure, neutral pattern: it is grounded in the love of God.

You may recall the title of a great medieval work of devotion by Thomas à Kempis, called the *Imitation of Christ*. We are called to imitate Jesus of Nazareth, as best we can – and the best is never going to be very good, but we have to go on trying. Now surely Jesus Christ is the same always, so the imitation of Christ is not going to change from generation to generation? But that's a misreading of imitation. You imitate the Mona Lisa by setting up your easel in front of the portrait (not that you're allowed to these days), and then you paint as good a copy of it as you can. The goodness of the copy is judged by how little different it is from the original. But the Mona Lisa is static, frozen at the moment in time when Leonardo finished it, and it is decaying away from that moment, despite all the best efforts of the conservationists at the Louvre in Paris.

Jesus Christ is not like that, frozen in the first century of the Common Era. It is the Catholic doctrine of the Church to affirm that he is alive, and that he is, in his humanity, part of every generation. He is the same in his Godhead but he is part of an infinite variety of human experiences, changing from age to age. To imitate him will be to find out what the contemporary age is like, and how love is best expressed in it.

This imitation of Christ our contemporary is of course a much more complex and challenging business than obeying ancient rules. It requires that discipline of thoughtful holiness or it will end in shipwreck. We may have to accept that this sort of discipline may be radically different from disciplines which can also be labelled Christian in other periods of history: this should not cause us distress, or make us condemn one discipline of one age in the terms set by another.

Let me try out on you one possible way to understand how this works: the discipline of music. You might think of other parallels, but music means a great deal to me, and I hope that you'll bear with me. In music, there are patterns greater than human understanding or effort. There's a story about a great English scholar-bishop, Charles Gore, coming out of the concert hall after listening to one of Bach's Brandenburg Concerti. He growled with a gruffness typical of the man, 'If *that* is true, everything must be all right'.

I have to admit straight away that relating music to morality has problems - to realize this, we only need to turn to the memory of Auschwitz, where sublime musical works were performed as accompaniment to the worst human savagery. I'm not going to try to resolve that puzzle for you this morning, but concentrate on the theme of patterns and discipline. The point about the discipline of music is that it is strict within its own terms, but infinite in its variety over time. The delight of the Brandenburg Concerti is that they are completely true to their own rules of harmony, rhythm and structure, and they play within those rules in a wonderful freedom because their composer knows the rules so well.

Yet Bach's rules are not the same as those to which Monteverdi wrote his Vespers in Renaissance Venice, and still more remote from those that Hildegard of Bingen used in her holy songs. They differ again from the rules used by successor composers of our own age. But we would not dream of criticizing a modern composer for not obeying the rules used by J.S. Bach. We can look at all these works in perspective, and we can understand the principles on which they are constructed. And still we can view all these varieties of the musical discipline as related to each other; each composer is writing within the Western musical tradition.

In the case of music, the passage of time has altered the tradition, but the tradition grows organically as the same body, just as a human body does in a single human lifetime. To describe this process of growth as 'the passage of time' is indeed too abstract: it is a galaxy of individual human decisions, working within the Western tradition of music and each time testing it out, extending it and transforming it. The one certainty about the discipline of music is that it is always in a state of moving on; each musical composition is changing the shape of the discipline. Yet the change does nothing to undermine the integrity of a Brandenburg Concerto within its own terms, or to lessen the possibility of delight in it. Nor does discipline cease to be discipline simply because it is not that of a previous age.

It seems to me that Christian discipline is like musical discipline. The Catholic tradition in which the Anglican Communion stands is like the tradition of music and not like the rule-book of some technical process, and its guiding principle is the love of God which is always one and the same, yet is always changing in the experience of human beings. This will raise another problem for us. How do you guard a

tradition which is always changing? Or, to put it the other way round, how does authority in our time and in our Communion move to change a matter of discipline and doctrine which affects the whole Church?

The easy answer is that you wait for a new consensus to evolve. This is how one might characterize the moves to the ordination of women to the priesthood in the Anglican communion; then our ongoing strivings towards equal marriage. Throughout this process, there has been much pain and anger, and perhaps also not a little fudging about rules and hard cases. I'm afraid that I have to admit that fudging is an uncomfortably frequent Anglican response to painful dilemmas. Out of this pain of decisions a new pattern is slowly coming into sight, but that does not lessen the pain, and did not make forgiving the pain any easier for the victims.

But a new pattern is the end of the process of change, not the beginning. How does it start? Almost by definition, not with the acclaiming shout of the crowd, but with the lonely pioneer, the nonconformist voice. How, then, do the guardians of tradition, the Bishop, the Synod, distinguish between those who are the creative extenders of tradition and those who are irresponsible wreckers of it? How does the leader interpret the enthusiasm of the prophet to those who find the prophecy bewildering? Church leaders in all ages have the awful warning of the tribunal which in 1616 condemned Galileo for getting the solar system right: a blunder for which Pope John Paul II made some amends by admitting the Church's mistake.

Lastly, Bishop Charles Gore may once again help us with this. There is a phrase at the end of his book *Jesus of Nazareth* which is worth remembering: 'O yet consider it again!' Note the wonderful

ambiguity of this urgent call: is it conservative or innovative? 'Consider it again!' - consider your defiant reassertion of old certainty, or consider your confident assertion of destructive novelty? This could almost serve as the motto of thoughtful holiness.

One main meaning of thoughtfulness is *attention.* Sometimes when we say someone is thoughtful we mean 'they're miles away'; but there is also an everyday human meaning of thoughtfulness: consideration for the needs and wants of other people. Its opposite, thought***less***ness, is heedlessness, failure to pay attention. When we call someone 'a really thoughtful person', we mean that this is someone who characteristically takes the trouble to consider how things are for us.

To attend to the consequences of our actions, and - still more important - to attend to each other, is the best way to resolve the tension we feel, and need to feel, between traditionalism and radicalism. 'O yet consider it again'. Attending to what is really going on, trying to see the point of other people's concerns, what they mind about and why, is a way of developing sensitive understanding on which we can act responsibly.

Thoughtfulness is noticing, and taking time, and bothering. Such attentiveness does not always come naturally. It is easier to be heedless. Paying attention is a discipline. It is also the discipline which we need most. In the words of our epistle to Timothy, it is the 'spirit of power and love, and self-control.' May we pray to our Father in heaven to lead us into the presence of such a spirit.

AMEN