

Our Nathan in this past week celebrated his 14th birthday. And that's a really scary thing as I remember going into the delivery suite with Alison in the Causeway Hospital as if it was literally yesterday. And even though we have already experienced the time flying by with Josh who now sits 6"2' towering over me, I am still in wonder at how quickly those little babies of ours have grown up. Now we watch Josh head off with his driving instructor every week preparing him for that point when he will be able to drive out of the house on his own. All of this is a truly terrifying feeling as you realise your child is becoming more and more independent. When we were on holidays last week in Scotland, we went to visit St Andrew's, not just for the golf course, but also for University as Josh is looking at it for one of his possible options next year. I stood in the courtyard of St Mary's College beginning to cry as I realised our child's time at being at home with us is coming closer to an end.

Both Alison and I have done whatever we can to shape our boys – we've made mistakes along the way, we are still learning, we continue to pray for them, we've worked hard as parents to remain faithful to the vows that we gave before God at their baptisms, and like all parents we will continually be watching their every step. The worrying thing over this past year of COVID is my greater realisation of how many unhealthy influences affect our children, and the battle of the world to steal our young people away from God's direction are so real and so dangerous.

We've got to work hard for the future of our children. The shaping that is done now is done with the long term perspective in mind. The shaping that has been done with both Josh and Nathan will we hope and pray bring much blessings for the future.

The investment in the early years I believe will pay off. The past 17 and 14 years respectively for our 2 boys have required much patience, and yes it would have been so easy at times to give up, but all parents have got to keep going, don't we. And it doesn't just stop at parents; as grandparents there's such an opportunity to shape now just one generation but two.

We all have days when it would be so easy to give up on things. It would be so easy to just let the children sit in front of the TV, or their devices, but society is showing us that that lack of investment doesn't end well. So the answer is to not give up sowing into our young people.

Whether it's in our parenting, or our relationships together, or whether it's our Christian life – they all have one thing in common, and that is that we've got to work hard and continually think about the long haul. In our Christian lives we can't just give up when it seems tough. You will remember Paul's encouragement to the Church of Philippi that, "Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus".

As lockdown begins to ease, and as the opportunity to do more together as a church begins, we will be seeing a number of baptisms in both churches, we'll be having our Confirmation Service in the Autumn, and it's got me thinking in a wider sense about the incredibly important influence we need to be on our young people – whether those within our families or those within the church. I have been frankly gobsmacked having spent 2 weeks on holiday with our boys at the pull that society, the internet, sexualization of everything, and

commercialism has a grip on them. And therefore as the Church of God and as people who care, we need to invest in our young people for the long term gain that comes in their spiritual development. And so we must not give up – in fact we must work even harder. And it's not easy. It is important to remind ourselves that the Christian life is not a hundred metre sprint – it is a marathon, and the support of all young people in our care requires significant investment.

We're looking this morning at the final section of Paul's first letter to Timothy, and here he writes of how we all need to go the distance. Timothy, young at heart, was confronted with difficult situations. He had to confront false teachers who had risen in power among the Ephesian leaders, and the church was being led astray. So Paul, like a football manager at half time, reminds Timothy to not give up on things, to stay focused on the plan, to be ready for the challenges that inevitably were ahead.

And in verses 11 & 12, Paul gives four points for persevering : he says to flee, to pursue, to fight, and to take hold. To persevere, the person of God will flee from worldliness, they will pursue Godliness and righteousness, they will 'fight for the faith', and finally they will take hold of eternal life. So this morning, as I've been thinking about the spiritual care of young people I feel that these words should be declared prayerfully and prophetically in Jesus' name over them.

And so following the main points in verse 11 & 12, it is my prayer that our young people will be men and women of God who will flee worldliness.

It's not a brave thing today to tell people to flee, is it? It comes across as a sign of weakness. You don't normally win by fleeing, do you? But Paul knew that there are times when the way to victory is to flee, not to fight. We're actually instructed throughout the New Testament Letters to flee – to flee immorality, to flee idolatry, to flee youthful lusts. Timothy was faced with false teachers whose doctrine and way of life were all about self. Earlier in the chapter, which we didn't read, it says they were puffed up with pride, they had an unhealthy interest in quarrelling to get their own way. And ultimately their love of money became a motivation for their actions, and drove them away from faith. There's a danger folks that in our striving for better security, even for what seems right and proper – that is the financial security of our sons & daughters, that we allow those strivings and worldly ambitions to actually become the priority over our faith. But our worldly pursuits should never get in the way of our spiritual pursuits. I think COVID has been so dangerous because I feel for many, the priority of people's faith has become less and less of a focus because of the many other worries. To persevere in the Christian life, the people of God must flee from all that is worldly, and as our young people grow I pray that they don't allow the things of this world to distract them.

Secondly, it is my prayer for our young people that they will be men and women of God who will pursue Godliness.

That word pursue is an interesting one isn't it. You think it describes a race or something like that. And actually the word is trying to give some sense of action to it. Because we've got to make the effort, to be determined to go after godliness. It's not going to happen just by

hanging around church on a regular basis, although that will certainly shape behaviour, but personally you've got to be active in pursuing after God and his will for your life every day – and we do that through daily devotion, daily prayer, and daily service.

We have a challenge in today's society, especially parents, to claim back a role model for our children. And so I strongly believe that a child's desire to pursue after God will come more natural when they see those around them, parents, family, the church community, pursuing after God themselves. If I'm being truly honest, it's the one area that I would beat myself up for as a parent. I see so many times how I have maybe been a poor witness at home of God's love, and I know that all of us as parents will make mistakes, but please remember that your daily actions are watched by young people around you. As adults we have such an important role of influencing what our young people pursue after. If they don't see us praying, then how can we expect them to pray? You see otherwise, they will pursue after the influences that are around us all every day. Saying that, I will say that today's Church needs a mission that says the entire faith community will feel the responsibility of raising a spiritually transformed generation of children. When children step away from church, we should never just blame the church for not providing adequate facilities. The responsibility lies first and foremost with the family, and then the church community, and that's you.

So my hope for this place is to hear stories of more and more people literally rushing to know more of Jesus, but wouldn't it be amazing if they have been pointed towards him through what each of us as adults have modeled in our own lives to them. It should be our desire that someday all children in our care will make the commitment of their own which longs to pursue as the writer says after righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance (the long haul) and gentleness.

Thirdly, it is my prayer for our young people that they will be men and women of God who will fight for the faith.

Throughout life, there are times we all have to make a stand on what is essentially right and what is wrong. Within the Christian faith today many followers are having to stand up for what is the truth of God's Word, but also many are remaining silent. For example, today's culture is attempting to redefine the meaning of marriage. And this is only one of many examples where the Christian faith is being eroded. The history of the Church has over centuries had to fight and confront where Satan has twisted and distorted God's Word for his own pleasing. Timothy was having to confront the twisted and heretical messages of the gospel which were turning people away from the true Gospel. The great church councils from which our Creed came from were attempts to correct false teaching and to set forth sound doctrine. The great reformation saw a combat against corruption that permeated the church over its indulgences. And so in every age, God is looking for his people who are willing to stand and fight against the untruths of our time. For our young people this is becoming much more difficult as the voice of God's truth is drowned out by a culture who want to redefine what truth is. For our young people and many children in our community, we've got to pray for parents of faith who choose to protect and shape them in a culture that wants to reshape him in many different ways. So pray for our young people as they

make decisions to stand for their faith or feel the pressure to conform to the pressures around them.

Finally, it is my prayer for our young people that they will be men and women of God who will take hold of eternal life.

Paul says to take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses. I'm guessing this is a clear reference to Timothy's baptism. Baptism in itself is not the free ticket to eternal life. Repentance and acceptance of Jesus as Saviour is what does that. I was in with a gentlemen in hospital the other day in which he mentioned that last year his pastor saved him. I'm sure he was just mixing his words up, because the church doesn't save – Jesus does. With the children that are in our care, let's be active in praying that each of them will take hold of the gift of eternal life that is awaiting each one. Let's not joke ourselves that everything is ok with them just because of infant baptism. Let's do all that we can in prayer before God to seek the Holy Spirit's conviction for each one of their lives. I am so conscious in the words of Peter that we must be alert and of sober mind. Our enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. And I believe through the vices of social media and other influences he traps many. But let's live in hope for the day in which young people all over our community claim that eternal inheritance for themselves. I remember the day that my Josh came to Alison and I to tell us he had accepted Jesus as his Lord and Saviour. There is no better feeling when our young people take hold of the promises for themselves.

Conclusion

So let's finish. Can I suggest that the pointers provided by Paul to his apprentice Timothy - to persevere in your relationship with your loving God, to flee from worldiness, to pursue Godliness and righteousness, to 'fight for the faith', and finally to take hold of eternal life are as important for you as they are for our young people.

If today you as an adult have not pursued this in your own life, then can I suggest there is nothing more important. But remember also back to your own childhood, and think about the hopes for the future that you had. Each of the young people that either are within your family, and the young people within the care of our church community can be so influenced positively. Each of us has the opportunity to get involved. There is so much about the new generation coming after us that is worrying but I believe there is so much that is exciting. Imagine with me the significant impact that would be made to our community if those coming after us were people of faith.

God today wants all of us to remember back to the baptismal promises made over us – those spiritual roots that dig deep into our souls, and he desires that we don't give up in the spiritual evangelism and discipleship to our young. For our young people will it ever be an easy path to take in a world that is so against the Christian faith? No! Fleeing, pursuing, fighting, and taking hold all imply hardship and effort. But with Paul, Timothy, and many others who have gone before, we are assured today for those young people we shape, that God will give them the strength to go the distance as we seek to obey His Word.