

I Charge Thee . . .

INTRODUCTION : When I was little and still in primary school, we once all bundled into my fathers car to travel to Eldoret. For some reason this trip imprinted itself on my mind. I can still picture the old escarpment road, the trees that lined the road down into the rift valley, and the little Italian chapel by the roadside. Surprisingly, however, what I remember most were the milestones, placed every 4 miles along the road. Preparing to come for this service today reminded me of those milestones.

We are gathered for a very special reason. A year and a half ago, several of you left Nairobi Chapel to come and begin a new work here. You sacrificed that which was comfortable and established for that which you could only hope at that time, would become grounded, take root and eventually stand on it's own. Over the last 1 ½ yrs you have passed several milestones since that step of faith - remember the time when we had the very first service; and then the milestone of the first members, then the interim elders court, then the actual elders election. . . and many others. Today we are gathered to rejoice in yet another milestone that God has allowed us to see. Moving from an interim to an actual pastor at Karura.

Act's 20 is about a milestone too. Paul, after many yrs of ministry, was on a journey - his last trip ever to Jerusalem. On the way he passed by Ephesus and know that this would be the last time he would ever see his beloved leaders in Ephesus. And so he sent for them, and gave them his last ever parting words, saying . . .

Acts 20:18 - 30

Weighty words. But as you begin a new phase of your ministry here Ngari, these are appropriate words to guide you. Allow me to point out just 3 of the lessons they contain

LESSON 1. PAUL'S EXAMPLE :

A. He was a model We are not ordaining you today Ngari, the time for that will eventually come. But take note of this - too many people in positions of leadership and authority depend on their titles and positions to lead, and the same is true in the church also. Benjamin Hooks is quoted as having said "He who thinks he is leading, but has no-one following, is only taking a stroll". For many of our so called leaders today, if their titles, positions and wealth were removed from them, or if they themselves were removed from their structural hierarchy, they'd discover they were merely taking a leisurely walk, and in-fact have no followers. But Paul was different, whenever Paul talks about authority, it is not to titles he points, but to his own life, lived out transparently before the church.

"You know how I lived the whole time I was with you, from the first day I came into the province of Asia. ¹⁹ I served the Lord with great humility and with tears, although I was severely tested by the plots of the Jews. ²⁰ You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house.

I Thess 1:5 You know how we lived among you for your sake. (2:11) For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, ¹² encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory.

St. Francis of Assisi used to say “Preach the gospel . . . and if necessary, use words” This was Paul’s testimony, may it be yours.

B. He did not shrink from proclaiming the truth : But there is a second example that Paul sets for us here. In the work of preaching the gospel today, many will try and set an agenda as to what you are to preach. People want to hear the good news of God, as long as you don’t apply it to their lives. II Tim 4:3 **For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear.**

By most people’s standards it’s OK to preach and say “It is a sin to steal”, but when you preach and say “You thief, you have sinned by stealing” then they want to stone you. Hence Paul’s words in Vs 20 “**I have endured the trials that came to me from the plot of the Jew's. Yet I never shrank from telling you the truth, either publicly or in your homes**”

Preach the truth Ngari, even when we don’t want to hear it - when politicians tell you to keep out of politics, preach the truth as it applies to that realm, when we tell you “this is the way of the world”, tell us the truth because we need to hear it. Do not shrink from proclaiming the truth. Do not let your charge to proclaim the truth become nothing more than trying to win the favour of men.

LESSON 2. PAUL’S ATTITUDE

He was dead to self : But how was Paul able to do this - not needing to dance to the tune of any man, but only to the tune of God. The answer lies in his attitude towards life. Vs 24 **However, I**

consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me -- the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace.

That’s where the answer lies . . . considering your life worth nothing. A couple of days ago, I was talking to Dennis Tongoi, whom you all know well, and he was telling me of a man who determined to proclaim the truth, no matter what the consequences. When harassed and questioned as to why he was speaking out on issues the Govt thought he should not speak on, his response was simply this “Even if you harass me, remember that I’m not alive, you can kill me even if you want to because I’m already dead. I died when I passed through the waters of baptism.” Against such faith the world can do nothing. Have you died to self Ngari? Have you died to your ambitions? Have you died to your desire to succeed in life? Have you died to your desire for the things of this world? Are we free from the Until we all as Christians do so, we will never really be free, free to abandon ourselves to the purpose of God, because there will always be something we are protecting, something that then becomes our chain of bondage - a bondage we do not often see or feel, because the chain is rarely yanked, but a bondage never-the-less, that does not allow us to abandon ourselves to God.

LESSON 3. PAUL’S CHARGE

Paul finally concludes his parting words with a charge to these elders, a charge that we give you today, Ngari, and one that is in 3 parts . . .

A. Keep watch - ²⁸Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers.

This ministry that you have among us Ngari is a gift given you by God's grace, not by your own right. But if you do not keep watch, you can disqualify yourself. Therefore keep watch over your relationship with God, for it is what lends you credibility among us. Keep watch over your study of the word for out of your study will come food for us. Don't let us occupy all your time with our needs. Keep watch over your life, for your attitudes, sacrifice and devotion inspire us. Keep watch over your family, for when we are battered and discouraged in ours we will look to you for encouragement. But remember to keep watch over the place we give you in our lives for it is easy for us to idolise you and learn to depend on you, your counsel, your prayers, your presence . . . and not on God.

B. Be Shepherds - secondly **Be a shepherd of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.**

Be a good shepherd and avoid the 2 pitfalls that Satan will constantly set before you. Sometimes, when your ministry is criticised and attacked, and your vision begins to become blurred, you may be tempted to serve as a **hireling**, at the beck and call of any who command you, instead of the Chief Shepherd. Remind yourself at that time that you are here first and foremost because of the lord's call upon your life. Do not become a hireling instead of a shepherd. But you can also lose the calling of a shepherd and become a hireling in a second way - when the motive for your service is the wage. Many serve dependant on the benefits of their ministry, and move from one ministry to another, not on the basis of their gifting, or call, but for the package that comes with the position. I remember being struck by a question I once read in an article that asked *"Why is it that God always only seems to call 'successful' ministers from poor churches to richer churches, and*

from small churches to bigger churches, when it is the small churches that really need their help?"

As a shepherd, there is a second temptation that Satan will set before you - when he tempts you to usurp the position of the Chief Shepherd, and begin playing the little games of "Empire Building" instead of "Kingdom Building". We Africans are prone to falling into OT heresies of dress and position instead of the NT heresies of logic and thought that the church in the west falls into. We begin to picture ourselves as "Moses" - ruling alone, undisputed, in special communion with God and therefore unchallenged. We forget that the nature of Christian leadership has changed in the NT - that now there is to be a plurality of leadership, elders in the church, that now we respect the priesthood of all believers, that now succession is not by bloodlines but by calling. Do not fall into this trap Ngari.

C. Be on your guard - Finally ²⁹ **be on your guard . . . because . . . savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock.** ³⁰ **Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them.**

Today it is not always clear what the true work of a shepherd should be. The world calls us to be expert, professional administrators, expert social workers, expert psychotherapists, expert educators, and expert facilitators. After 8 years of trying to be those things Ngari, the only word I can give you is that if you try, all you will ever be is expert burnt out and expert ineffective.

A shepherd needs to know the common ailments but should not try and prove himself to be a Veterinary Doctor, he needs to know what is nourishing food for his sheep, but he doesn't need to be a professional botanist. There are many distractions that will promise

you success in your ministry, but beware that you not be led astray. Instead let the focus of your life be “to know Christ and him crucified”. Heed Peters words in II Peter 1:5, a passage that we could title “The 7 Habits of a Highly Effective Christian”

⁵ For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; ⁶ and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; ⁷ and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love. ⁸ For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

I believe that as you give yourself to this narrow call of a shepherd, your life lived before us and your knowledge of Christ will keep at bay the destruction of false teachers upon your flock.

May God help you to remain true to your calling!