

Streetsville United Church  
Sunday, October 28, 2007  
Rev. John Tapscott

“THE ONE WHO STANDS BY US”

2 Timothy 4:17

As a person comes to the end of their career or even their earthly life, they often reflect on their life and accomplishments. Sometimes the reflection is quite lengthy as in former Prime Minister Jean Chretien’s new 435 page book. Or sometimes it’s quite short as in Paul’s words written from a Roman prison, “For I am already on the point of being sacrificed; the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.” 2 Timothy 4: 6,7. Then in verse 8 Paul looks forward to what will happen to him after his departure. “Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness which the Lord, the righteous judge will award to me on that day.”

A woman wrote a letter to her son and said, “Rev. Adams came to call the other day. He said at my age I should be thinking of the hereafter. I told him, ‘Oh I do it all the time. No matter where I am, in the living room or upstairs or in the kitchen or down in the basement, I ask myself, ‘Now, what am I here after?’”

As the end drew near Paul reflected on both his life and the hereafter. And if you had asked Paul, “How were you able to fight the good fight, finish the race and keep the faith?” he would have said, “It was because the Lord stood by me and gave me strength.”

These words from 2 Timothy 4:17 are today’s text. Paul is speaking of what happened at his trial before a Roman court. “At my first defence no one took my part; all deserted me. May it not be charged against them. But the Lord stood by me and gave me strength.” Now we can understand why the apostle had been abandoned by his friends, by members of the church, and by co-workers. They didn’t want to be in the same boat as Paul, facing trial and possible execution, perhaps being fed to the lions for their faith.

Paul knew what it was like to have people stand with him and what it was like to have people abandon him. It was happening even as he wrote this letter. Demas was once Paul’s helper but fell in love with this present world and took off. Crescens and Titus had departed for some reason. Tychius had been sent to Ephesus by Paul to do ministry there. Paul speaks of Alexander the coppersmith who did him great harm. Only Luke was standing by him. You get the picture of a somewhat lonely man who seemed to be longing for some more human companionship. So he urged Timothy to come to him soon, and to bring his winter coat,

along with the Scriptures.

Isn't this a realistic slice of life? Sometimes we stand with one another; other times we don't. Remember how the people of New Orleans felt abandoned during Hurricane Katrina, but then found many people coming to stand with them and help them. A more recent example is Bryan McCabe who hears both cheers and jeers from Maple Leafs' fans. Life is a mixed bag. Sometimes we are surrounded by supporters; sometimes we stand alone. Sometimes we are refreshed by faithful friends; sometimes we are deserted by people we counted on. And we must say that we have also deserted others in their time of need. We left them standing alone when they needed us. There's been times when to my regret I should have stayed with someone just a little longer, and stood by them in their time of need.

In the Church, the Body of Christ, we should stand with one another. But it doesn't always happen. Disputes arise, agendas differ, personalities clash, and the resulting rupture is hurtful, whether you're the one leaving or the one left standing alone.

It happens in business and politics. In his memoirs Jean Chretien apparently expresses bitterness over the way Paul Martin, even while standing with him publicly, was working behind the scenes to take Chretien's place as Prime Minister. It happens between nations. I read in the newspaper about the current Dutch debate about extending their mission in Afghanistan. The Dutch apparently have doubts about the solidarity of NATO. One Dutch analyst said, "We were counting on it and it doesn't appear to be there." The Dutch still remember 1995 when Dutch peacekeepers had to stand alone in a Bosnian village as Serb forces waged a campaign that resulted in the death of 8,000 Bosnians. The Dutch perspective, rightly or wrongly is that NATO allies abandoned them.

Now when someone stands by us and with us it is greatly strengthening. A wonderful thing about a good marriage is knowing that your spouse stands by you according to the marriage vows you have made to one another, "for better and for worse, for richer and for poorer, in sickness and in health, in joy and in sorrow, until death do us part." In the Victorian era a British preacher by the name of R. W. Dale guided his church through a difficult time, but then became the centre of controversy himself. Asked how he was able to weather the storm he replied simply, "I am happy at home." Of course, even when we have a marriage partner who stands by us like that, the relationship will be someday be broken by death which does part us.

Why do we sometimes stand with one another and sometimes abandon one another? Why did people desert Paul at his trial? It's because of forgetfulness, self-interest, fear. It's a product of our human limitation, that we can't be in all places at all times. At root it comes from our sinful nature. We know how disappointing it is to be deserted and frankly, we've

all deserted someone when they needed us. Sometimes we stand with others and sometimes we don't, even when we should. That's human nature.

But notice what Paul says, "At my first defence no one took my part; all deserted me, but the Lord stood by me and gave me strength..." Even when his friends deserted him, Paul found that the Lord Jesus Christ stood by him and gave him strength to make his defence. He even proclaimed the Gospel message at his trial, so that many Gentiles heard it. Paul says that he was rescued from the lion's mouth. Perhaps he was thinking of Daniel chapter 6 where the Lord stood by Daniel and delivered him from the lion's den, so that even King Nebuchadnezzar became a worshipper of Israel's God. So at his first trial Paul was saved from Roman wrath at least for a time. Paul welcomed the support of friends, but he knew that his true refuge and strength was in Christ.

"But the Lord stood by me." That's our hope, too. Even when other helpers flee, even when our friends desert us, the Lord Jesus stands by us. He sticks with us in every situation, not because we are always worthy of his presence, but because he is faithful to the promise he made to his church and his people. "I will never fail you nor forsake you." The Son of God who loves us, who died for our sins, and rose again to live forevermore is the One who stands by us and strengthens us. The Psalmist says, "The Lord is at my right hand; therefore I will not be shaken." We who trust in the Lord will never be alone. From his love we can never be separated.

And knowing that Christ always stands by us even helps us to forgive those who have deserted us. Paul wrote to Timothy, "Get Mark and bring him with you for he is very useful in serving me." Now Mark had once abandoned Paul during a missionary journey. He left and went home. Paul was angry and for a long time was divided from Mark. But by now they had reconciled, and Paul wanted Mark to stand by him in his final days. The fact that someone did not stand with us, or we with them doesn't mean we must be permanently separated. By God's grace, we can stand with one another again!

Now when Paul says in verse 18 that "The Lord will rescue me from every evil and save me for his heavenly Kingdom", he didn't mean that the Lord would rescue him from every earthly difficulty. At his next trial Paul would be found guilty and put to death. He would not be saved from the lion's mouth. But he had confidence that even then the Lord would save him from the ultimate power of death. Paul's words in Romans chapter 8 would be gloriously fulfilled. "For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, not anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

On the day we stand before God, the day of judgement, who will stand by us? None other

than Christ. Even as we stand before the throne with nothing to boast of, the One who died for us will be our advocate. He will claim us as his own. We will be given the crown of righteousness and saved for the Heavenly Kingdom. We do not have to fear the last day if we are trusting in Christ now, for he will stand beside us all our days, including on that day.

Some of you watch the Michael Coren show on CTS, or read his columns. He is an interesting and forthright spiritual and political commentator, even when you always agree with all his views. Michael Coren is a Christian and he wrote a column recently which I found very moving. Here is part of it in his own words.

*“Could you spare some money?” the man asks, his body trembling. I turn and ask if he is hungry. Of course he is. His broken body is little more than a skeleton. I tell him I’ll buy him some food, and begin walking to the corner store. He follows, a yard behind. As he walks he trembles and chatters. And stinks. I’m uncomfortable, embarrassed. People look around when they smell him, and they look at me. We walk into the store. Me with good clothes and a good job. Him with ripped pants and nothing. I take some milk, chips, peanuts, any food that looks comforting and nourishing. I walk to the counter. He follows. I put the goods down and wait to pay. The woman behind the counter looks pained. She looks at me. Then at him. Then at me again. A pause, and then: “Are you two, are you together?” She was asking if I was paying for him. Was I together with this man? It seemed to take an eternity for the question to register. But then I steadied myself. “Yes”, I said. “We are together.” Michael Coren ends by saying, “The day will come when I will stand broken and stinking. The stench will be my own sin. The question will be asked, “Are you two together?” Because of my faith in Jesus Christ, because of my certainty that He lived, died and rose again for me and for all of us, the answer will be “Yes”. Jesus will say, “Yes, we are together.” And I will have eternal happiness with my Father in heaven.”*

”But the Lord stood by me and gave me strength.” Jesus Christ stands by us, even when others desert us. He strengthens us to stand with one another and to serve the least and the lowliest. Even on the last day the Lord Jesus will stand by us. Especially then he will stand by us. And we will be saved. To Him be glory forever and ever. Amen.