Demas: what you love most matters
2 Timothy 4:9-18

Over the summer we've looked at some of the members of Paul's team. And this morning we're going to finish by looking at a man called Demas, and what you love most matters most.

Now, when you read the Bible what you discover is that God hasn't given us a text-book of systematic or applied theology, has he? It's not like you get up one morning and think, 'why does God allows suffering?' And you turn to the index and there it is, Chapter 33, 'Suffering and why God lets it happen.' That's not how it works.

Instead God reveals himself, and answers your deepest questions through the lives of individuals, and the life of a nation, caught up in the one, great, unfolding story of the Bible, that culminates in Christ. And as you read that story, you see just about every human character trait and emotional response and moral behaviour you can imagine. Including treachery and betrayal.

In fact, as you read, it doesn't take long before you encounter that kind of stuff, does it? You start reading at the beginning and you're only three chapters into Genesis and you watch as Adam and Eve choose a piece of fruit, over loyalty to God. And from then on you watch as one descendant after another makes choices that seemed to promise so much but turned out so bad. And Esau, son of Isaac the patriarch, chooses a bowl of stew over the privileges of being first-born son. And you see Samson choose sexual pleasure over his God-given calling. And Ahithophel, David's trusted counsellor, chooses revenge and power, over faithfulness to his king. And then, as if humanity could sink no lower, you watch as Judas Iscariot chooses cash, and Peter self-preservation, and Pilate his career over Christ

And as you witness these events, you're witnessing people standing at the crossroads - the cross-roads of moral decision making. And as you see them making the wrong choice, you're supposed to ask, why do they do that? What makes them make that choice?

And, it's obvious why that matters for us, isn't it? Daily you and I also stand at those moral crossroads. And maybe you've seen a friend take a wrong turn and seen them turn away from the faith, or desert their spouse or family, and you've seen the fall-out and it shakes you. But, maybe, deep down you also understand *why* they did it, and you don't want to go there, but you know you're not perfect, and temptation comes knocking.

And maybe you also realise, that a loveless loyalty, either to God or other people, a faithfulness that's more to do with duty than delight, is also not the answer. Instead, what you want is a deep *heart* loyalty to your friends, or your spouse, or to God. A heart loyalty that brings happiness over years of friendship.

So, how can you learn that? And how can you learn it in a world where faithfulness seems in short supply? I mean, why do deserters desert? Why do people betray those they supposedly love, and how can you protect yourself from doing the same, and instead develop a loyalty over a lifetime that brings joy?

Well, Demas, who we're going to look at, provides us with an incredibly helpful case-study in why betrayal happens, how to avoid it, and how instead to cultivate loyalty.

So, we're going to look at three things: a disordered love (that's where we're going to spend most of our time), a too-near horizon, and a faithful friend.

A Disordered Love

The first time we meet Demas is in Colossians 4:14, where Paul writes, 'Luke the beloved physician greets you, *as does Demas*.' And around the same time, Paul writes to Philemon and says, 'Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, *and so do* Mark, Aristarchus, *Demas*, and Luke, *my fellow workers*.' (Phil 23-4).

So, Demas was right there in Paul's team. He's a guy Paul values as a fellow worker, as someone labouring alongside him in helping others know Jesus. And when you share the same passion with someone, and you work closely alongside them like that, it's almost inevitable that you build a friendship with them, isn't it?

But Demas isn't best known for his friendship with Paul, but for the catastrophic error of judgment he makes while in Rome. You see, Paul is reaching the end of the line. He's imprisoned, probably in the Mamertine jail in Rome - and if you've ever been there, and seen inside, you know it's grim. It's cold, it's damp, and the ceiling is oppressively low. And Paul was chained there, on trial for his life. And in his last letter before he was executed, he writes to Timothy and says, 2 Timothy 4:10: 'Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica.'

Now, Demas would have known that at this moment in Paul's life, Paul needed him. I mean, they were co-workers, they were friends. They'd experienced the highs and lows of life together. And yet, when Paul needed him, Demas walked away.

Why desert your friend like that? What does Demas see going on there in Rome, in the circumstances surrounding Paul, and what does he *imagine* happening instead in Thessalonica, that makes him think - 'I'm not staying here, I'm going there, to Thessalonica.' And to do that in a way that, as he heads for the airport, or donkey station, Paul sees it as nothing less than desertion?

Well, Paul tells us why Demas does it. 'Demas, *in love with this present world*'.

So, the reason Demas chooses Thessalonica over friendship; the reason he chooses Thessalonica over faithfulness, to Paul and to the work of Christ, was because of what he loved.

Now, if you want to know about love, who do you go to, who are the experts? Ed Sheeran? He's an expert on love - he's always singing about it - or so I'm told. Or maybe the author of the latest romantic novel you can pick up in the airport bookshop? She's got to be an expert on love. Or the screen writer of the latest Netflix blockbuster? cos that's all about love, or sex, but hey, they're the same things surely. They know all about love.

Well, outside the Bible, I want to point you to St Augustine, because he understood that what you love determines what you choose.

And Augustine observed that people tend to live discontented lives; that we're not really satisfied with how things are going in our lives. And we're not exactly full of joy, or experiencing deep happiness. And that bothered him.

And the reason Augustine gives for this discontent and lack of joy, is that our loves are out of order. And that you are most shaped not by what you do, or think, or even believe about life, but by what you love, *and* by what you love *most*.

And how and why we make the decisions we do, like staying beside a friend who needs us, or heading off to Thessalonica, is down to what we love. That the presence, or absence, of contentment and joy and moral virtue in our lives depends on what we set our hearts on. What it is we love.

I mean, imagine that you're leaving work one day, and you see a colleague being assaulted. And the person assaulting them is obviously strong enough to take both of you out. What do you do? You see, you can believe, *in theory*, that courage is great, and that we should all be courageous in the defence of the weak. But what will *make* you courageous in that moment, what will make you move towards them, rather than hold back, or turn away, is if you *love* your friend's well-being and safety more than your own. It's not that you just *think* justice is better than injustice in your head, it's that you *feel it* in your heart. It's that you *love* it. Now, of course, we live in Switzerland, so you're not going to see anyone being beaten up, but what if a colleague is being bullied or or badly treated in the office? But to go to their defence might cost you. What you do will depend on whether you love your neighbour's welfare more than your own.

Or imagine you're walking down a street and notice something fall out of someone's pocket up ahead. And they haven't noticed, and apart from you two, the street is deserted and there are no security cameras anywhere. And the person up ahead turns a corner and walks out of sight. And you get to the thing they dropped, and it's an envelope, filled with bank notes - which could happen in Switzerland! And no one else can see you, and the person who dropped it doesn't know they've dropped it. And they're walking away oblivious. What do you do? Well, what you do will depend on what you love most. If you love that person's interests more than your own, you'll run after them and hand it over. But if you love yourself more, or love money more, you'll slip that envelope in your own pocket. You can *think* or even *believe* honesty is a good thing, but for you to follow through on honesty, it depends on you *loving* it, and your neighbour. Now, of course, that's not going to happen to you. But what about any situation where honesty or integrity could cost you personally. How you act will depend on what your heart runs after. What it most wants, what it most values, what it loves.

You see, how does Jesus sum up God's law? Matthew 22:37, "You shall *love* the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it. You shall *love* your neighbour as yourself.' In other words, put negatively, ultimately all sin, every time we fail to make the right moral decision, comes from a lack of love for God or neighbour.

But not just *a lack* of love. Augustine also said that that we get *the order* of our loves wrong - that they're dis-ordered. That we can love some things, even good things, too much that we should love less. And we don't love enough those things we should love more.

So it's not that we don't love our friend who's being assaulted, or the stranger walking down the street, or God whose law we break. It's that we love money, or safety, or personal freedom, more.

I mean, ask yourself, is it good to have a job you love doing? Or, students, is it good that you love your studies? That you get up in the morning excited about what lies ahead in your day ahead? Yes! It's great. But, if you love your job more than God, or your friendships, or your family, you're going to make choices that are not good. Or, is it ok to love making money, and generating wealth? And I would argue, absolutely! Provided the wealth you generate is put to good use. But, if in your hierarchy of loves, making money comes higher up than doing good with it, trouble is going to come.

And Demas may very well have loved God and loved Paul. He may even have *believed* courage and loyalty were good things. But when he saw how things were turning with Paul in prison, and he saw what Thessalonica offered, he decided he would be happier and better off if he headed for Thessalonica. Because, Paul says, he was '*in love* with this present world.'

Ok, so, what does the world have to offer Demas, or you and me, that when you stand at the crossroads you so like the look of what's on offer that you make the wrong choice and take the wrong turn? What was there for Demas to love in this present world?

Well, firstly, there are its comforts. I mean, staying beside Paul, and staying loyal to the work of God, probably meant risk and uncertainty for Demas, maybe even the threat of imprisonment or persecution for himself. Whereas, Thessalonica offered a great and growing church, so he could still do ministry there, he could still preach the Bible, *and* it came with much lower risks. Rome offered hardship. Thessalonica offered sunshine and safety. And when you love the comfort the world offers you more than God, or your friend, you're likely to choose wrongly.

Secondly, there are the pleasures of the world. I mean, trying to look after Paul in prison, and get food to him, or help organise his defence, didn't exactly promise a whole load of fun, did it? But Thessalonica… there are some great coffee shops, and lovely wine bars and a humming night-life in Thessalonica. And there's a good theatre and a great library. I could improve myself in Thessalonica. And when we love the pleasures of the world, the good or fun things it has to offer more than God, or loyalty, or honesty, and we find ourselves standing at the crossroads, we'll choose wrong.

But thirdly, there's the applause of the world. I mean, imagine trying to get past the guards at the prison to see Paul each day. Do you think the guards applauded Demas and slapped him on the back, or insulted, and threatened and shoved him? The friend of a man on Caesar's death row, the friend of a man who says there is another king than Caesar, doesn't get applause. But, if he went to Thessalonica, and joined the church there, he could make a name for himself! He could be someone. Demas - Paul's fellow worker! He could secure some good speaking engagements, maybe even write a book - My Life With Paul in the Mamertine Jail. And he could tell himself, it's all for the sake of the gospel. Love the applause of others, or their good opinion of you, more than God, or our neighbour, and we'll choose wrong.

It's no wonder, is it, that John writes in 1 John 2:15, 'Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.'

And yet, Paul doesn't say, 'Demas, in love with *the world* deserted me'. He says, 'Demas, in love with this *present* world.'

A Too-Near Horizon

Imagine an ancient explorer who sets out to discover a new land. And, after months at sea, he sees land. And he thinks he's found the new world, and he rows ashore, plants his flag in the ground and names it after himself. Only, he later discovers that this wasn't it. And the continent he's searching for is still a thousand miles away.

Or imagine you're out hiking, and you can see the mountain peak you're aiming for up ahead. And the ascent is steep, and you're tired, so you stop and drink the last of your water, and eat the last of your chocolate, before setting out for the top. And sweaty and out of breath you make it! Only, you discover, when you get there, it's not the top. The real top is still 3 kilometres away, and it's uphill all the way!

And the reason Demas made the choices he did was because he thought his destination, his point of arrival, was way nearer than it was. He was living for and in love with this *present* world. And he made his choices accordingly. Choices and decisions that make absolute sense if this life *is* all there is, if this world is it, if this is our destination and nothing lies beyond the horizon.

Now, you know the expression YOLO, don't you? You Only Live Once. I'm standing on the edge of some freezing mountain lake, and Lukas and the girls are frolicking in the water, calling out, 'Come on dad, get in, you only live once!'

And if you only live once it makes total sense to choose Thessalonica over Rome, doesn't it? It makes total sense for Demas to leave a man, Paul, who's going nowhere and choose instead a life that's going somewhere. If you only live once, and this present world is it, it makes total sense to love yourself first, and pursue the comforts, pleasures and applause of the world.

But what if Demas' calculation is wrong? What if you don't only live once? What if this present world isn't it?

And in 1 John 2:17, having told us not to love the world or the things in the world, John says, 'And the world is passing away along with its desires.'

Now, it's been said that young people typically make two errors in thinking. Firstly, they think the world revolves around them. Though I'm not sure that error's reserved for the young. And, secondly, they tend to think they'll live forever; that they, and their place in this world, will go on forever.

But John says, 'nah, it won't.' This present world isn't permanent and it isn't *it*. And deep down you know he's right. I mean, take losing someone you love to cancer. If you have ever experienced that I suspect you wish you never had to say goodbye like that to someone you love again. And when you have, you wish you could live in a world of no more goodbyes. But where does that longing come from, when death is part and parcel of this present world? Why would you long for something this present world can never give you? Well, as CS Lewis wrote, 'If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.'

And when we stand at that moral crossroads, contemplating Rome or Thessalonica? Loyalty or comfort? Self-sacrifice or selfishness? Self-forgetfulness or self-centredness? What you believe, deep down, about this present world, and the real horizon you're looking to and living for, will profoundly influence the direction you turn.

So, how can you grow in your love for God and for others, and how can your conviction about what lies ahead shape you, so that even when comfort or pleasure or applause *seem* more attractive, you choose faithfulness and loyalty, and do so with joy?

A Faithful Friend

Look at 2 Timothy 4:16, 'At my first defence no one came to stand by me, but all deserted me. May it not be charged against them!' So Paul wasn't just abandoned by Demas, but by everyone. And yet, he forgives them. He doesn't brush it under the carpet; he doesn't pretend it didn't happen; he's honest about the hurt. But he forgives it.

Now, if that's how Demas and others treated him, look what he says about the Lord: v17, 'But the Lord stood by me and strengthened me.' Everyone else drew back, Paul says, 'but Jesus drew near.' Everyone else headed for the exits, but Jesus stayed by my side. Because right through the Bible God has revealed himself as the God of steadfast, never-ending, always faithful, never-forsaking love. And Paul knew it.

But thirdly, Paul knows this world isn't it. Look at v18, 'The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed and bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen.' So even if Paul's trial ends with his death, he knows it's not the end. He knows you don't Only Live Once. Jesus's endless glory and kingdom lies up ahead.

And, listen, you can know what Paul knew. You see, just like Paul, when you most needed it, Christ drew near and loved you. 'For God *so loved* the world', John says, - not like Demas loved it, to get from it, but to give his only Son for it. And when we most needed him, when we were on trial, standing accused by our sin, guilty of all those times we've stood at the moral crossroads and taken the wrong turn, with the judgment of death hanging over us, Jesus didn't do a Demas. He didn't draw back, he drew near. The only one who has ever loved God with all his heart, soul, mind and strength didn't desert you, he loved you and at the cross he gave himself for you, so that you can always know he's with you. 'No greater love has man than this', Jesus said, 'than that he lay down his life for his friends'. And if he loved you enough to die for you, he's not going to walk away from you when you need him.

And his resurrection from the dead, and his sending His Spirit into your life, tells you this present world isn't it. There's another world beyond the horizon. The one you've been made for. The one whose longings you feel.

The writer to the Hebrews says 'For [God] has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." So we can confidently say, "The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?"' (Hebrews 13:5-6). You see, when you know that Christ is your faithful friend, that he loves you with a never-deserting love, you'll love him. As John says in 1 John 4:19, 'We love because he first loved us.' And you'll love him more. More than comfort. More than pleasure. More than applause. More than this present world. And as Hebrews says, you'll fear less. You'll find the courage to be that person of honesty and integrity even when it costs you. You'll love your neighbour. And you'll be a loyal friend and give yourself to others; and you'll stay faithful to God even if others mock you - because why would you turn away from one who loves you like this and stands by yours side? Because you know Jesus didn't choose comfort, or pleasure, or applause, he chose you. And that means you can be faithful and do it with joy.