

The Aroma of Christ

Date: 28 June 2020, 3rd Sunday after Trinity

Location: St George's online

Series: God's Power in Our Weakness

Texts: Ezekiel 36:24-28; 2 Corinthians 2:12-3:6

Some of you will remember the fall of 2015. I don't mean the autumn leaves. I mean when my predecessor John fell off his balcony while building his house. It was a huge leadership challenge for me. I was barely 2 years out of seminary and I had to step into the shoes of an experienced leader. How was I going to lead? To teach? To care for people in a crisis? To see the church not just through it but hopefully to grow? I didn't really know what I was doing. I was painfully conscious of my own weaknesses and the immensity of the challenge. I still am. The gap between where we are and where we could be often feels so big, and how to get us there, beyond me.

Maybe you're like me and you're painfully aware of your own weaknesses and the challenges that lie before you - in your family, in your work, in your discipleship, in trying to work out God and life and if this whole Christianity business is true and makes a difference. In our text today, 2 Corinthians 2.12-3:6 the apostle Paul speaks right into that experience of feeling weak and incompetent. Paul had planted the church in Corinth. But after he left other leaders had come in and cast doubt on his authority. Paul ironically calls them "super apostles". Their ministry was flashy with slick presentations and signs and wonders and miracles.¹ His was weak and unimpressive. We pick the text where Paul leaves off explaining why he wasn't able to visit the Corinthians. He takes a long detour to explore what Christian leadership and ministry, and really the whole Christian life looks like: God's power at work in our weakness. In these verses he uses 3 pictures to illustrate this. We'll look at each in turn.

Triumph

Read with me 2.14.

But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ
As a history nerd I love the origins of words, so I'm not letting this opportunity go. When a Roman general won a stunning victory, on his return to Rome he would celebrate a triumph. This was a great procession through the city. First would come the spoils of war - captured treasures and conquered people. Then the troops, and finally the general himself. By the time Paul wrote, only the emperor was awarded this honour. Here Paul pictures himself as a prisoner in Christ's triumph. He is being paraded to the glory of Christ. To be a humiliated prisoner in Christ's victory parade is better than any praise and glory before men.

Aroma

Verse 14 continues with the second picture.

And through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him.
Have you ever had that experience where a smell brings a vivid memory rushing back. For me the smell of kerosene takes me back to sitting in a village in PNG at night sharing stories. Here Paul says that he and Silas and Timothy are like that smell - but what they bring to

¹ 12.11-12

mind is Jesus. And really, that's true for all of us who bear the name of Christ, who would call ourselves Christians. People see how we live and what we say. And it's worth pondering. What do people see of Christ when they look at us? We know that the church is sometimes on the nose, and with good reason. The church has had appalling failures. But the opposite can also be true. Through you, even in your weakness, people might smell the sweetness of Jesus' love and grace and hope.

But Paul also points out that the smell of Christ can be like smelling salts. It gets your attention. It makes you sit up. It's confronting.

15 For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. 16 To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life.

Jesus is not some senile geriatric who you can pat on the head and ignore. (As if that was an ok way to treat our elders anyway!) He is Saviour and Lord, the King of Glory. You can either accept his invitation and receive life. Or you can reject him and choose death. Sometimes people will smell the fragrance of Christ in us as the stench of death, and they will reject us, as they reject our master. Sometimes they will breathe in the aroma of life, and we will have the joy of seeing God at work in their lives.

In verse 17 Paul contrasts himself and his ministry with the 'super apostles' who were opposing him in Corinth.

Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, like men sent from God.

There are still people like this around today. They're often flashy, with slick presentations and promises of healing and wealth that you can receive if only you sow your money into their coffers. I remember my parents being very upset when they heard about the tele-evangelist Creflo Dollar going to PNG. Yes, you heard right. That was his name. The churches who had invited him had spent a small fortune hosting him. When he got off the plane he asked where his limo and police escort were. He demanded to be put up in the best hotel. And then he spent his time at his rallies asking for money from people who were mostly subsistence farmers. True Christianity ministry is not a front for greed.

Letter

Anyway, in chapter 3:1-6 we come to the third picture - the letter. In the early church it was common for the Christian leaders who travelled between churches to carry with them letters of introduction. The super apostles had these letters. But Paul says, I don't need a letter to recommend me. Verse 2:

You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everybody. 3 You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.

It's a bit of a complex metaphor that Paul plays with from different angles. First he says that the Corinthians are written on his heart. He knows them intimately and cares for them deeply. At the same time, they are a public letter, read by all. Like the previous picture - as followers of Christ their conduct is seen by the watching world. And Paul is confident that

when people see them, they will see Jesus. Because Jesus himself is at work through Paul in their lives.

In verse 3 he switches the metaphor. Now the letter is written from Christ by the Spirit on their hearts. He picks up God's promise, spoken hundreds of years before through the prophet Ezekiel:

I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. 26 I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. 27 And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.

That transformation from the inside out to make us smell like Jesus - it is something that only God can do. If you trust in Jesus, he is at work to transform you, even you, by his mighty Holy Spirit. And people will see it. You are Christ's letter to your family and friends, your neighbours and colleagues.

Triumph. Aroma. Letter. What ties these three pictures together? They are pictures of Christ's power at work in our weakness. Christ has won the great victory over sin and death. We may feel weak, even humiliated. But his power shines through our weakness to show his glory. He leads us in his triumph. He uses us to waft his sweet aroma to our neighbours. We are his letter to the world.

Because Christ's power is at work in our weakness, Paul is confident in his ministry.

Such confidence as this is ours through Christ before God. 5 Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. 6 He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant—not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

Paul's words help me interpret my experience. I feel weak. I have shed tears knowing the burdens some of you bare, longing for you to know healing and freedom by the Spirit. I'm deeply concerned for the spiritual wellbeing of each one of you. And I find Paul's words ring true for me - you are written on my heart. With Paul, I am learning to be confident. Certainly not in myself or my abilities! Rather confident that Christ is at work to transform you through his Word and and by the power of the Holy Spirit. And perhaps even confident, that just as he is at work in you, so also he might be at work through me for you.