

Boasting in Weakness

Date: 29 November 2020, 1st Sunday in Advent

Location: St George's

Series: God's Power in Our Weakness

Texts: 2 Corinthians 11:16-33; Jeremiah 9:23-24; Mark 10:35-45

10 years or so ago I went to hear a rock star preacher visiting from the US. Mark Driscoll was the flavour of the month. He had planted a church in Seattle that had grown into the thousands within a decade. He had started a church planting network. His style particularly appealed to young men. He told them to stop playing video games, grow up, get a job, move out of home and get married. He inspired hordes of young men to try their hand at church planting. I remember listening to one of his sermons with Claire and she asked me - why is he shouting at us? She, like other women, did not find his aggressive, hyper masculine approach appealing. Sadly, a few years later Driscoll spectacularly fell from grace. He was sacked from his church for bullying.

One of the questions Driscoll's story raises is ***What does Christian leadership look like?*** Being a great preacher and a charismatic leader clearly is not the whole or even the key. There has to be something deeper. One of the things that drives bullying is when a person gets their sense of self worth from being in control. There is an underlying pride that means you have to be at the centre, in charge, in the spotlight. And when that is threatened, you lash out in anger. Or maybe bubbling aware is a pattern of manipulation and intimidation to ensure you get your way.

2 Corinthians presents us with a case study of Christian leadership. What it looks like in practise. What to avoid. I certainly found it instructive when Bishop Richard took us through it as clergy. Our text for today is centred on the theme of boasting. What do you boast in? We'll look at 2 parts: Worldly boasting in verses 16-21, and Boasting in weakness in verses 21-33. But before we come to that, we need to orient ourselves to the culture of the 1st century Mediterranean.

There's a funny website called the Kanye West self-confidence generator, where you can find some of the best quotes from rapper Kanye West talking himself up. Here's a couple of his choice lines:

- "My music isn't just music. It's medicine"
- "For me to say I wasn't a genius, I would just be lying to you and to myself."

American culture has a soft spot for self promotion, but Australian culture finds boasting brash and impolite. So, of course we have some backwards ways of doing it. I know there's people from a number of different cultures in St George's, and I'd love to hear what place boasting has in your culture. In Western culture, because of the influence of the Bible we do value humility and self-effacement as virtues. That cringe when it comes to boasting, at least in Australian culture, means there is a greater cultural distance for us to cross to understand 2 Corinthians.

One commentator writes,

"People in Graeco-Roman antiquity possessed no hope of glory in an after-life. A detached immortality was the most one could expect. Therefore it was customary to achieve 'glory' in this life, and to boast of one's achievements in this life. Thus citizens and soldiers, without

embarrassment and as a social convention, outdid one another in boasting of military and political achievements.”¹

For my money, however we come at boasting, what lies behind it is what we take pride in. Where we get our sense of self worth from. How you answer that question will profoundly shape what you do and how you treat other people. It’s a question that I know I need to constantly ask myself as I lead.

So, let’s take a look at Paul’s argument.

16-21 - Worldly boasting

Have a read with me verse 16

16 I repeat: let no one take me for a fool. But if you do, then tolerate me just as you would a fool, so that I may do a little boasting. **17** In this self-confident boasting I am not talking as the Lord would, but as a fool. **18** Since many are boasting in the way the world does, I too will boast.

It seems that the “super apostles” that Paul responds to in chapter 11 emulated the culture around them, putting a premium on self promotion, trumpeting personal achievement. They “boast[ed] the way the world does”. This however was not how Paul went about his ministry. Back in chapter 10 he quotes from the prophet Jeremiah:

“Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord.” For it is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends.²

Ultimately Paul’s ministry is shaped by the cross of Christ. In the opening words of his first letter Paul had drawn the Corinthians attention to the cross. Weakness and folly to human eyes, but in reality nothing less than God’s power and wisdom.

The Corinthians however were still enmeshed in the surrounding culture of self promotion. Compared to the flashy “super apostles”, Paul’s ministry looked weak and foolish. They doubted his authority as an apostle. Earlier in the chapter Paul had directly attacked the super apostles, calling them servants of Satan, masquerading as apostles of Christ. In our text he switches strategy to ironic overdrive. Boasting is foolishness. But he will play the fool and boast, and he asks for their indulgence to hear him out.

19 You gladly put up with fools since you are so wise! **20** In fact, you even put up with anyone who enslaves you or exploits you or takes advantage of you or puts on airs or slaps you in the face. **21** To my shame I admit that we were too weak for that! With these words Paul unmasks the “super-apostles” approach to ministry with the hope of shaking the Corinthians free from their destructive influence. At the beginning of chapter 11 he had pictured himself as a father presenting the Corinthians as his daughter to Christ in marriage, only to discover she had been receiving someone else's affection. Now he shows that these “super apostles” have in reality been an abusive partner.

Paul’s description here of how the super apostles are treating the Corinthians sounds incredibly modern, how you might hear someone describe an abusive partner - someone who enslaves, exploits, takes advantage, puts on airs, even in the end, who slaps you in the face. If you are in a relationship where this is how your partner is treating you, you do not need to

¹ Paul Barnett, *The Message of 2 Corinthians*, IVP 1988: 172

² 2 Corinthians 10:17-18

put up with this kind of behaviour. Paul called out bad church leaders on it 2000 years ago, and it's still not ok now. You can leave, and we would love to help you. Come and have a chat to me or Claire or someone you trust.

Likewise, if this is how you're treating someone else, at work or at home, that is not ok. You need to change. Come and speak to me or Tristan. There's no shame in admitting you want to change and you need help.

I'm so glad Paul is so clear that this behaviour is not ok - because Christian leaders can treat their people like this and it is incredibly damaging. You may have seen examples in the news or in church land over the past few years. I certainly have been seeing discussions in social media about this, especially with the release earlier this year of a book called *When Narcissism comes to Church: Healing Your Community from Emotional and Spiritual Abuse*.

21-33 - Boasting in weakness

Having shown the folly of boasting in worldly strength Paul returns to his own ironic boast. Read with me from verse 21

Whatever anyone else dares to boast about – I am speaking as a fool – I also dare to boast about. **22** Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they Abraham's descendants? So am I. **23** Are they servants of Christ? (I am out of my mind to talk like this.)

The super apostles were trumpeting their credentials and pedigree. Paul can go toe to toe with them. But even as he does so he knows that Christians, let alone Christian leaders shouldn't place their sense of self worth such things as where they have come from, or who their parents were or what school they went to. I'm reminded of Paul's words to the Christians 700 km north in Philippi:

If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: **5** circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; **6** as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.

7 But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ.

We can do that too can't we? Get our sense of self worth from what family we came from, what school we went to, where we live, what job we have, the people we mix with. We might not be so uncouth as to boast in it. But it can come out in who we include or exclude in our conversations. Or how we react when these things are threatened. Or you might not have been fed with a silver spoon, and you're doing it tough but at least you've got your pride. You can stand on your own two feet and don't need a hand, thank you very much. That too can be a form of pride.

I remember studying Roman history that central to Roman culture was the obligation to live up to the deeds of your ancestors or surpass them. Roman life was a contest of honour and prestige. In the remaining verses of chapter 11 Paul inverts the ancient CV. Instead of boasting the things that would normally bring him honour he rehearses a list of shame and weakness.

I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. **24** Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. **25** Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, **26** I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. **27** I have laboured and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. **28** Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. **29** Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?

I love how Paul's heart comes through in these words. He's like a parent. No matter where he is and what is happening to him, his spiritual children are always present in his mind. All that he does is for their good and growth. I can't claim to come close to Paul as a pastor, but I can tell you that Paul's words resonate with me. I find St George's, each one of you and those not here, are constantly on my heart. How you are going. What your struggles are. Where you need to grow.

And I want to follow Paul's example. That my ministry might be shaped by the cross. That I would not be like the super apostles using my position to exploit, lording it over those entrusted to my care, but rather to follow Jesus' clear words on leadership in Mark 10 - to be your servant, that's what the word *minister* means. Because the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

The summary of what Paul has been doing comes in verse 30.

If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. Why does Paul boast in his weaknesses? We will see more next week. But as we look back across 1&2 Corinthians we can say this - because sees who he is and what he does in the light of the cross. The cross humbles our pride. It says we bring nothing to God except our sin. And yet, the cross exalts us to the skies for it is here that God has demonstrated his love for us. The cross is where Paul looks to for his sense of self worth. And therefore he can own his weaknesses and even step into shameful situations for the sake of others - because the cross is shame and weakness and folly to the world, but it is the glory and power and wisdom of God to save us. Paul kneads this through not just his beliefs but also how he conducts his ministry so that who he is and what he does line up.

What about you? You might not be so brash as to boast. But what do you take pride in? Where do you derive your sense of self worth from? Can you boast in your weakness? What parts of your life do you need to knead the cross into so that who you are as a follower of Christ and what you do line up?