

Jars of Clay

A Sermon on 2 Corinthians 4:7-18

I grew up in a house where it was considered quite normal to watch four different lots of news back-to-back in the evening. When I moved out of home, I rebelled. For ten years after moving out of home I watched no news, dipping into current affairs only reluctantly, if at all. This year, that all changed. Writing this sermon, I found myself constantly picking up my phone for the latest news coming out of Melbourne. It strikes me that one of the many things the coronavirus pandemic has done has been to shine a most searching light on the world's leaders. Relatively small degrees of difference when steering a country's response have gone on to have massive ramifications with regard to the number of people infected with the virus. Some leaders have been able to communicate difficult decisions clearly and compellingly. Others... have not. The pandemic has in fact proved to be a laboratory for the observation of leadership.

The Second Letter to the Corinthians is, amongst other things, Paul's long and messy defence of his own leadership. He's writing to the church he himself planted in the city of Corinth, but which has of late been distancing itself from him. People in the congregation have accused him of being weak, as well as being inconsistent and unreliable. The charge of inconsistency he's already dealt with at several points in the letter so far, but in today's passage he begins to focus in on the topic of strength and weakness, which is arguably the main theme of the whole letter, and the reason why we've named this sermon series *God's Power in Our Weakness*.

You'll notice this theme making its appearance right from the very first verse of today's passage. Paul has had put into his hands something that is immensely powerful, which, depending on what the 'this' in v. 7 is pointing back to in the previous verses, is either the good news that Jesus is Lord, or God's work in our hearts in helping us to see in Jesus the clearest and brightest display of God's glory. It's referring either to the *message* that saves us or to the *perception of what God is truly like* that is the first and best fruit of being saved in the first place.

But this message, and this perception, for that matter, are being carried around in a man who is—weak, a man who has been all but destroyed by the rigours of bringing this message to the different communities of the Eastern Mediterranean coast. Paul's doubters in Corinth have hinted that their founder is weak, and Paul, most unexpectedly for his detractors no doubt,

agrees. But he thinks that God has a purpose in pouring so powerful a message into so unimpressive, so frail a vessel as Paul himself. Read with me from v. 10:—

We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus (Paul writes), so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our mortal body.

The first thing Paul does is to link his own experience of suffering as a missionary to Jesus' experience on the cross (and the word Paul uses here, *νέκρωσις*, is, as you might imagine, a word that puts the accent more on the *process* of death than anything else). And then he goes on to credit any efficacy his own work might have in bringing people to salvation to Jesus' own powerful, resurrection life at work within him. 'When someone I've shared the gospel with becomes Christian,' Paul is saying, 'I look at the unimpressive nature of my gifts, and at the weakness of my own mortal body, and then it's brought home to me that the power that is at work in the person I've been sharing with isn't *my* power, it's the power of the God who raised Jesus from the dead and who will raise *us* from the dead, as well. In fact, the more clearly I see my own weakness, the more powerfully do I perceive God's work in the people I serve. And the more clearly *you* see my weakness, the surer you can be that it's God who's been at work in your life, and not some talented, smooth-talking guru who may or may not have your best interests at heart.'

Paul is saying here that for Christians, suffering is no longer be thought of simply as the result of living in a broken world. Of course, it *is* that, and remains that, because, when taken purely on its own terms, suffering is an evil, or at least points to the fact that something has gone wrong. But, Paul says, God has been able to take this hostile power and force it to work for our good. God does this by using suffering to break down our pride. In other words, our suffering teaches us to be humble. We learn to place our confidence, not in our own abilities, but in the God who gave us those abilities in the first place, and whose abilities are so much greater than our own. We learn that we are jars of clay.

And the second thing Paul is saying is that suffering teaches us to take our eyes off ourselves and to fix our gaze instead on God, who is at work within us and among us even now, and who is even now preparing us for a future, eternal life when, to borrow the phrase of another New Testament author, we will see God as he is. Read with me from v. 16:—

Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

Paul's life, seen from one vantage-point, looked like one long succession of ignominious failures and humiliating disappointments. But, seen from another, Paul was in God's kindness the humble and unimpressive vessel God used to bring the news about Jesus to Europe, and through Europe, to the world. But none of that latter vantage-point would have been particularly self-evident to a dispassionate observer. Looking at the fragile, often fractured communities Paul founded, it would have been hard for anyone to see in them the fruit of the victory of God over the forces of sin and death. But in God's kindness that is exactly what they were. The power of Jesus' resurrection life flowed in them all, and itself pointed forward to the hope their members could have that one day God would take their mortal bodies and raise them to everlasting life just as he had done to the life of his crucified Son. They would die and rise again with Christ, even as their present experience of the Christian life would be a paradoxical mixture of dying in the midst of life, and resurrection life peeking through the cracks in the clay jars of their mortality.

I began this sermon by talking of how the coronavirus has shone a penetrating and not always flattering light on our leaders. Now, I'm very grateful that my leadership is not of the kind that's likely to wind up on an evening news bulletin. But, imagine, for one awful moment, that assistant leading a congregation and being a parent were the sorts of leadership a news-hungry public was interested in reading about. What would they see?

Plenty of weakness. Plenty of dithering. Plenty of opportunities missed, and responsibilities shrugged. But maybe, from another vantage-point, they might see something else, too: something co-existing with that weakness and transforming it from within, something that reflects back to God however faintly something of the beauty of God as it's been revealed in the face of Christ. Moments when I've done something that was clearly beyond my own strength, and when I recognise in delight that it was God who was working through me as I did it. Moments when I've been weak, but God has nevertheless intervened so that his good purposes wouldn't be thwarted by my own frailty. Then again, there have been moments when I've been full of self-confidence, but where failure, pulling me up short, has led me back to the rock-solid

confidence that, no matter what eventuates, yes, Christ is and will be enough for me. A jar of clay, but a jar filled with treasure. Frail and ephemeral, but at the same time renewed day by day.