

St Brandon's 9 June 24
2 Cor 4:13- 5:1; Mark 3: 20-end

SERMON

Prayer

God of our reality,
expand and illumine our understanding of you, ourselves and others. Help us to be real,
and in our struggles to experience your 'all surpassing power' in the clay jars of our
ordinary lives, so that your light and love may shine through.

Amen.

In these days of catch up TV and iplayer, we can watch our favourite series at our
leisure, when it suits us. We sometimes do this in the evening after a busy day of
vicaring and just occasionally I doze off ... so I love the start of each new episode which
gives a recap of what's happened so far.

Therefore, I make no apology for starting my sermon today with 'Previously in 2
Corinthians...' if you weren't here last week, or dozed off (Edward), this is for you, and
you can also watch and read last week's episode via the website, of course..

Last Sunday we began a series of sermons based on this letter from Paul to the early
church in Corinth, noting that letters in the ancient world were very valuable in every
sense, and that the 2 letters to Corinth we have in our Bible are part of a longer
correspondence between Paul and the church. We heard that Paul lived in Corinth for
18 months and knew how the city ticked, and I recommended Philip Plyming's book
about 'Being Real' in which he summarises what was most prized in Corinthian culture:
success, status, strength and **speaking** (impressively in public).

In contrast to this, we noted that Paul often writes about his struggles and weakness,
rather than the many successes in his ministry. But he also says that we have the
treasure of God's presence in clay jars, our fragile and ordinary lives – so that God's
'all surpassing power' may shine through us.

Members of our PMC team offered their helpful insights into the passage, which is the one we've used for 'Dwelling in the Word' this year.

And so to today's verses, which follow directly from last week and continue Paul's theme of our weakness but God's power.

Do have your blue readings sheet in front of you if that helps.

In this letter Paul is defending himself – we have to guess what was in the Corinthians' correspondence to him, but he is at pains to reassure them of his apostolic authority and credentials.

He could have given them a catalogue of planting churches and seeing people converted but he chooses not to do so.

In verse 13, he refers instead to Psalm 116, whose author, as in many of the psalms, is up against it and humbly puts his trust in God to save him. The psalmist speaks in faith not self-confidence: 'I believed, and so I spoke', and so does Paul here, relying on God's strength in weakness, and claiming the authority of scripture in his ministry, not the fleeting power of celebrity or success.

Based on the same faith which David had, Paul speaks (and writes) what he knows to be true - that God, who raised Jesus from the dead will also raise him and the Corinthian Christians to eternal life, both beyond the grave and in this life as they experience God's resurrection power. Indeed, Paul lives daily in the resurrection power of God. Acts 14 tells us he was stoned in Lystra, dragged out of the city and left for dead. But God raised him up to continue his ministry.

Summarizing memorably, Paul says, everything I do is for you – so you experience *God's* grace, with thankfulness, to *God's* glory. It's all about Jesus, not him, and it's for their sake, not his and so, says Paul, whatever trials and persecution he is facing, 'we do not lose heart.'

As we thought last week, Paul's words may resonate powerfully during our current political debates and electioneering. Let us pray for leaders who work for the good of others, not themselves, and in pursuit of truth and justice rather than self-

aggrandisement and power.

The second half of today's passage is another example of Paul speaking of his struggles not successes, and this time he uses contrasts and a different powerful image to make his point.

The contrasts first –

Whilst *outwardly*, physically we may be wasting away, *inwardly* we are being renewed by God's power. What an encouragement at times of weakness and illness.

We think Paul had an ongoing physical weakness or disability, his 'thorn in the flesh' to which he refers elsewhere. I expect many of us can identify with this, either personally or in the lives of family members and friends. Yet Paul calls such suffering a 'slight momentary affliction' which is preparing us for 'an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure'. There's the contrast – not made to dismiss or deny the reality of suffering in this life, but to set it in the context of eternity – the weight of glory beyond all measure.

Two things give Paul's words impact here: his own experience of hardship and persecution and the cross of Christ. All our suffering, to Paul, is a sharing in the suffering of Christ which leads through the cross to resurrection life. Because of Jesus, suffering in this life can be transformed and we can know that Christ is with us in it, and at work though it. And nothing can separate us from the love of God, as Paul tells us in Romans.

Thus Paul compares temporal and eternal, trials on earth and glory in heaven, what is seen and unseen and reaches the final sentence of our passage:

For we know that if this the earthly tent we live in is destroyed (as we all know it will be, one day) we have a building (in our parlance- bricks and mortar, not camping!) a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.

I could preach a whole other sermon on this house – but I won't. Instead I ask, as we close, what does it mean for us?

Perhaps the Father's house which Jesus tells us about in John chapter 14, with its many rooms prepared by him for God's children. This house embodies the promise of eternal life through Jesus Christ, the way, the truth and the life.

Perhaps we think of the City of God, Zion the eternal city, about which we sing.
Or perhaps this image speaks to us of the ultimate security of a home full of love and will never end, never be broken or lost through human frailty, violence or circumstance. The experience of the many, many refugees and asylum seekers around the world today must surely impact on how we read these words, and cause us to work and pray for them, and for God's kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven.

I close with some words from 'Being Real', then a few moments of silence in which we can pray and reflect.

What sustains Paul is his certainty that God is present with him and for him as he suffers for others, just as God was present in the death of Jesus. Indeed... it is not just that God is present, but he is also at work; that is the reality to which Paul wishes to bear witness. He will not be shamed by his won experience of suffering, because in that cross-shaped place he has been touched by God.

May this be our inspiration and witness too. Amen