

Living with integrity within the grace of God

St Brandon's

2 Corinthians 12:2-10

7 July 2024

Today marks the last in our series on 2 Corinthians. I suspect there may be a collective sigh of relief from those who have preached in the series, and perhaps a collective sigh of relief from you as the congregation who have heard some or all of the sermons. It's not been an easy journey!

But we aren't quite finished yet, and today's passage is perhaps just as challenging as some of the others. What is St Paul saying? And why is he saying it? And what's it got to do with us?

We're not helped by our passage starting at v.2 of Chapter 12. V.1 reads: "It is necessary to boast; nothing is to be gained by it [so, we might ask why it's necessary], but I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord." So, our reading is mostly a boast, and Paul has been boasting for quite some time. It started back in Chapter 10 v.8: "Now even if I boast a little too much of our authority, which the Lord gave ..." He followed that up by saying, at least, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord" (10:17), but then he goes on to say, "What I am saying in regard to this boastful confidence, I am saying not with the Lord's authority, but as a fool" (11:17).

So, he seems to be boasting on his own behalf, and not because the Lord has encouraged him to do so. Strange, so why? Well, perhaps two reasons. We've learnt from previous sermons that Corinth was a place where success, status, strength and being able to speak impressively in public were highly prized. And that there was a culture of honour, where you needed to be honourable, and bring honour to yourself and the city, and to do so by publicly displaying your honour. And while Paul in one sense stands up against all of that – he proclaims Christ as a dishonourable person, who died a dishonourable death, for example – it seems as though the culture might have got to him. Why shouldn't he boast about, well, his sufferings, his hard work and so on? He knows it won't do any good ("nothing is to be gained by it"), but he seems to be drawn into the same kind of self-promotion that the culture demands.

The second reason that he seems to be boasting on his own behalf is that some other apostles – "super-apostles" (11:5) or "false apostles" (11:13) – have appeared on the scene, and while it's not very clear who these were, Paul seems to be suffering from something of an inferiority complex in relation to these other apostles – though he is also concerned about the false gospel that they are proclaiming (11:4), and the way that that might draw the Corinthian Christians away from the true faith. So, he feels the need to state his case, to establish, or more likely re-establish his own credibility, and perhaps superiority, over these other so-called apostles. And perhaps he feels the need to do that in anticipation of his third visit to Corinth, which he speaks about in the chapter following ours. He's about to visit them in person; he wants them to receive him with due honour.

And so, to re-establish his credibility, he relates in our passage today a story about someone who had received an amazing revelation, caught up into Paradise, and who had heard things that no mortal is permitted to repeat. Who was this person, what did they hear, and how did Paul come to know of it if it wasn't to be repeated? Well, you've probably guessed that it's very likely that Paul was himself the person. He virtually gives the game away in v.7 when he says that he will

refrain from boasting “even considering the exceptional character of the revelation [that I have received]”.

And if that’s the case, then what we have in this whole passage is something rather unusual – because it’s all autobiography. Now, Paul tells us elsewhere – and six times in 1 and 2 Corinthians – about the hardships he has suffered for the sake of the gospel. So, we get some autobiography in his letters. But this is something rather more and different. Paul is telling us two things about himself – the heavenly revelations he has received, and the ‘thorn in the flesh’ which we’ll come on to. And he’s doing so, even though he knows that he’s a fool to do so, that he’s boasting about himself, that this is all self-promotion. And it seems that we learn something from this about St Paul himself from this. That he could be seriously affected by the culture around him. That he perhaps wasn’t as self-confident as he would seem to be from the rest of his writings and doings. That he felt the need to go on the defensive. That he perhaps had something of an inferiority complex.

So perhaps one lesson we might draw from this is that if even people like St Paul – who we would probably regard as *the* super-apostle given his proclamation of the gospel among the Gentiles, and his amazing, if tough to understand, letters, and his willingness to suffer on behalf of Christ – if even he could be affected by the culture, be drawn into foolishly boasting about his own achievements, then, of course, so could we. So, while justified self-respect is normal and fine, unjustified boasting, self-promotion, a search for status and honour, are not good things to pursue, not worthy of us as Christians. Let us beware.

Now Paul tries to correct some of this by what he says in vv.6-7. “But if I wish to boast, I will not be a fool, for I will be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it [well, not really, as we’ve seen], so that no one may think better of me *than what is seen in me or heard from me.*” Here is an appeal to judge him on his true character, not on his boasts. He seems to be saying, “Judge me by what you see in me, the way I behave in normal circumstances, the person I truly am behind the mask I sometimes wear. And judge me by what you have heard from me, the words I have spoken in bringing the good news of Jesus Christ to you.”

So perhaps another lesson we might draw from this is to be people of integrity, that that is part of our calling as Christians. Let people see in us and hear from us, in ways that promote the kingdom of God. Let us seek to live lives of integrity in all that we do and are and say, always being true to the faith we profess.

But then Paul goes on to his ‘thorn in the flesh’. What is this all about? Well, first, the thorn is a “messenger of Satan to torment me”. So, whatever it was, it did not come from God. We might more naturally think of it as some illness or condition that just happened to Paul – we’re familiar enough with conditions such as these in our own lives. But the effect of it was to keep Paul from being too elated, and in that sense God, even though He was not the origin of it, decided not to take it away, not to heal him of it, whatever it was. It would serve a purpose, because it would teach Paul that God’s grace was sufficient for him. It would stop him from getting above himself.

What exactly was it? Well, of course, different ideas have been put forward. Given his extraordinary missionary journeys, and his ability to suffer and to recover from enormous physical hardships, it clearly wasn’t a permanently disabling condition. But malarial fever is one possibility, something that would recur at times. Or perhaps it was his eyesight – he often signs his letters

but doesn't write them, as though he couldn't see well enough to write normally. In Galatians, he refers again to his "physical infirmity", and praises them that, had it been possible, they would have torn out their eyes and given them to him (Gal. 4:13-15). So perhaps it was that.

But, perhaps deliberately, he leaves his condition vague so that it might have more general application. And the lesson that we might learn from this is that, while God does not deliberately afflict us with illnesses or conditions, be they physical or mental, He may choose not to heal them because there are other beneficial effects which, in God's estimation, outweigh the discomfort, however severe that may be.

That is, of course, by no means an easy lesson for us to learn. Nor was it an easy lesson for Paul. Three times he asked God to heal him, and it was only when God didn't that he realised that God was saying to him, "My grace is sufficient for you, for [my] power is made perfect in [your] weakness". It might be another way of saying that we are clay jars, an idea we came across in the first sermon in the series. As fragile clay jars we hold the treasure of faith, but in such a way that the all-surpassing power of God might shine through us. Might there have been, or still are, or might be in the future, similar circumstances to which we are subject? Have we, do we, will we have the same humility to accept God's grace for us?

So, three things we might learn from this. Beware the effects of the surrounding culture, the lure of status and honour. Live lives of integrity in all that we do and are and say. Have the humility to accept God's grace for us, even when it hurts or doesn't currently make sense.

And to finish as St Paul finishes 2 Corinthians, as we seek to live like this, may "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all" (13:13). Amen.