

Trust When the Answer is No

Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians 12v1-10

Sunday 21st February 2021

The theme of today's passage is strength through weakness and, in his Second letter to the church in Corinth, Paul says 'when I am weak, then I am strong'.

Today, a modern citizen might question the notion of strength through weakness. Surely, in today's world, they might argue, that's an outdated concept. So a few rich philanthropists talk about 'turning the other cheek' and 'going an extra mile' but when was the last time you saw anyone actually doing those things? It's all talk, surely? After all, if any person were to do such a thing, they would surely be considered foolish.

Our modern citizen might also say that, to be successful in today's world, we should abandon any notion of weakness and instead focus on what Science tells us is logical. Evolution shows us that only the fittest will survive in this world of diminishing resources. They would say, 'we should live lives full of interesting experiences, eat healthy food, drive cars that reflect our personalities and choose careers that allow us to become who we were meant to be.'

Well, a closer inspection of Paul's letter shows us that the Bible might just be at variance with what our modern citizen tells us is right. But, of course, Paul was writing to the Corinthians [in modern day Greece] nearly 2,000 years ago. He didn't know that his little tin pot religion called Christianity would grow into a faith movement which today has the greatest number of followers in the world. Paul was just interested in a few scattered churches around the Eastern Mediterranean Sea that he had some claim to have founded or inspired. Meanwhile, the might of the Roman Empire proclaimed the worship of emperors and pagan gods.

In this letter, Paul was clearly having a little local difficulty with the Corinthians. You see, the church at Corinth was surrounded by pagan practice, including the worship of Aphrodite, the pagan goddess of love. Her temple was the focus of pilgrimage in the same way that a red light district attracts those wanting to expand their range of experiences in today's world. It was further complicated by certain false teachers who were turning the congregation against Paul and trying to corrupt the teachings of Jesus.

That is why, earlier in the letter, Paul, though normally a very humble person, is forced to compare himself with the false teachers by listing all the sufferings he had to endure for his faith in Christ Jesus. These sufferings included being flogged more severely, exposed to death more often, being stoned, shipwrecked, knowing hunger and thirst and being cold and naked – all for the sake of sharing the Gospel with those early believers, including the Corinthians.

In fact, Paul's list of sufferings is very impressive. So impressive, in fact, that it probably leaves Bear Grills list of accomplishments in the shade. So it's strange to think that this super-human list of sufferings should be ascribed to someone who claimed to be so weak. You see, in this regard, Paul agreed with his accusers who were keen to point out his human frailties: his stammer, his unimpressive public speaking and his lack of riches. Indeed, during the two visits Paul made to Corinth, it appears that he was entirely self financed through his other work as a tent maker. We might wonder why Paul would want to be so financially independent – was it so that he himself could avoid being corrupted by the false teachers at Corinth?

To underline his weaknesses, Paul then tells the Corinthians that he has another weakness which he describes as a thorn in his flesh. Whatever he meant, it is clear that this ailment was greatly distressing to Paul, so much so that he had 'pleaded three times with the Lord' to have it taken away. But the answer to Paul's prayers of pleading are 'No'.

We are left in no doubt that the suffering is significant, it being a 'messenger of Satan', but Paul tells the Corinthians that it is actually a part of God's plan to keep him from becoming conceited. Furthermore, Paul's claim is that God's 'power is made perfect in weakness'.

How completely at odds are Paul's words both with the received wisdom of the first century Roman Empire and also of our own post-Christian world. Indeed, it might seem that, decade by decade, the western world is sliding backwards towards those pagan days when might was right and humility was considered not just a weakness but also a liability.

And so we return to the here and now. To a world brought low by a pandemic that has exposed the falacies of the present age: truth decay, tribalism parading as patriotism and blind self-interest.

What can we do about it? To Paul, the Lord says that 'His grace is sufficient' for him. Is that what God is saying to us today? If so, then surely we are being asked to gamble on such impossible odds that we are bound to fail? But what is the alternative? When people have exhausted all the earthly possibilities, perhaps then they will turn once more to God. But in the meantime perhaps we can take solace in those in the Christian community who have already discovered the sufficiency of God's Grace:

This is what the Nazi concentration camp survivor Corrie Ten Boom says: 'Perhaps only when human effort has done its best and failed, will God's power alone be free to work.'

This is what the quadruplegic evangelist Joni Tada Earekson said just last month, having fought and won her battle against COVID:

'When I was told I had COVID I thought 'this is a death sentence'. But my disability had taught me how to carry even this cross. For when I trusted Him to see me through, yes, even if it did mean death. when I gave it all up to Him, I could feel God take gentle, firm possession of this strange affliction and begin to do a work in me.

It was as though the Lord pressed me:

'Joni, do you believe that I will never leave you or forsake you? That I am your ever present help in this trouble? That doubting me only makes things worse? Do you believe my grace is sufficient whether I take you home or assign you to remain? Do you trust me? And in the dark, in bed, I cried out: 'Yes Lord, I believe'.

And then in the ensuing hours and days I felt this wonderfully odd calmness, an almost indifference to how much it might hurt or how it might end and I felt perfectly still under the hand of God. He pulled me close into his shelter and I felt myself resting in the shadow of the Almighty. And it felt blessed.'

But don't just listen to me. Listen to Joni in her own words on YouTube by following the link on the St Peter's website.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=squAX6IV2Aw>