

2 Corinthians 11:16-12:10 CC 9 and 10.30 1st June 2014

If you can cast your mind back to Jan 5th, it was cold and wet then as well. We began this series in 2 Corinthians. I began then by asking two questions, “what is your image of a great leader?” and “what is your image of a Christian leader?”

We saw then, and have been seeing since, that the Christian leadership seen in Paul may not be what we might expect and certainly was not that which was being shown and promulgated by some of the teachers who were in Corinth and whom Paul has just in 11:13-15 described as false apostles and servants of Satan.

Today Paul continues to both defend himself as an apostle to whom these Christians in Corinth should be listening and to reveal the other teachers as frauds and fools.

1. Foolish words 11:16-23a

In an earlier letter to these Corinthians Paul had written “When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child” (1 Cor 13:11). If you listen to children talking you hear that a lot of what they say is foolish. It involves boasts and claims which there is no way they can fulfil or substantiate. It is childish talk and it is foolish talk.

What we have in these verses is just that and Paul describes it as “foolish”.

a. an assertion, firstly Paul asserts that he is not a fool. Clearly the other teachers had been presenting him as a fool but Paul says no, even though he is going to go on and speak as if he were a fool.

b. the argument, do follow it through in vs 17-23a. Paul says look you seem to be happy with people coming to you with this foolish talk and, v17, self-confident boasting so let me use this pattern even though I know it is worldly and not godly. I know you gladly put up with the fools who do this even though they exploit you, and take advantage of you. I do recognise I am not in their league in this perhaps because I am what they say I am and that is weak, v21.

However I am their equal v22, they are Hebrews, true Israelites and of Abraham well so am I. They claim to be servants of Christ well so am I.

Paul knew all this to be foolish, because what mattered was not him or them but the Christians in Corinth and their walk with Jesus, but, as we have seen, that was what was at stake and so Paul is trying by any means to wake them up and see what was really happening.

It is a bit like the man who was sleeping and in his dream he could smell bacon cooking and the smell was intoxicating as only the smell of bacon can be but then into the dream came a noise, strident and out of keeping, until he woke up and realised it was the fire alarm and his bacon was burnt.

Paul was sounding the warning to these Christians who were being fooled by the false teachers.

2. Foolish boasts 11:23b-33

But Paul continues to boast.

Have you got a CV? I wonder what it says. I would imagine it focuses upon your strengths and all the good things you have done.

Well Paul sets out a bit of a CV. He wants to show he was better than these other teachers, v23b "I am more, I have worked much harder". But then look at the rest, prison, flogged, beaten, shipwrecked. He has as much chance of getting a job as Jonah when he applied to Captain a ship! Paul's boasts were not about his preaching campaigns, the missions he'd run and churches he'd established and so on. No he boasted about his sufferings, his pains even, as we look at v33, how he had suffered the indignity of having to flee from Damascus by being let down from a window in a basket. V30 sums it up, "If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness!" It seems very strange!

I remember being asked to go to a church and speak at their Family Service. So as the regulars here can imagine I loaded the car with props and visuals and so on and got there to find that there was only one child and he was only about three. What I had prepared to say was totally inappropriate for the people there.

As I read this I want to say Paul you are writing to Greeks and you are highlighting weakness. It is inappropriate. Do you know nothing of the Greeks and their love of their heroes, of Hercules and his labours, or Jason and the astronauts or whatever. They loved their heroes as we love Spiderman, Batman, Superman and so on yet you Paul talk about weakness. It is pathetic.

Yes it is in human terms and Paul knew that as he spoke of "self-confident boasting" (v17).

But Paul was a follower of Jesus. Jesus had come down from heaven and been born as a man. Jesus knew weakness. He had suffered and been beaten.

As we look at Paul here we see an integrity in his life and work that resonates with Jesus.

His CV might not have got him many job interviews but it has the stamp of following Jesus all over it.

3. Foolish spirituality 12:1-6

As we move into Chap 12 the foolishness continues.

Again these other teachers must have been boasting about visions and revelations they had had and Paul shows he is not lesser than them in that department. In v2-6 he recounted an intense spiritual experience. He talked of a man he knew, which is actually himself, and this vision of heaven. Yes he concludes v5 I can boast. Indeed in our day many do boast about visions and revelations and we Christians love it because such dramatic things excite us and we think that this is somehow super spiritual and much better than the mundane Christian life of reading our Bible and prayer.

Now Paul doesn't deny this event but it wasn't something to boast about. Paul didn't want to speak about such things or make such boasts because, v6, he didn't want to make people think more of him than they should. For Paul it was not about his or anyone else's ego, He was not prepared as he says in v5 to boast about these things and about himself except about his weaknesses.

4. Weakness and strength 12:7-10

In these final verses we at last see what Paul wants to boast about and it is not himself it is God and his strength in Paul's weakness.

Paul had this vision and it could easily have led him to boasting in the same way as the super-apostles but that was not what God wanted. So God acted to keep Paul from getting proud. As we see in v7 he was given a thorn in the flesh. We are not told what the thorn was but we see v8 that Paul prayed about it and asked God to take it away.

However, God said no. That was the answer. Often we only see it as an answer to prayer when God does what we want, but here Paul recognised that the removal of the thorn was not what God wanted. As far as God was concerned this thorn was a vital part of Paul's life and ministry.

How does that sit with you, God's answer being no? If you have had children you will be very well aware how the word no sits with the average child – not good at all. Nor does it sit well with us when God answers our prayer in the negative. But we need to trust that God, much more than imperfect parents, has our best interest at heart. And certainly here God had a greater lesson to teach Paul through that thorn, the lesson that actually weakness in Christian leaders is a strength. God's answer to Paul's prayer in v9 was, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." It sounds good doesn't it, a nice motto verse to give someone. God answered the prayer not by removing the thorn but by adding more grace, sufficient grace and the very power of God for him to be able to cope with it. So that he could put up with the pain and agony and continue the ministry God had for him.

In his agony and pain Paul would always find the grace of God bringing comfort and help to enable him to cope with the suffering and anguish. In his weakness he would find the power of God to bring him through.

What God was saying to Paul and what he wanted to pass on to these Christians in Corinth who were being misled by the super-apostles is a message firstly about Christian ministry and secondly about Christian life in general,

a. Christian ministry and service

i. its nature. Effective ministry is not about human strength and power but about God and his power. The super apostles pointed to Paul's weakness and said this is not real Christian ministry. But God was saying that thorn and those weaknesses were not hindrances to his ministry but actually

strengths which God could and did use. Real spirituality looks ordinary and weak even as Christ looked weak and ordinary as he lay in the manger and as he hung on the cross.

ii. weakness doesn't disqualify us from Christian service. Paul knew he was weak, that he was, to use his metaphor, a clay jar easily broken and yet God was saying because of that his power rested upon Paul in a special way. The weakness did not disqualify as an apostle nor should they disqualify any other Christian in their service of Christ.

The idea of weakness being a positive goes against so much of our thinking today. We don't want a flawed Prime Minister but one able to deal with and rise above every difficulty. We don't want a flawed Christian Minister but one who is successful in every area. Paul was flawed, he had this thorn which was not going to go away and yet God assured him that he was able to use him. God's power made perfect in Paul's weakness.

Often as Christians we are so aware of our weaknesses and failings and take the attitude that God can't use me. We compare ourselves to others who seem to be so capable and be able to lead prayers in church or teach in Lightcatchers without a worry. We need to hear God's word, "my power is made perfect in weakness" – God can in his power use even me, even you. Weakness does not disqualify us rather it gives us the opportunity to see the power of God at work

But then I think this verse says much to us in our Christian life

b. Christian life

i. we can't avoid the thorns. I find that so true in my garden that every time I do anything I get attacked by spiky things. The most prolific thing in my garden is the brambles which attack me whenever I try to get rid of them. The roses are lovely but they have thorns!

So often in life there are thorns and we can't avoid them. We may long for an easy life and at times enjoy such but the reality is that we can't avoid the thorns. So what should we do?

ii. God won't always take then thorn away. Again Paul's experience may be ours. We may struggle with pressures in family life, or crippling ill health or the deep pain of bereavement and loneliness and cry out to God to remove these pains only to find that he doesn't.

iii. grace and power – it is then that these words come to us as they did to Paul. In our pain God draws close to us and brings his grace and kindness to comfort us and his power to enable us to endure. I recognise that this is an uncomfortable message for us as it was to Paul. God is not promising to take away whatever it is that assails you and gets you down. However, he assures us of his goodness and power to enable us to live with it.

Paul's response in v9b & 10 to what God said to him was remarkable, "Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me."

He had been forced to boasting in response to the false teachers and here in a sense he says if you want some real boasting then I will boast about my weaknesses and then only because in them the power of God is shown.

I find Paul's spiritual maturity here is amazing because I tend to moan about my weakness and more the longer they go on. I can't say I will boast of my weaknesses and I certainly can't say what he says in v10 "I delight in weakness, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties." I shy away from such things and I'm sure you do.

We have so much to learn don't we, and of course not just from Paul for Paul is only following Jesus in this. Having asked three times for the cup of suffering to be taken away Jesus went to the cross and there God's grace and power was shown in a supreme way.

At the end Paul gives us what might almost be a strap line, "when I am weak, then I am strong."

This is the heart of the Christian faith! We become Christians when we recognise that we cannot on our own make ourselves acceptable to God. By our own actions we cannot remove the barrier of sin that separates us sinful humans from our holy God. But in this weak position God has acted in power in Jesus who died on a cross taking the punishment we deserve so that through his death we might know God's forgiveness. It is when we finally accept the weakness of our state that we can know God's grace and forgiveness. That then follows through our Christian lives that when we realise we are not strong to stand against temptation, to cope with the problems at work, to help in Lightcatchers, to lead a church when we realise this then we look to God and this great promise, "my power is made perfect in weakness."

Down the centuries this has spoken encouragement to countless thousand Christians who know themselves as weak, feel themselves as second class or worthless and yet hear the word of God saying that in our weakness Christ draws near and gives us his grace and power.