

We live in a competitive world so in things like X factor or Strictly Come Dancing you get people up against each other trying to show they are the best. Then we've just had the party conference season and as ever it is about showing your party better than the others and then of course there is the sport. It is a competitive world.

The one place you might not expect it is in the church. Seeking to follow Jesus who was born into humility, spoke of himself as coming to serve and who washed his disciples feet you might think there was no room for competition and yet even in the church we see people vying for high office and to show that they have what it takes in the Christian leadership stakes. That's how it is in the church of today and that's how it was in the church of Paul's day, people trying to show they were the real deal, the best in terms of ministry.

### 1. "I must go on boasting"

This part of 2 Cor 12 Paul begins with the words "I must go on boasting." Paul boasting – it doesn't seem very Christian does it? Why was he boasting?

We get a bit of an idea from 12:11, "I have made a fool of myself, but you drove me to it. I ought to have been commended by you, for I am not in the least inferior to the "super-apostles," even though I am nothing."

Into the church in Corinth had come some teachers whom Paul labelled "super-apostles". That was what they were claiming. They were boasting about being powerful, effective preachers, successful leaders, seeing visions and having great spiritual experiences and saying that Paul didn't match up. Paul knew this, 2 Cor 10:10, "For some say, "His letters are weighty and forceful, but in person he is unimpressive and his speaking amounts to nothing."

So, even though he realised it was foolish, Paul boasted in order to show that he is a true apostle and to show the emptiness of these "super-apostles".

However, as we can see in 11:21ff, he boasted not about his great missionary journeys and preaching tours and churches he'd established, but about the persecutions, the beatings, the problems and pressures he been through.

### 2. Paul's visions

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. However, as he says in v6, this time it is not foolish boasting because he was speaking the truth not a parody of what these other teachers were claiming. However, 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.

I want to get on and talk about how Paul viewed weakness but I have to say that these verses and the passages in Chap 11 raise some interesting issues for us.

Some time back I read in the press an advert about a job at a place called Christ Church Chineham. It seemed interesting so I sent off for the profile and when I read the profile I thought yes that seems good. So I applied. In my application I explained much of what I had done, the areas where I felt I matched the profile and the strengths I had. Unlike many other forms there was nothing asked about my weaknesses. However, I'm sure if there had been I would have described a weakness that really was a positive thing, for example that I have a weakness for taking on too much with the aim that people get the impression I work hard – that's what happens in applications if we want a job.

Now as I read these words of Paul "I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses", I begin to wonder. It is often said about churches when they are looking for a new Minister that they are looking for the Archangel Gabriel, well I wonder. I wonder what Paul might have put on his application form and whether he would have been accepted or even offered an interview. Please don't misunderstand me I am not in anyway knocking those involved in my selection here but looking at this it does make me wonder whether the whole process causes people to act contrary to Scripture.

Anyway you now know my faults.

### 3. God's counter action

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 because of this vision. As we see in v7 he was given a thorn in the flesh.

Three things to note :

a. egos have no place in Christian ministry. That was what Paul has been saying and the same is true here. To stop him feeling better than others God sent this thorn to keep Paul's feet in the ground. The point of Paul mentioning his thorn is to lead us to his main theme that actually weakness in Christian leaders is a strength.

b. note that while he says on the one hand the thorn came from God "there was given me" refers to God, yet also Paul refers to the thorn as "a messenger of Satan". God intended the thorn for good but the devil was trying to use it to break Paul down and demoralise him.

c. we are not told what the thorn was and therefore we don't need to know and should not speculate.

Clearly the image of the apostle with no problems, no apparent weaknesses doesn't fit with God's idea. Today there is great emphasis on the cult of the person whereby we raise up certain people in the media, in politics and in the church and in the light of what Paul says here we have to seriously question that.

### 4. Paul's prayer

Not surprisingly, v8, Paul prayed and asked that this thorn be taken away. I'm not sure whether we are meant to see a link between that threefold prayer and the prayer of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane. However, what we do see is the same answer from God the Father – no! Paul saying to God? "I'm not ashamed to suffer for you and the gospel, but this torment I can't bear – it is unendurable. Please cast Satan away." It was a time of almost unique agony and he begged the Heavenly Father to take away this messenger of Satan. God said no. That was the answer. Often we only see it as an answers 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.

### 5. God's answer

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. While the devil was trying to use the to destroy Paul, God was using it to remove his ego, to keep him reliant on God and as a vehicle of grace and power.

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. So 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 or speak at Fellowship group 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.

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 when ever I try to get rid of them. The roses are lovely but they have thorns and now it is autumn there are some lovely orange berries but, yes on a thorny bush!

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. Where 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 and that it doesn't put us out of the battle, out of his army.

### 6. Paul's response

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.

When he speaks of the power "resting on me" he was using imagery from the wilderness wanderings of God's people under Moses where the tabernacle was seen as God "pitching his tent" with his people. That same image is used in John 1:14 "the word became flesh and dwelt, i.e. pitched his tent, among us." Here Paul is saying that Jesus "pitches his tent" with his people in their weaknesses. As one writer puts it, "ecstasy has all the appearances of divine power; but the reality is otherwise. Christ draws near to us and gives his grace and power to us in weakness." 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 in that having asked three times for the cup to be taken away he 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."

These false teachers accused Paul of being weak and insignificant because he didn't match their stereotype of an apostle. He was weak and that was his strength because it put the emphasis upon God not him and it gave the glory to God not him and in so doing it down the centuries 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.

One final quote to leave with us, "here is the paradox of the cross: that only in humiliation do we find God exalting us, only in dying do we find God making us alive, only in throwing away our lives do we find God giving life back to us. Only when I am weak am I strong."