

Trinity 1. 2 June 2024. Sermon: 2 Corinthians 4:5-12

2 Corinthians 4:5-12

⁵For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake.

⁶For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness,"^[a] made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ.

⁷But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.

⁸We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; ⁹persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. ¹⁰We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. ¹¹For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body. ¹²So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.

Sermon on 2 Corinthians 4:5-12

We have 6 weeks on this second book written by St Paul the Apostle to the church, the people of God, in Corinth.

By way of introduction, we can say that Paul had a somewhat complex relationship with the Corinthian church over a period of several years in the middle of the 1st Century. He wrote several letters and also received correspondence from the Corinthians. 2 Corinthians ch1-9 is widely thought to have been Paul's 4th letter to the Corinthians church with 2 Corinthians ch 10-13 thought to be his 5th letter!

A crude summary introduction...

Amongst other things a main message seem to be about relationship... what a surprise!

Paul writes to defend his apostleship in the face of rivals... "super-apostles"... as he called them, who were threatening the spiritual ground Paul had so carefully prepared. He is seeking to lead the Corinthian congregation back to a right relationship with Christ, and he also strengthens their relationship with himself as their founding apostle, and with each other in their discord. There is much in the letter about reconciliation. Paul demonstrates how God heals all the wounds of his people and shows his saving reconciling power in their weaknesses.

And so... thinking about relationship... with God, with Paul, with each other... and the problems that we encounter with relationship just as much today as they did then... let us look at a few things from today's text in chapter 4.

1 There's 'stuff' here about God...

"We preach Jesus Christ as Lord"... not ourselves, but Jesus Christ. This is Paul's Gospel and ours. Paul is saying "it's not about me, if you think it is, then you're wrong. Or if I've made it about that... then I'm sorry."

For me there are echoes here of 1 Corinthians 1:23. "We preach Christ crucified."

Preaching Jesus Christ, the crucified and risen one, as Lord is what Paul's teaching is all about.

Paul exhorts the Corinthians and us to proclaim this message and urge allegiance to Christ! He himself is subservient to this Gospel truth and a servant of this message.

The Gospel tackles all parts of life... and rightly so... but there is such a danger, which I think Paul's writing alerts us to... of the Gospel, the church, our faith... becoming about personalities, projects, agendas... and becoming detached from HIM who is the Gospel... the Good News... namely Jesus Christ. How easily it can happen. The church building, the music, the Wellbeing project etc... might be declared as Lord and everyone gives their allegiance to them over and above Christ! As the church, as God's people, as bearers of the Gospel... we preach Jesus Christ as Lord! Lord of heaven and earth, Lord of our relationships, Lord of the Church, Lord over music, buildings, projects, events etc... As I have preached around Easter... Jesus Christ is Lord over depression, disaster, disease, negativity, doubt and darkness, Lord over cancer and Covid, anxiety and trauma. That is our message. That is our Gospel!

Similarly Paul says, when perplexed, when struck down, when persecuted, when hard pressed... Jesus Christ is Lord.

Paul also talks about the 'extraordinary power of God' in these verses... a power revealed, poured out, shared and declared in Christ's death and resurrection... and revealed through those who receive Christ. We'll come back to this.

2 So there's stuff here about God... and there's stuff here about ourselves...

Without Christ we would be in darkness. Our lives although bearing the image of God are marred and blighted by sin.

Paul uses the image of clay pots/ cracked pots to describe our human weakness, brokenness and vulnerability. Earthenware vessels were commonplace in virtually every home in the Middle East. They're inexpensive, fragile and easily broken.

The image can be helpful when thinking about our human state. We are created from the stuff of the earth and are flawed, fragile, ordinary and easily broken.

Paul speaks about his own fragility and vulnerability in his letters... including this one... afflicted, perplexed and struck down.

In so doing he draws out the contrast between himself/ourselves and this extraordinary God!

I don't know about you but I'm only too aware of my own brokenness and vulnerability and fragility – and last week I was aware of the ABC's (Archbishop of Canterbury) too. The clay jar is a helpful image.

So there is stuff here about God, stuff about ourselves.

3 But crucially there is material here about God and US.

Verse 6&7 He, God, has made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ.

7 But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.

The Gospel is that God loved the world and loves us... God comes to us in the person of Jesus Christ... God illuminates the those in the dark. God shines his light upon and within the broken vessel. He reconciles us to himself. He draws near. He comes and makes his home in us.

There is a coming together of the Holy God, the Light of Light, the Creator and Maker of all... ... to weak cracked pots. The treasure of God's presence... the Spirit of Christ, the light and love of Christ... being placed in earthenware jars. How remarkable is that!!! The treasure, eternal and unfailing, pure and holy, life giving and life changing... is poured into our hearts and lives. WOW. God's Spirit wedded to our spirit.

The sheer contrast between mortal flawed human beings and the immortal God... truly shows the glory of God.

And when we're bashed, when we're persecuted, when we're struck down, when we're broken and cracked... we share in, we know, the death of Jesus, the crucified One. We are united with him in his death. But ALSO miraculously find the resurrection and the life of Jesus shown forth in us and through us. We share in his resurrection.

Is this your experience? That when aware of your frailty, brokenness, weakness and vulnerability... you connect to the crucified One... and in so doing, discover the risen One? I can relate to that. Christmas 2015, I was broken/shattered with the news about my Kathy's cancer diagnosis so soon after my dad had died from bowel cancer. The Crucifixion was exactly where I was at... but to be able to function over Christmas and conduct a cancer funeral, Margaret Vickery, was ALL the resurrection power of Christ in my weakness. And it's been my experience throughout ministry that when I've been perplexed, broken, under water... I've known the crucified and resurrected Saviour... and been able to realise and say (sometimes with gritted teeth and with more doubt than faith) 'Jesus Christ is Lord!'

So what can we take away today...?

1. That for Paul and for the church the message will always be that Jesus Christ is Lord.
2. That despite our brokenness and more besides God pours his treasure, shines his light, into our lives
3. That God uses us... cracked pots... to reveal the death of Jesus and the light and life of Jesus in us and to the broken world in need of light and life.