**Power in weakness** 14/11/21 dkm

Read: Isaiah 64, 2Corinthians 4

Text: 2Corinthians 4:7-15

Psalms: 46:7-11, 84:1-9, 27:7-14, 117

When we first went to India, cups of tea were given in clay cups. In nearby villages we saw potters sitting at a wheel making these cheap, sun-dried, throw-away cups. After drinking our tea we just threw these clay cups on the ground. At least they did not pollute like the plastic cups which they now use. Villagers also made and used large clay jars to store their grain, and often hid their gold jewellery in such jars.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is full of paradoxes, glorious paradoxes. The cross itself is a paradox that many fail to grasp; that in dying on the cross Jesus gives life to all who believe. This treasure in jars of clay is another paradox. How strange that something so precious is found in such an ordinary vessel! I guess it is like Jesus being born in a stable. Yet this is the truth; the power of God is witnessed by the world in the most humble of human beings; his power is made manifest in our weakness (12:9). Paul learnt that, ‘When I am weak then I am strong’. How many of us have learnt this lesson?

The apostle began this letter by telling the Corinthians of the trouble he faced in Asia, probably Ephesus; he feared that he would die. This threat was probably associated with the riot led by the silversmiths. Opponents in the church at Corinth were critical of Paul for changing his plans to visit them. This criticism came in the context of a case of ongoing sexual immorality in the church. Critics of Paul were being whipped up by this man, so it seems. And then outsiders came along with a different message to that which Paul preached; they readily joined this party that opposed Paul.

So Paul was being attacked from all sides. He was particularly concerned about these false teachers - the majority had dealt with the incestuous man. The false teachers were like Judaizers; they were Jewish converts clinging to the old covenant. Paul describes their ministry as one of condemnation and death. Paul was not in Corinth to defend himself at this time; he was getting reports through Titus and others. It was a difficult situation for the apostle but he did not give up on this church. He did not lose heart (4:1,16). Why? Because he had ‘received mercy’, because he had been called by Christ and was being sustained by Christ and his resurrection, and ultimately because of the glory of God.

**1. Disciples in clay jars**

The prophet Isaiah spoke of God being like the potter and his people being like jars of clay, so Paul’s picture of a disciple of Christ being like a clay jar is not original (Isa 64:8); although he has a different take on this analogy. He is not so much pointing to God’s sovereignty as his power, his ‘surpassing power’ compared to the weakness of human beings (4:7). Paul was a man like us but he achieved great things for God because of the Spirit of the living God working in and through him, through the word that he preached. Paul was but a vessel, a weak earthen vessel, being used by God for his life-changing purposes. The treasure is the word of God, and specially the gospel of Jesus Christ, which is more precious than gold, yea than much fine gold (Ps 19:10).

In this letter Paul reveals the struggles that he had in his ministry, both physical and mental. But he never lost heart and never gave up. He knew the weakness of the flesh, but he also knew the power of God that was at work in him. He was in Christ and Christ was in him. He never forgot the day the risen Christ confronted him on the road to Damascus. In the preceding verse he refers to the light that God had shone into his heart, and the hearts of other believers. In this light was the precious knowledge of the gospel, just referred to, and also the power of the Spirit of God that he refers to here in verse 7.

As a servant of the Lord and preacher of the gospel, Paul was simply the messenger of this powerful, life-saving message of the gospel. He rejoiced at seeing new life appear in the hearts of lives of his hearers, but he never took credit or glory to himself. More often than not his preaching met with ridicule and opposition, sometimes violent opposition; this was the cost of shining the light of the glory of God into this dark world. This is what Jesus experienced and it is what true disciples of Jesus will also experience.

**2. Deliverance**

When Paul says ‘we’ he is primarily referring to himself, but what is true for him is true for his fellow missionaries and indeed for every faithful believer. He goes on to speak very personally of the pressure and even persecution he suffered as a minister of life and hope in the gospel of Jesus Christ. His opponents would not have faced such attacks because their gospel did not offend anyone. They preached their own ideas in their own strength and to their own glory. They were impressive and convincing speakers, never admitting to personal weakness. They would not have described themselves as a ‘clay jar’- but then again, they had no treasure to offer beyond the things of this world.

Paul describes his suffering for Christ’s sake in four ways, but counters each with a ‘but’. Never were his enemies allowed to do their worst. Maybe he recalled how the Jews tried to grab Jesus at various times but were not able to do so until his ‘hour had come’. Paul was hard pressed on every side, including inside and outside, but not crushed (4:8). He was perplexed, seeing no way out of the predicament he was in, but he did not despair. You have probably been in situations from which you saw no way out, but here you are, the Lord has brought you through- I hope you acknowledge Him. When describing his trouble in Asia, Paul admitted to ‘despair even of life’ but here says that when perplexed he did not despair. This was because of the comfort and strength given by the Lord (1:4).

Paul faced persecution, as in physical attack, numerous times (11:24, 25). In Lystra he was stoned and left for dead. He was beaten and thrown into prison at Philippi and other places. Paul tells about his suffering and persecution to declare the power of God to deliver him. He writes ‘being persecuted, we endure’ (1Cor 4:12), and here ‘persecuted but not forsaken’ (4:9). He took hold of the promise God first made to Joshua, and repeated to other faithful servants right down to the NT; ‘I will never leave you or forsake you’ (Heb 13:5).

Paul’s final ‘suffering-word’ is ‘struck down but not destroyed (4:9). Moffatt describes this as being like a boxer, ‘knocked down but not knocked out’. Paul is not saying he will never suffer to the point of death, but saying that God is powerful to deliver him. In the words of Daniel’s friends, ‘Our God, whom we serve, is able to deliver us… but if not, know that we will not serve your gods or worship the image you have set up’ (Dan 3:17, 18). Up to this point in time God had delivered Paul from all his persecutions. Jesus of course, suffered unto death, death on the cross. Paul wanted to know more of the power of the resurrection (Phil 3:10).

**3. Dying of Jesus**

Isaiah referred to Messiah as the suffering servant of God. From the moment Jesus came into this world he began to die. At his birth there was rejoicing in heaven but not on earth. Jesus went about doing good, doing miracles, but what was the response? The religious leaders hated him. They followed him around, trying to trap him in his words, or in body, which they finally did. Paul speaks of the dying of the Lord Jesus, rather than his death, here in verse 10. Four times in these two verses he refers to Jesus.

The Jewish leaders hated Jesus, and they hated anyone who spoke of Jesus; Paul was preaching Jesus, Jesus crucified and risen from the dead. The Gentiles thought the gospel was foolishness- they did not believe in the resurrection. Jesus himself said, ‘If the world hates you, know that it hated me first’ (John 15:18). Paul was not naive about these things, unlike many in the church today. He expected opposition and knew the dangers of being a missionary, but he was compelled to preach the gospel (1Cor 9:16). He was ready to suffer like his Master and Lord. He was ready to carry about in his body the dying of the Lord Jesus. He was not at liberty to change the message of the gospel; doing so would have rendered it powerless anyway. As the earthly life of Jesus was focussed on death, so the life of the believer is focused on death, death to the world and life in Christ.

‘He must increase, I must decrease’ said John the Baptist. Paul saw his life in the same way. He must decrease but Christ must increase. Christ must live in and through Paul and his life; ‘that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body’ - ‘our body’ means the body of all believers (4:10).

Paul repeats this insight into the life and death of a believer in the next verse. ‘We who live are always delivered to death for Jesus’ sake’ (4:11). We live not to ourselves but for Jesus, expending ourselves for Christ and his glory. ‘I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me’ (Gal 2:20). I hope this is not a radical thought to you as a believer.

The gospel we preach is not a philosophy but a person, a person who is the way, the truth, and the life for us and for all who believe. We are called to imitate Christ as Paul did, to suffer like him and even to die for him. We are to ‘present our bodies as a living sacrifice, which is your reasonable service’ (Rom 12:1). In this way, and only in this way, will the life of Christ be ‘manifested in our body’ or ‘our mortal flesh’ (4:10, 11).

Paul’s conclusion is, ‘So then death is working in us, but life in you’ (4:12). We must be dying in order that others, those who hear the gospel, might live in Christ. It was Jesus who said that unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies it cannot produce fruit (John 12:24). Those who follow Jesus and serve him will ‘hate’ their life in this world but will gain eternal life in Christ. Paul’s focus is on expending himself for the sake of others, but ultimately for the sake of God’s glory. God’s glory is multiplied as the number of believers multiplies. Paul’s picture of ministry is the complete opposite of the newcomers in Corinth, and sadly of some in the ministry today. ‘So then death is at work in us, but life in you’ (4:12). Paul was ready die that the people of Corinth might hear the gospel and live. Jesus had of course, died for him that he might live!

**4. Devotion on Psalm 116**

In Psalm 116 the writer is thanking God for delivering him from death: ‘You have delivered my soul from death’ (Ps 116:8). Maybe Paul had been meditating on this Psalm and it spoke to his heart- as often happens when we have serious devotions upon the word of God. He recalled verse 10, ‘I believed and therefore I spoke’. Paul, like the Psalmist, was greatly afflicted, but he believed that Jesus had called him to speak after revealing himself to Paul on the Damascus road. And so Paul was speaking what he had seen and heard, and what he believed. He had received the Spirit of God, by whom he came to faith and by whom he was empowered to speak. He spoke not out of his own strength but out of personal weakness. He understood the limitations of ‘mortal flesh’ but also understood the unlimited power of the Spirit of God by which all believers must confess Jesus Christ as Lord.

Paul did not preach for any personal gain or glory; he preached that his hearers might receive new life in Christ. But he did look forward to a reward; he looked forward to being raised up with Jesus (4:14). Paul had seen the risen Jesus and, as the firstborn from the dead, he believed that all who belong to Jesus will be raised to be with Jesus in heavenly glory. This motivated Paul in his ministry and moved him to declare, ‘For me to live is Christ and to die is gain’ (Phil 1:21). Paul shared this promise with the believers at Corinth saying, ‘and [God] will present us with you’ (4:14). They, like Paul, will be raised from the dead and presented to Christ like a bride is presented to her husband (Eph 5:27). What a glorious thought; what a glorious hope; what a glorious truth for us to take hold of. Knowing this truth, Paul was ready to endure whatever suffering he faced. What about you?

Why seek the things of this world when God supplies all our needs. ‘All things are for your sakes’ writes Paul (4:15). Christ gave himself for us and we, like Paul, should be ready to give ourselves for Christ; a servant is not above his master. Paul preached the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, grace by which our sins are forgiven, grace by which we become the covenant children of God, never to be forsaken by Him. God’s grace is sufficient for all. Paul rejoiced in the grace revealed in the gospel and that had spread into the hearts of many at Corinth. He rejoiced with those rejoicing in this wonderful grace as they joined in worshipping the Lord Jesus. God is glorified when those who are a new creation in Christ Jesus gather to worship. This was the ultimate motive of the apostle, God being glorified on earth as in heaven.