

The Fourteenth Sunday of the Year

2 Corinthians 12:7-10

St. Paul was never a calculating man whose loyalty to the Gospel was tempered by consideration of the risks he took. His great courage was not always his most attractive feature so it comes almost as a relief to be given an insight that shows Paul to be as human and as vulnerable as anyone else.



The second letter to the Corinthians reveals a man who suffers, a man who is rejected and who is misunderstood by other Christians. In today's extract Paul wears his heart on his sleeve but in a typically Pauline way, he uses the revelation of himself to say something even more important about his relationship with Jesus Christ.

Paul's adventures leading up to his first visit to Corinth had not been encouraging. People had been hostile to him in Philippi and Thessalonica. His attempts at preaching a sophisticated Gospel in Athens had failed. So he approached Corinth "in weakness and fear, and with much trembling." He changed his style to preach a simple and straightforward Gospel, but this did not appeal to intellectuals or academics.

Fortunately his actions spoke louder and he had some success. As a result, Paul could claim that the Corinthians' faith did "not rest on human wisdom, but on God's power." (1 Cor.2:3-5) Paul left Corinth in 52AD when the synagogue made his life unbearable. His departure left Corinth open to the "super apostles". Paul's lack of sophistication compared badly with the smooth eloquence of these missionaries who made a good living out of preaching their gospel.

When Paul's friend Timothy visited Corinth in 56AD he found that amongst other problems, the Gospel was being subverted into a money making scheme for the "false apostles, deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ." (2 Cor.11:14) Paul went back to Corinth quickly but the visit was a failure. The Corinthians, perhaps influenced by the manners and techniques of the new missionaries, whose 'prosperity gospel' was perhaps more in line with Corinthian culture, were not at all impressed with Paul. They said, "His letters are weighty and forceful, but in person he is unimpressive and his speaking amounts to nothing." (2 Cor.10)

Paul retreated to Ephesus and worried about what to do with Corinth. Meanwhile, Titus carried his tearful letter (which has not come down to us) to Corinth (2 Cor.2:3-4). Titus was well received and set off to tell Paul the good news. Paul had not been able to stop fidgeting. He had already set off towards Corinth over land and that's where Titus met him in the autumn of 57AD (2 Cor.2:12-13). He immediately sent Titus and two other friends back to Corinth with this letter.

In this letter, Paul accepts the accusation that he is weak. He compares himself to a humble clay jar, which nevertheless holds a great treasure (2 Cor.4:7). His weakness and humility are catalogued in the chapter before our reading today. He lists imprisonment, flogging, lashing, stoning, shipwreck, hunger, thirst and being deprived even of his clothes as signs of his utter weakness (2 Cor.11:23-29). To balance the cost of his apostolate, he boasts some of the benefits, especially his ecstatic experience of God. But he leaves his boasting there with the sarcastic remark aimed at the false apostles that "I refrain, so no-one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say." (2 Cor.12:6).

The thorn in Paul's flesh, whether it was a person, a disease or his past that pricked his conscience repeatedly, kept Paul from pride. There is no need to speculate about what the thorn was since there is so much in Paul's life and adventures that caused him pain. The "super apostles" might boast about the great things they saw and did, but Paul's boast of his weakness is greater. He is not speaking in riddles when he says, "it is when I am weak that I am strong," because his weakness is all his own, but his strength is all Jesus'.