

Sermon

Sunday 5th July, 2009

Lessons

2 Corinthians 12: 2 - 10

St Mark 6: 1 – 13

Jesus said to St Paul, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.’

2 Corinthians 12: 9

Jesus said, ‘My grace is sufficient for you.’ These are words to treasure and to do so not least because of the context in which they were spoken. St Paul is writing to the Christians living in the Asia Minor town of Corinth. He knows that, having shared many insights into Jesus with them, they hold him in the highest regard. So, he wrote to them in these terms:

Lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure.

It is in the context of facing his own temptation, the temptation to have a higher estimate of himself than he reasonably ought, and facing too his own demons, the thorn in his flesh, that St Paul hears the comforting words of Jesus. We do not know the nature of the thorn which injured him but it was a demon, a psychological, spiritual or emotional burden, from which he was unable to free himself. It was in this context of being *buffeted by Satan*, to use the language of mythology, that St Paul heard Jesus say, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.’ St Paul replied, ‘May the power of Christ rest upon me.’

We know something of the hardships endured by St Paul. He wrote:

From the Jews five times I received forty stripes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep; in journeys often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils of my own countrymen, in perils of the Gentiles, in the perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren, in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness.....

If I maybe frivolous for a moment, it seems that St Paul lived through more danger, hardship and excitement than James Bond and living out his faith in such an engaging, energetic and enthusiastic manner almost certainly cost him his health. Be that as it may, it was when he turned to what seems to be a more personal and private agony, the thorn in his flesh, that St Paul writes in the strongest terms of his faith being tested and challenged and under attack. St Paul is buffeted by Satan. It in this all consuming experience that he pleads, cries from the soul to God, that the thorn might be taken away. He has no escape from it; he lives with it everyday. It haunts him. It is in this darkest tragedy that he hears Jesus speak: 'My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness, *your weakness*.'

In Mark's Gospel, we read the story of Jesus sending out the disciples to preach, to preach the Good News, to repent and to call men and women to re-orientate their lives to God. The crux of their preaching, surely, was that life lived as a

follower of Jesus is a life lived to the full. In his book, *How to be Good*, Nick Hornby tells the story of David and Katie. Their marriage is on the rocks. Hornby has vivid metaphors for both Katie and David. He says they have a ‘flat battery inside’; they are ‘soul dead’; yet they still have to ‘drive the car,’ get through life. In one passage, Katie says that it is love which she and everyone she knows has lost. Katie says:

Oh, I’m not talking about romantic love, the mad hunger for someone you don’t know very well.....I’m talking about that love which used to feel something like optimism, benignity... Where did that go? I just seemed to run out of steam somewhere along the line. I ended up disappointed with my work, and my marriage, and myself, and I turned into someone who didn’t know what to hope for.

Robert Winston in his book, *The Story of God*, says that the purpose of life is the search for the purpose of life. The disciples were sent out by Jesus to share their knowledge of God and the teaching of Jesus with as many people as possible in as many towns and villages as possible. Though the details may change, Katie’s story of brokenness, loss of self-worth, sense of failure and a soul-deep anxiety about death, the meaning of life and how to make the most out of the time we have, are commonplace human experiences. The disciples went out to talk about the Man who had changed their lives and they did so with His blessing. ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness, your weakness.’ It was their faith in the grace of Jesus which sustained the disciples on their missionary journey. Jesus said to them, ‘My

grace, My generosity, My love for you, is enough to sustain you. Use my strength in your weakness.’

I hope that we will use this renovation of our building as a springboard on our journey of faith. In this month’s *Grapevine* magazine as well as in June, I reflect on what it means to be the Church today. Journeys often induce anxiety because of the possibility of facing the unforeseen and being challenged in ways which we, sitting in our comfort zone, would rather not face. God’s people have always had to strike a balance in how they lived, a balance between enjoying comfort in our tradition and yet always being encouraged by the Holy Spirit to walk onwards to engage the world as it changes. It seems to me that the Church and churches need to place an increasing emphasis on mission.

There are some things which are outwith our control: there are, for example, far too many Church of Scotland buildings in the city and throughout the country. By way of crude comparison, two thousand Muslim men attend prayers, their main diet of worship, each week in Edinburgh. There are two mosques. The Church of Scotland has just over ten thousand people attending worship each week; we have eighty-six charges. Will we be able to re-shape the institution we love to make it more suited to its task in the twenty-first century? Sadly, I doubt it. The parish system, a territorial ministry for every square inch of Scotland, is an anachronism: it is a model of serving communities which are part of Christendom. We do not live in Christendom. It would be ludicrous

for the Muslim community to provide a parish system in Edinburgh for two thousand men and their families, that is, two thousand out of four hundred and sixty thousand people. But, the Church of Scotland is trying to do just that for ten thousand people. For most of the Scottish population, though not all, the nature of community has changed, the nature of communication has changed and lifestyle has changed. The national church is showing no signs of being able to reform itself, but what can we do in our local setting? I hope that the renovation will act as a springboard for us, to move forward, to journey together, providing comfort where comfort is needed, but to move forward and engage enthusiastically in mission today.

This is a beautiful building: it is bright and psychologically uplifting to enter. The new lighting and fresh paint were necessary and the right thing to do. For me, the high ceiling speaks of the vastness of God. We are small by comparison to this height and, to me, that speaks volumes about our concept of God: He is so far above our understanding and apprehension. The windows are a means of grace: they bring alive the great faith narratives of the Church – the Birth of Jesus, the Transfiguration, the Resurrection and the Ascension – and they name many of the saints: our worship in this place is always as one with the Communion of Saints. We are never on our own. The Lord's Supper, the breaking of the bread and the sharing of the wine, is the climax of Christian worship and the centre point, the still point, of the cosmos. With spiritual

imagination, the meal shared in this House, at this Table, God's House and God's Table, where He is the Host, offering us food for our souls, is the moment where in time we enter eternity, enjoying stillness in His Presence while the stars spin in their orbit. We have a building which is welcoming, comfortable and, with the eyes of faith, spiritually rich. I hope that this renovation will act as a springboard on our journey of faith and help re-shape us into a mission-shaped church. Jesus said, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness, your weakness.'

The aphorism attributed to the late Carl Buechner conveys a message that is basic to all human interaction. Buechner said, 'They may forget what you said, but they will never forget how you made them feel.' In the twenty-first century, what attracts many people to a church is not its location but what they have heard about it and what they have read on its website. Distinctive forms of worship, a diverse diet of services and a leaning towards 'authentic' spirituality found in music, meditation and silence are all means of grace which attract people to a church. One hymn-writer has said much of modern worship divides congregations because they can't sing it and much of traditional choral music divides congregations because they cannot relate to it. Music, like all aspects of worship, must serve the body of believers. Once here, welcome and genuine spiritual fellowship are key factors which keep people coming back. The apostles were concerned to create churches in which believers could build

each other up and nurture faith. Door duty needs to become ‘Welcome Ministry’ and that is much more than a name change: an administrative task has become a ministry of caring for one another. People attract people and a congregation has a much greater chance of holding onto people if it has a broad demographic. A congregation with families is much more likely to retain new families than ones that don’t. What new people want to know in coming to a church is, ‘Does what I experience in this church connect with my lifestyle? Does it help me in my life?’

I hope that over the next year or so we will remain very open in our exploration of what it means to be a mission-shaped church in the twenty-first century. We have just spent £300,000 on giving ourselves a head start, but if we spiritually remain closed, tethered to the past, it will have been for nothing. This expenditure is only justified if we make sure that we become increasingly a mission-shaped church. Jesus said, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.’

Amen.