

Reflection for Sunday 7th July 2024 Proper 14, Year B

Ezekiel 2:1-5, 2 Corinthians 12:2-10, Mark 6: 1-13

Of our three readings this morning, the one I would like to spend a little time on is in Paul's second letter to the Corinthians rather than the Gospel reading. In part, this is because like many Paul the man, and his motivations and experiences have always intrigued me. Some of my curiosity was satisfied when last year I read Tom Wright's magisterial biography of Paul, which seemed to me to get as close to the man as we are ever likely to, and provided a detailed historical, social and political context for the man and his missionary efforts. While all this is important background, it is the content of the letter and in particular the passage we read together which matters most, with its implications for ourselves in the 21st Century.

Tom Wright assigns this letter to late 56CE, and falls just after Paul's release from prison in Ephesus, where his suffering was both physical and mental. Therefore, when he talks about this in chapter 11 and enumerates exactly what this had involved, it is clear that he must be at a low ebb when he wrote the letter.

"I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again(v.24). Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one....."

The weakness he writes about is real and tangible, with the mental and physical scars obvious. Corinth by contrast was a new city set up as a Roman Colony in 44CE and was a confident seaport filled with elite whose wealth was constantly on show and carpet baggers of every type and profession were in abundance. In short it was an 'in your face kind of place', where everybody was severely competitive in every aspect of life, with boastful one-upmanship the norm. In the church at Corinth there were a number of "super apostles" (as Paul sarcastically calls them in ch.11) who boasted about their divine experiences, and that is why Paul goes against his better judgment and feels that he must do a little boasting himself. "I must go on boasting. Although there was nothing to be gained by it...." They had attacked both Paul's version of the Gospel, and Paul's style of ministry. This in turn had severely divided the Corinthian church. So, Paul defended his ministry by a little light boasting about himself to counter the way

these 'super apostles' talked about themselves, and God's will for the Christian message in the city. Paul starts his own story with the caveat that a boastful recounting of visions and miracles is not what God needs or wants.

Paul says he knew a man (he means himself although he uses the 3rd person in this passage) who went through such a revelation and was ".....caught up to the 3rd heaven fourteen years ago....." He heard and saw things that he would not boast about and has said nothing about these until this time. To keep him from being conceited, he was given a 'thorn in his flesh'. Quite what this might be is really unknown, although it has been the subject of speculation ever since. Three times he asked that it be removed by God but was told that God's grace must be sufficient for him, for Grace is made perfect in weakness. God says no, just as he did to Jesus in Gethsemane when he asked that the cup of life be taken from him. This in itself is interesting, because it makes Paul vulnerable to his critics, along the lines of "if the physician cannot heal himself, what is basis of his ability to heal for others"

As I understand it, what Paul is saying here is that the benefit of weakness is that God can work within us (2 Corinthians 12:10) because it is in this frame of mind and body that we are most open to his message. In the face of worldly challenges, Christians, like Paul and ourselves, expect that God will respond to our needs. If we are asked to prove the existence of God or God's presence in our lives, we have to be mindful of not over-emphasising dramatic mystical visions or ecstatic public revelations of faith. These are not to be discounted, but on the other hand Paul is arguing that they are not a necessary precondition of a Christian life. I think what he is getting at, is that it is equally, and perhaps more important, that we have the humility to testify about our experiences of God's grace and compassion in times of sicknesses, doubt, death of our dearest friends and family, and all in life that is personally painful and possibly humiliating. In short, it is about everything that constitutes our individual human experience. No public show is required.

To return to Paul himself he wants to be judged on his personal faith relationship with God and be known for what he preaches; that is the proclamation of the cross of Jesus Christ (verse 6). In other words, Paul's point is that prophetic or spiritual experiences should not be exalted in ways that put a spotlight on the purely visually dramatic. I suspect he thought that the "super apostles" were

guilty of exaggeration and possibly fabrication. Yet, in our world and certainly in the world of the Corinth's people, reputation and personal glory are over-valued. Paul argues that that sort personal glory and spiritual pride must be tamed and may in the last resort have little to do with the reasons that God sent Jesus Christ into the world for our redemption from sin. The core problem being that the Christian message is being lost in performance.

This chapter is very complex and has been the subject of study since it was written. I have taken what I believe to be one aspect of what Paul is saying. It is a chapter to return to often; to contemplate, study and think about. For any person who chooses to think that life was simpler in Roman times, and therefore the answers to difficult human situations easier, this is the antidote. The way of the Christian may involve choices, which result in public humiliation, confrontation or attract anger or disbelief. In Paul's case missionary experience involved all these things and physical violence as well. We also see Paul's essential humanity in the face of a very unattractive situation.

Amen