

Year A Proper 13 28th June 2026

Jeremiah 28:5-9. Romans 6:12-23. Matthew 10:40-42

The Paradox of our weaknesses giving us strength

"The person who has come to know the weakness of human nature has gained experience of divine power. Such a person never belittles anyone... He knows that God is like a good and loving physician who heals with individual treatment each of those who are trying to make progress."

I am not sure I ever thought I would quote Maximus of Constantinople, aka Maximus the Confessor¹ (c580-662) in a sermon! But this morning, that quote seems most apt. Maximus said that God divided the ages into distinct periods. One age was where God chose to do his work of becoming a human being, a divine being in human form, a unique union of human and divine in one person. This is the incarnation of God, through the life of Jesus. The ages to follow on would be the work of making humanity divine; the ages to come are appointed to the work of the mystical and ineffable deification of humanity, when God will reveal the supreme wealth of his goodness upon us (Ephesians 2:7), having worked perfectly to make us worthy of such deification.

I don't think Maximus spent time alone in the desert as many of the 'Desert Fathers' did. But this simple saying is profound, and seems an ideal companion to our readings from Paul's letter to the Romans, and also to the gospel reading today. Let me repeat what Maximus said.

Paul's honest and profound analysis of his own mind and actions is humbling and also reassuring. Humbling because so great a character as Paul admits to his human frailties and flaws. Reassuring, because it allows us to admit that we

¹ Widely regarded as one of the most significant Greek Christian writers, whose ideas continue to play an important role in modern Greek and Russian Orthodox theology. He is often thought of as the last great Christian Neoplatonist, and is particularly valued for his writings on the incarnation. (The Christian Theology Read, Third Edition, edited by Alister McGrath, published by Blackwells, 2007)

too are less than perfect, even if we truly yearn for perfection in all we think, say and do. And like Paul, we do things we don't want to do.

The model of the life Jesus led is often before us as we read the gospels, and the writings of others who explore the nature of the incarnation. It is a life we aspire to follow.

Some people who come to faith, in their wonderful enthusiasm and love of God, seek to become an example of human perfection; morally, spiritually, financially, physically, vocationally, and in relationships with family, friends and anyone they meet. This ideal can be very seductive. But, as we get older and wiser, we realise that as we strain to achieve this, we fail and fail often, and in fact we become a prisoner to this perfection, as we find that we have to deny or ignore our brokenness. It is not healthy.

The way to wholeness, as the desert mothers and fathers found out as they struggled to achieve this perfection too, was to befriend their brokenness instead of denying, ignoring or attempting to rationalise our thoughts and behaviours. This brought them a real sense of liberation from the self-made prison of seeking absolute perfection combined with a denial of a lack of perfection. In that liberation they understood that they were loved unconditionally by God, and they in turn then exuded the unconditional love of God upon others. As a direct result of this they were able to be tender and patient with one another and all who visited them. They totally eschewed judgment of others, and realised comparing themselves to others led to unhealthy thoughts and behaviours. They learnt to stop making comparisons of themselves to others, and stilled the internal chatter of their minds that had created a background of anxiety about their progress towards their spiritual goals.

As a result of this deep spiritual work, the desert fathers and mothers were renowned for their compassion, their humility, and their eternal hope in the ability for others to change for the better.

Paul set out his case; that we are to seek to become more Christ-like in all we think, say and do, but to be aware of our human limitations. To be set free from sin, and find a formula for living a holy life that does not deny our humanity.

This passage from Romans, coupled with the musings of Maximus help us today, to be imperfect but improving Christians. We can identify our personal failings without beating ourselves up too much. We know that God loves us unconditionally, but that doesn't give us a free pass to being content with how we currently live. In response to God's love we wish to reflect his kingdom values, such that we bring glimpses of God's kingdom to all people that we meet. However, we can't do that if we are overly self-critical. We can't do that if we judge others and can't show our humility. We can't do that if we are not good listeners nor patient. We can't do that if we are not tender and caring, and have no empathy nor hope for the people we meet.

In your personal prayer time, I suggest you open up to God your father, knowing that in God's unconditional love you can offer up your brokenness, and ask for insight and ways to live a life closer to the narrow path Jesus walked. In this healthy relationship know that God wants you to be the best version of yourself that you can be. This means being aware of your brokenness and not letting it become your identity or lens through which you see and live in the world. The desert fathers and mothers learnt that lesson for us, so that we may live well and be agents of God's will, warts and all.