

Sunday 28th June 2020, When I am weak I am strong, 2 Corinthians 12: 7 – 10

Over the coming weeks, at Stanground, we are focussing a series of Sundays on the theme of “strength”. Someone at Park Road was talking to me recently, saying that the church used to be bigger and stronger. As the number of members decline, and the congregation talk to me about being older and not being able to do so much, I have been reflecting on one hand about what I am listening to, and on another hand on the theme of strength. Naturally the two have met up and journeyed together in my mind this week. I have been thinking how we understand strength, where our strength comes from, where we find strength, and how we receive strength from the omnipotent God in whom we live and move and have our being.

READ: 2 Corinthians chapter 12, verses 7 – 10

Do you feel that the church has “passed its peak”? Used to be strong but doesn’t feel strong anymore? Or do you disagree with that view? Would you feel that the church of Jesus Christ which began in vulnerability needs to stay vulnerable, needs to speak out from the margins and for the margins? We’ll each come to these thoughts from a different starting point and need to acknowledge that as we look at these verses about what it means to be strong, to have strength, and where our strength comes from.

Paul is saying here, quite clearly, that power/strength are made perfect in weakness. That it is only when we are weak that we can be strong, have strength. Hmmm.

So far in 2 Corinthians 12 he’s been talking about visions and revelations from the Lord. It’s the sort of spiritual experience that some people crave and some would not. The Corinthians, judging from a reading of the two letters, seemed to favour such experiences. As Paul tells them about his experience, talking about it happening to “a man”, not directly himself, he talks about the experience from God and then says that he doesn’t want to get big headed about it. Taking a gift from God is not something to make a person proud, just grateful.

Then we come to the passage, verses 7 – 10. It makes clear that “the man” who had the visionary experience was Paul and he says “to keep me from becoming conceited by these divine revelations, there was given to me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me”.

What could “thorn in the flesh” mean? Various, over centuries, theologians and others have suggested that the thorn in the flesh was an illness, the opposition of the Jewish teachers, carnal temptation, epilepsy, recurring illness, a speech impediment, a person of the “church bully” type, persecution by authorities.

Two themes emerge from the ideas about what the thorn in the flesh could be. Some of the ideas are about illness. Those who live with pain or physical limitations and challenges may relate to Paul’s describing this as a thorn in the flesh. We find in Galatians (Galatians 4:13) that Paul writes to them “As you know it was because of an illness that I first preached the Gospel to you”. Having said that, most people experience illness from time to time, even if not living with an ongoing medical condition.

The other theme to emerge is one of people who make Paul's life and ministry a much more trying experience than it needs to be. People who are constantly critical, ignorant, aggressive. You know the type, they exist in every human gathering and churches are no exception. Such people hinder the Gospel mission of a church, drain the spirit of a church, use up leadership resources and deflect from the work of Christ. We can read from Acts to the back cover of our New Testaments example after example of such people in the life and ministry of Paul. Sometimes they are groups, sometimes they are individuals, always they actively hamper the work of the Gospel.

The joy I think of not knowing exactly what Paul means when he talks of his thorn in the flesh is that it leaves it as something that each one of us can relate to at any time. Is there an illness, a condition, an addiction, an impediment that we feel besets us, holds us back from fully engaging in our calling, our work for Jesus? Are there people, or a person, who demean us, pull us down, demean us even in subtle ways, hold us back, constantly oppose us? These were part of Paul's experience of human life, just as they are part of ours. This is normal!

Whatever the "thorn in the flesh" affliction was, Paul makes an important point about it. He says that it was given by God. Anything given by God is a gift from God. Ponder that – we might want God to give us any manner of gifts, a gift of healing, a gift of preaching, a gift of leadership, a gift of hospitality ... and so on. We'd rejoice in such gifts. But can we see how "a thorn in the flesh" could be a gift from God? Paul writes that this was given to him by God to prevent him from getting big headed, from becoming conceited after his massive spiritual experience. The thorn was a negative thing, without question, but it was given by God for a beneficial purpose, to keep Paul rooted in God, grounded in God, dependent upon God and humble before God and other people.

At the same time as calling the thorn in his flesh a gift from God, Paul also calls it "a messenger from Satan". So we must be careful not to romanticise suffering or pain or to minimise the damage that some people can cause in a church, family or community just because we think they are "nice" people. This is not a morbid fascination with suffering for the sake of it. Paul isn't encouraging us to self-flagellate so we can be nearer to God!! Paul is acknowledging that negative experiences can be a gift, to help us to remain rooted in God and dependent upon God.

In verses 8-10 we come back to an age old question that each and every one of us might have asked at some point in our lives. "Why are my prayers not answered?" Paul had been so tormented by the thorn in his flesh that he had begged God three times to take it away. I was reminded of Jesus at Gethsemane, pleading three times with God the Father to take the cup of suffering from him if there was another way. Three prayers, three answers – but just not the answers hoped for. Paul prayed, and God heard, and the "thorn" remained. And imprinted in Paul's memory and experience is the reply that Jesus gave to him.

The answer to Paul's prayer was that in his weakness, Paul would always have enough to be a conqueror. There's a link here to Romans 8:35-37 where Paul asks "What can separate us from the love of God?" and lists many setbacks and

afflictions. Then says with confidence “We are more than conquerors through Christ who loves us”.

In answering Paul’s plea, the Lord says “You will get no more because you need no more”. The grace of Christ is sufficient, adequate, for Paul even when he is weak. In fact, especially when he is weak and vulnerable. God’s divine power finds its greatest expression, reveals its strength, in human weakness.

In Philippians 4:13 we find the words “I can do everything through Christ who gives me strength”. Our strength comes from God and God can make strength perfect when we come, not in our own strength, but when we come with empty hands and an acknowledgement that we are weak and vulnerable.

Is the cross of Jesus not the greatest example of strength and weakness?

The power of God doesn’t demean weakness, it sees it as a strength that opens a door to allow the strength and grace of God to flood in.

No-one is too weak to be of service to Jesus.

Many believe themselves to be so strong, so righteous, so “right” that God has no way to use them. The self-sufficient will never know the power of God that only manifests itself in our admitted weaknesses.

“My power is made perfect in weakness”, “When I am weak, that’s when I am strong”. God does not banish weakness as if it were a negative thing. God works through weakness and overcomes it in order to establish God’s own strength and power.

How does this relate to the experience of God’s people as we seek to follow Jesus? How can these words help us through illness and physical weakness? How can we manage people who would hinder the Gospel witness of a church? How do we apply these ancient words to the church we find ourselves in at Park Road in 2020?

- There’s nothing wrong with praying for healing for physical ailments and we rejoice in the positive answers to prayers we have seen in our midst in recent times. Those who do not receive physical healing have still been heard by God. God has another plan for them. People with physical challenges are called and equipped to serve God, to make Jesus known and to give glory to him
- People who would present themselves as the strong people who should be followed and esteemed in a church need to remember that Jesus came to serve, not to be served. Jesus washed the feet of his disciples and then went and died on a cross for each of us. “Strong” leadership, in human terms, is not the way of Jesus and should be recognised, exposed and resisted for what it is at all times
- A church that is feeling weaker and more vulnerable than in its glory days past might well be a church that is more open to the call of Christ than a church that wallowed in human strength. What does it mean for a church to be strong? To be big, to have loads of members (even if many of those are not active participants?), to be awash with activity (which may or may not simply keep people too busy to take time with God?)

Simple question really, do we want to belong to a “strong” church so that we can feel strong and wallow in reflected glory? Or are we willing to stand where we are, in all our vulnerability, and say “Yours Lord is the power, the strength and the glory. When we are weak, that’s when we are strong so take us, cleanse us, forgive us and use us to make Jesus known and for His glory”