

So deeply do we care

1 Thessalonians 2: 1-8

Matthew 22: 34-46

Today we are thinking about 'gentleness'. Being gentle is sometimes associated with being weak or bland, or boring. But is it? Imagine a child trying to hurt an adult's hand by squeezing it as hard as they can – and vice versa. The strong adult hand must remain gentle – mindful not only of its own strength but also of the limitations of the small hand. Far from being a weakness, gentleness is often a strength that can protect and transform. Doing things in a gentle way may take longer, but the impact can be longer lasting and more inclusive.

Let's now think about 'strength'. The images that pop into our minds when we think about strength probably have little or nothing to do with gentleness. Strength is more typically portrayed as being about power, and about a determination to achieve one's will regardless of others. Like it or not, when I think of strength at the moment, it's the image of Donald Trump at a presidential electioneering campaign, looking smug as he tells the world how wonderful he is, that fills my head, but it's an image of strength without any hint of gentleness. And, if I'm honest, it's an image I find really ugly.

But gentleness can of course *be* strength. The UK-based musician, writer and podcaster Andy Mort on his website 'A Home for Gentle Rebels' says that '*there is nothing that shows your strength better than your gentleness.*' This might sound a little bit odd, and may come across as some kind of a contradiction, but if you think about it for just a minute it makes sense. Most of us, I believe, admire strength. It's something we tend to commend in others, particularly if someone has been going through a tough time. It's something we desire for ourselves and wish for our children. Sometimes, though, I wonder if we confuse strength and other words - like aggression and even violence. But, there is nothing strong about the person who is quick to lose their temper and resort to aggression and violence in their spirit, words, and action. This is anything but strength, it is in fact a display of profound weakness.

I rather like the definition of strength as '*the ability to do things that need a lot of physical or mental effort. It's the choice to continue through the pain even when it feels unbearably hard.*' Gentleness can find its place in this definition, as the ability to remain peaceful, calm and with a consistent character -

strength itself. The gentle person attracts the trust of others because of this strength. They are aware of the needs of the people around them and willing to bring their natural and peaceful disposition to difficult situations. And we admire and respect them for it.

Each October, the UK celebrates Black History Month, where there are countless examples of people demonstrating strength through gentleness. One of the most common images to come to mind is that of Rosa Parks, the tiny Black American woman who, in 1955, resisted bus segregation by refusing to relinquish her seat to a white passenger. Her gentle, peaceful protest led to her arrest, but sparked a year-long boycott by the Black community of Montgomery's buses, and ultimately to the decision that segregation was unlawful and had to end. A more modern day example of gentle strength might be Doreen Lawrence, mother of Stephen, who was brutally attacked and killed by a gang of white youths at a bus stop in south-east London. His mother, now Baroness Doreen Lawrence, OBE, has spent decades fighting for justice for Stephen and campaigning against unequal treatment because of skin colour, and the resulting prejudice embedded in systems, structures and institutions. All of this she has achieved with a quiet gentleness and strength.

In Paul's letter to the Thessalonians, in our passage from the start of chapter two, Paul speaks of the ill-treatment that the apostles – Paul, Silas and Timothy - experienced at Philippi, but, with the help of God, they persisted in telling the Good News of Jesus Christ. From there, they travelled on to share the gospel in Thessalonica, despite strong opposition there also. When you read of the struggles they experienced, you get a sense of the strength of their faith and their determination to continue through the pain of opposition, even though it must have been unbearably hard. And, in verses six to eight, we learn of the gentleness with which they shared their faith. From the Message translation, we read:

'Even though we had some standing as Christ's apostles, we never threw our weight around or tried to come across as important, with you or anyone else. We weren't aloof with you. We took you just as you were. We were never patronising, never condescending, but we cared for you the way a mother cares for her children. We loved you dearly. Not content to just pass on the Message, we wanted to give you our hearts. And we did.'

This is a wonderful example of the apostles imitating Christ, something we looked at last week as we heard how the Thessalonians imitated Paul, Silas and

Timothy in the way they then spread the Good News. And, the clue to what they were imitating in Christ comes from our gospel reading this week, from Matthew chapter 22. When asked by an expert in the law: *'Which is the greatest commandment?'* Jesus replies: *'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbour as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.'*

And what does Paul say of love in his letter to the church in Corinth?

'Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.'

If this isn't a passage that oozes gentleness and strength, I don't know what is. So how can we develop strength founded in gentleness? What does this profoundly different display of strength look like? There are a few things we can do in any situation to embrace our gentle core and avoid the pitfalls of mindless aggression. I'd like to suggest five.

The first thing we can do is be conscious of our feelings. Sometimes we don't like to admit how we really feel about things, which is why when people ask us how we are, we respond with a cheery *'Fine'* when the reality is anything but. The gentle spirit acknowledges the truth of what is being felt, so give yourself permission to be honest in how you are *really* feeling about something that might be happening in your life right now.

The second is to use the space between something happening and how you respond to it. Gentle people make and embrace this time and space to stop and take a metaphorical step back, to ground themselves and then decide what to do. And, by choosing if and how to react, they remain strong and full of self-control.

The third thing we can do to embrace a gentle spirit is to allow ourselves to care – to care about other people, the world, our hopes and our dreams. It can be so easy in today's world, when there's so much going on around us that is wrong, to feel on the outside with our hearts switched off. There's much in the world at the moment to make us feel hopeless, or it may be that you have

personal experience of being hurt or let down. If we're not careful, we can switch off our decision to care.

The fourth thing to embrace a gentle spirit may help guard against this switching off, and that is - taking our focus deeper. Ask yourself: *'Why does this situation matter? Why is this person important?'* and the gentle spirit will find reasons to be positive and caring that go beyond our own ability to muster energy.

And the final thing is deciding what you are then going to do. Rather than reacting in the moment, gentle spirits embrace their ability to choose, to decide what the next step will be, acknowledging the intention behind it. Gentleness has insight to see implications and consequences of actions, so whatever is decided is done so with a good idea of what will happen as a result. A rational decision is always better than a decision made in the heat of the moment, and regretted later. And the more control you give yourself, the more space you have to choose to be gentle.

And, in being gentle, we imitate the Thessalonians. We imitate Paul, Silas and Timothy. And we imitate Christ himself. Christ who said, *'Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.'* Amen.