

Sermon Mk 6 1-13. (2 Cor 12 2-10 & Ezek 2 1-5) St M & AA 8.30 & 10am 4/7/21



*May I speak in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen*

Today I would like to concentrate on our reading of 2 Corinthians, which has always been the source of enormous speculation. Its tantalising hints about Paul may have made sense to his readers but to us we can only really fill it out by engaging overactive imaginations, which, cannot be proved or disproved. It seems that Paul is maybe talking about his own spiritual experience in the first half of chapter 12. And yet at the same time the language also shows unease at doing this, but clearly he feels this is necessary to make the theological point he has to make.

As in Paul's encounter on the Damascus road, for some people this kind of 'mystical' experience is a natural result of meeting with God. But Paul is trying to make the point to the Corinthians that these experiences are in themselves irrelevant. What's important, what really matters is the meeting with God, not how it takes place! Clearly the Corinthians had become dependent upon exciting experiences and these needs had presumably been pampered to in the provision of spectacle.

Therefore Paul is trying to make it clear that he is not talking out of envy of such experiences as clearly his own experience can equal them in every way. What Paul is trying to rebalance is that the focus should not be a matter for himself or any other leader within the church, to gather admiring followers, but the calling is to focus people towards and witness to Christ.

However it is only natural, like the Corinthians, for us today to want to know what Paul means by being 'caught up into Paradise' just as much as wanting to know what his 'thorn in the flesh' was. Some theologians suggest a physical defect of some kind, maybe, but the thorn could also be someone who is opposing or undermining Paul's work.

Those that have pampered to the need of spiritual spectacle have brought out the worst in Paul, it has made him aggressive, defensive, and boastful, even suggesting that his Gospel is not the real one. This is dividing the very community Paul loves, and despite prayer to remove this obstacle, God seems to have said no!

If this is correct then this is very hard. For what it means is that Paul must live without God's public vindication of his apostleship. This ultimately leads Paul to a deeper challenge still. Does Paul want to be proved right for his own sake or for Gods? God our Saviour does not need public acclamation or approval, that need is ours alone. So is this need the thorn in the flesh of Paul?

The need for love, understanding and support is not wrong, but they, like mystical experiences were to be viewed as the occasional luxury rather than the norm for committed Christians at those times and for many even today. Just as when Jesus goes home with his disciples, he may have hoped to be surrounded by people who loved and trusted him. If Jesus did, then he too would have been deeply disappointed. 'Who does he think he is?' makes it quite clear that his reputation, authority and the challenges he brings are to be paid no attention. Despite rejection and further isolation Jesus remains faithful to the will of God the Father, and sends his disciples out to preach. For what was paramount to Jesus must be for Paul and all of us, peoples love, admiration or approval is secondary in relation to the call, will and word of God.

AMEN.