

A Reflection from Stacy Nelson Taylor, Ordinand, for Sunday 4th July 2021 ~ Trinity 5

2 Corinthians 12.2-10 and Mark 6.1-13

Who do you listen to? What voice or voices do you choose to hear? The well-spoken or well-educated? The prominent or powerful? Those with impressive pedigrees or those who can point to great spiritual experiences? It seems the believers in Corinth found all these to be important factors in determining who they would want follow, and perhaps be led astray by.

Although Paul founded the church in Corinth and spent time there, teaching and discipling the believers, he had left quite a while ago. And since then, others had arrived. In 1st Corinthians, which is actually thought to be Paul's second letter, we find the church had divided itself behind different teachers, claiming an allegiance to Paul or Apollos. In that letter, Paul reprimanded the Corinthians for their factionalism, reminding them that he "planted, and Apollos watered, but God gave the growth."¹

Many more things were said in that letter, and it is generally thought that the letter was not well received by the Corinthians. Their reply is something we do not have; however, we see in 2nd Corinthians that Paul is now feeling the need to reaffirm his apostleship over new "super apostles"² who the Corinthians were looking to instead of him. It is into the middle of Paul's argument about these "super apostles" that we pick up in our reading today.³

In it we find the crux of his argument is in fact boasting, these "super apostles" boast about themselves and compare themselves favourably with others by human standards⁴. Paul calls this foolishness. Paul then line by line compares himself to what might well be their boasts,

- Jewish heritage.
- Labouring as a minister of Christ and enduring hardship for preaching the gospel.
- Having visions and revelations.
- Performing signs and wonders in their presence.

But he very clearly bookends the discussion by saying he is being forced into this by the Corinthians so that they are not preyed upon by the "super apostles" who will accept money for preaching when he would not. What is really worthy of boasting is exactly the opposite of all these things looked to as human standards. What is really worthy of boasting is so very counter-cultural. It is weakness because it is through weakness that "the power of Christ" dwells.

Oh, that gorgeous verse, "my grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Wonderful to meditate on in those moments when we are so very aware of our weaknesses, when we are clinging to God as our lifeline. When we know how much we need that grace.

What a challenging verse when we think we have it all together.

I mean, "I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses."

Is that really how we feel? Do we really want to be weak?

Do we want people to see our weaknesses? Or do we want to appear whole, unblemished, dare I say it, in control?

¹ 1 Corinthians 3.6 (NRSVA)

² 2 Corinthians 11.5; 2 Corinthians 12.11

³ 2 Corinthians 10 - 12

⁴ 2 Corinthians 10.12

How often do we slide into comparison based on accomplishment, heritage, or even faithfulness or doing good deeds? How often do we assess others based on these similar factors?

Are we inclined to listen to someone whose “bodily presence is weak, and speech contemptible” as Paul’s was?⁵ The reality is Paul was never going to look like those Greek or Roman statues we see in museums. Not only because he was Jewish from present day Turkey but also because of the “thorn in the flesh.” We aren’t sure what it was, but it could have been some sort of ailment or disability. Seemingly, he was also “untrained in speech”⁶. While he was trained and knowledgeable in the Law, the Torah, I imagine he means he was not trained in the Roman rhetorical style. He was not one of those smooth of tongue people that everyone wanted to go hear because of their wordsmithing. But he makes it clear, that is ok. He makes it clear; it is not about human standards.

What matters is that Christ is revealed, and that revelation is all the more clear because it was not possible for him to have done all he had done or endured all he endured through his own power. It was only possible in the power of Christ. I suppose this shouldn’t be surprising, because Jesus had a habit of upending the cultural norms. To be honest, he himself was hardly what was expected. He was a carpenter, from a family that was not well off. He did not fit the image of a conquering messiah. He certainly was not expected to have the wisdom and learning he revealed through his teaching, as was obvious by the reaction of his hometown.

So also, his followers, a ragamuffin band of disciples, sent out two by two with nothing but a staff, without food and without money. How much more visible is the power of Christ that this unlikely crew caused such a ruckus by proclaiming all should repent, casting out demons, and healing, that even a king heard about it? How much more visible is the power of Christ that the early church and many saints suffered persecution and hardship for the sake of Christ? How much more visible is the power of Christ in the endurance and faith of those who experience weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ today?

Paul reminds us in his ongoing conversation with the Corinthians that the humble reveal that which is magnificent and the weak reveal that which is mighty. Leaving us to ponder, how do we respond to humility and weakness? And where do we look for magnificence and might?

⁵ 2 Corinthians 10.10b

⁶ 2 Corinthians 11.6a