

READING

1 Corinthians 12:1-10

SERMON

Power in Weakness (2 Corinthians 12:1-10)

Think for a moment. What is your greatest achievement? What are you most proud of? Think about it for a moment. Would you tell everyone else about it? Would you boast about it? Boast about it?

- Boast or to put it another way
- brag
- fly your own kite
- try to make an impression
- blow your own trumpet
- sing your own praises

Surely not. This is a non-Christian thing to do. Christians do not brag. I can remember when I first met Arthur. In our very first meeting he told me how he had built up a Baptist Church in another part of the country single-handed. This was that he had built up the church both in bricks and mortar and also in numbers of people attending. To me it sounded like boasting and it sent alarm bells off in my head. It turned out that he was all mouth and no action!

If we turn to the New Testament the word boast, or boasting or any word that begins with the letters b-o-a-s-t occurs some 49 times in the NIV. However in the two letters that we have to the church of God at Corinth, we find words beginning with b-o-a-s-t some 30 times, just over 60% of the occurrences are found in correspondence to the same group of people. What does this say about this group of people?

In the second letter the words beginning with the letters b-o-a-s-t some 22 times, some 45% of the occurrences in the New Testament. They had a big problem or did they? We must be careful not to look back in time with the same lens that we use today. In the times of Jesus, the time of the Graeco-Roman era, boasting, the time at which Paul was writing it was normal to boast.

In Paul's day the hope of glory in an afterlife was non-existent and so one had to achieve one's glories in this life. So people would talk up their own exploits – a bit like the anglers. A fish this long, from one end of the outstretched fingertip to the other outstretched fingertip, usually means one half that size! If you were rich enough in Paul's day, you would erect a monument and on it put your glorious exploits.

I suppose the nearest we get to it today is a job interview, when you have to sell yourself, so one can boast, but really that has to be done in a humble way or else one is thought to be arrogant. So we need to remember that the culture of the day was of boasting about one's self.

The Corinthian church was being pressurised by people coming along and saying that they were having great ecstatic experience and this must mean that they were far, far better than Paul ever was – this is their credentials.

However Paul does a boast, but in a Rabbinic way. The way used by Rabbis was that they talked about themselves at times in the third person, using 'he' and 'him' and 'his' instead of 'I' or 'me' or 'my'. Something like

“I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know—God knows. And I know that this man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows— was caught up to paradise. He heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell.” (2 Corinthians 12:2-4 NIV)

Words we have read earlier from 2 Corinthians 12. Most people think that Paul is talking about himself and not anyone else. However did you notice that it was some fourteen years previously. Paul has quite a few visions and these are documented in the book of Acts, but not this one, not this time when he had this tremendous experience. To me it is similar to the vision of John when he was taken into heaven and from that we have the book of Revelations. Paul never wrote down his experiences in this third heaven, or paradise.

Of course we do not do that today? Or do we? There are those who will talk as if they have a hotline to God and that God speaks to them in words and visions and pictures and that you have to do what they say because it is really God who is speaking. I am not decrying any of those things and I know that God speaks in all of those ways to his people and in other ways. When we listen to God, say in a prayer meeting, do we listen to God putting things into our minds. It may be a passage of Scripture, or some words, or even a picture.

At one time I would always hear God through the Bible or a word, but now I seem to be getting more pictorial in the way God speaks to me – or am I boasting there? The thing not that the way God speaks to a person is wrong, but the way people use it. Is it used to build others up, or to pull others down and lord it over them

Back in the seventies and eighties there were the spiritual ones – the ones who went around telling everyone they were baptised in the Spirit and used it to lord it over others, who said they had not been.

In the nineties for some it was holiness for some. Everyone had to be more holy, just like they were. The problem was that they could not define holiness or could tell how people would develop in holiness, except to become more and more like them.

So beware of the boasting and the boasters.

So now think of your greatest weakness. You will not have to reveal it. But would you boast about it? Do you always try to hide it?

In 2 Corinthians Paul boasts about himself twice in quick succession. The first time he says

“...What anyone else dares to boast about—I am speaking as a fool— I also dare to boast about.”

“Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they Abraham’s descendants? So am I. Are they servants of Christ? (I am out of my mind to talk like this.) I am more. I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have laboured and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?” (2 Corinthians 11:21-29 NIV)

He reveals, not in his credentials, but in the sufferings that he has had to endure. He reveals in the dangers he had to put up with. And then he goes on

“If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, who is to be praised for ever, knows that I am not lying. In Damascus the governor under King Aretas had the city of the Damascenes guarded in order to arrest me. But I was lowered in a basket from a window in the wall and slipped through his hands.” (2 Corinthians 11:30-33 NIV)

He boasts about a time when he had to make a cowardly exit by being let down in a basket. And then of course he goes on in chapter 12 with the passage we have read and want to speak about his weakness – this thorn in the flesh. No-one really knows what it is, whether it is physical or spiritual. But it is a weakness and he says

“But he, God, said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.” (2 Corinthians 12:9-10 NIV)

Do you do the same? Do you begin by thinking that God’s grace is sufficient for you and that his power is made perfect in weakness? Or do we always want to go with success?

Tomorrow I begin another Summer School for my MA. This last year has been about leadership and leaders. The authors who did research found that very often the best leaders were often seen by others as weak, as having weaknesses. But we know that God can use weaknesses to his advantage. God can use suffering to his advantage. We just need to believe that

“...”My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me.” (2 Corinthians 12:9 NIV)

In doing that God will increase, as we decrease and this will mean that more glory goes to him and less to us. But that is how it should be.

PRAYER