

SERMON: 8 JULY 2018 – Rev Alistair Cowper

“Weak Made Strong” (2 Corinthians 12:2-10, Mark 6:1-13)

Paul in his letter to the believers in Corinth makes that great claim, “I will not boast, except of my weaknesses”. He knows that the grace of God is all he needs and that God’s power, true power, is made perfect through human weakness, “for whenever I am weak, then I am strong”.

Paul knew he wasn’t perfect. He had an affliction. We’re not sure what it was but he knew that despite it, God was still working through him, he could feel his power, his presence, his peace.

One commentator has written this, “Whatever afflicts Paul, what buoys him is Christ’s assurance that “My grace is sufficient for you, for my strength is made perfect in weakness.” This is not a celebration of suffering, nor a call to quietism in the face of injustice and pain –Paul prayed for it to be gone, after all– but is an assurance that no affliction that might beset the believer is beyond the grace or sustaining strength of Christ” (Andrew Kimmit).

Nothing is beyond God’s grace when people place their trust in God.

Jesus’ disciples were beginning to learn this paradox of God’s strength in their weakness. Jesus sends them out with no sword to protect them, no purse to buy what they needed, no bag with extra clothes and shoes. They were sent with only a stick to guide them and the sandals on their feet. They would need to lean on God’s hospitality, going from place to place, home to home, trusting on daily provision, give us this day, our daily bread.

It’s with this level of provision that Paul could rightly boast. We know that context of Paul saying he would only boast of his weaknesses, was one where there were other teachers who spoke only of their own power, who saw weakness as an indicator that God was either not present or that somehow they were at fault, usually some sin was suspected and therefore those who were weak were seen as second class citizens.

But the Bible seems to teach us that when we depend on God to fill our emptiness and to raise us up from the depths to which we’ve sunk, we can discover a place where we are strong on the inside, where we’re not

ashamed to own our faults, our mistakes, our deficiencies because we know that God can change us, and make us new, or maybe he won't change us, for he likes us that way, but will give us the grace, the peace inside, to live well and declare his goodness despite our weakness.

The disciples were learning this. It was in many ways a new kind of teaching, rooted firmly in God's love and Christ's sacrifice.

I'm so glad that Jesus wasn't put off by the critics in his hometown. He knew prophets were rejected when they tried to speak to those who 'knew' them well. This rejection wasn't going to stop Jesus sending out the 12, in two's, giving them authority over unclean spirits so that they might proclaim repentance, cast out demons, and cure the sick. The Father's business of the Kingdom, was not going to be deterred for the sake of one unbelieving village who couldn't see beyond their own prejudice.

Remember what William Barclay said last week about prejudice, how every great work has to overcome initial prejudice against it. It's been my experience that whenever people make even small steps to follow Jesus there will be some level of opposition, because we're in a spiritual battle which means there are spiritual forces against us, even when we settle down to pray. We need to press through these times, knowing that God's grace is more than sufficient.

Jesus was strong enough to persevere. In the words of the hymn:

Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so, young and old to him belong, we are weak but he is strong.

(Words adapted by a friend of mine, Betty Cameron).

Four points for us to think about:

1] Jesus is described as "Isn't he Mary's son, the carpenter?" Being described as Mary's son tells us Joseph has died. This explains why Jesus stays in the family home all these years as the local joiner craftsman, not leaving Nazareth until he was aged 30. Most likely he had taken on the role of supporting the family. He was a working man, familiar with all that that entailed, a man of the people, familiar with all that people face in life. That matters, because we need to know that God knows what its like to be

human, to face grief, to struggle with work, to smell the flowers, to walk in the sunshine as well as the rain.

2] The atmosphere was wrong in Nazareth. There was an air of unbelief. Willie Barclay, in his commentary, said that in the wrong atmosphere, there could be no healing, no preaching, nor any peace making. Wherever there is “an atmosphere of critical coldness or bland indifference, the most Spirit-packed utterance can fall lifeless to the earth”. So we see that we each have a tremendous responsibility which can either help or hinder the work of Jesus. We can either open the door or close it in his face.

3] In Jesus' day it was common for those who entered the Temple to take off their staff and shoes and purse to show that ordinary things were to be set aside when entering what was seen as the sacred place. So when Jesus uses this same terminology when sending out his disciples, to go from home to home with the Good News, I think he's saying that these people in the homes to which they are being sent are sacred, and that they too are to be seen as little temples, ready to receive the kingdom and the Spirit Of God.

4] Lastly, the message remains the same. Jesus is still reaching out to us today with the same message. And having heard it, he is still sending us to other people with the same message, to come to God, to pray with and for people, to take authority over unclean spirits, and to heal the sick. The Spirit of God is still moving through us and among us, until the kingdom of God comes in all its fullness.