

## Grace sufficient

5 7 09

O God, protector of all who trust in you,  
without whom nothing is strong, nothing is holy,  
increase and multiply your grace in us  
so that we may so pass through things temporal  
and lose not our hold on things eternal.

My text may be found in today's Epistle, Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians:  
'My grace is sufficient for you for power is made perfect in weakness.' (12 v9)

Last week, on Friday morning, the phone rang. It was Denise. She was planning the intercessions for today's service, a week in advance, and knowing me well, she wanted to know what was the theme of today's sermon. Actually, I didn't. Denise said she'd been looking at the readings for today and were she preaching, she'd preach on 'strength through weakness'. Why not I thought? Why shouldn't the Holy Spirit offer guidance and inspiration on the phone?

Today's teaching from Paul is clear but paradoxical. It's clear because he's simply saying that in our lives, God can appear most strongly when we are at our weakest. We can be better Christians when we are weaker. When we are weak, then God's strength can shine through us. This is a paradox, a seeming contradiction, because how can we be truly strong when we are really weak?

Paul wrestles with a problem (it is a very English problem) the problem of boasting. One of the things we learn early in school is not to boast. Boasting is somehow very un-English, not the done thing, and we are made to feel uncomfortable about boasting about ourselves or being in the presence of people who boast. The word braggart springs to mind though nowadays it is a word rarely used. English people prefer understatement, litotes, rather than exaggeration or hyperbole.

Paul has much to boast about. He is the Apostle to the Gentiles. He was chosen directly by God with a dramatic conversion experience which completely turned his life around. He was a man with a mission and he threw himself, mind and body, heart and soul, into the work that God called him to do. He took the word of God to people where they were, founded churches and through his understanding of the gospel message was able to set down in the letters attributed to his name the truth of the distinctive Christian revelation. He was a student of one of the best teachers at the time, Rabbi Gamaliel. He spoke Greek fluently; he was a Roman citizen; and as a tent-maker, he could be financially self-sufficient. Paul had everything going for him and he was a successful powerhouse for the spread of the good news that Jesus Christ is Lord.

So no problem there: there is much Paul could boast of. But he doesn't. Instead he points to a weakness that has dogged him: his 'thorn in the flesh'. What exactly this thorn in his flesh was we cannot say with certainty though personally I like William Barclay's suggestion that it was malaria, a recurring disease which would from time to time lay him low. Whatever it was, this thorn in his flesh, Paul

prayed forcefully for its removal, that he might be freed from this affliction. But he was not. Instead Paul came to see that his thorn in the flesh was a gift of God because it reminded him forcefully that he was only human and that however much he could do in his own strength, he could do so much more when his weakness allowed God to shine through him.

Now this is galling and encouraging at the same time. There is nothing more wonderful than being carried away with our own performance. As a teacher at my best I was very good: there was a real exhilaration in teaching a good lesson and helping a pupil understand. But when in March 2006 on a School trip to India, I broke a bone in my left foot carelessly jumping down an embankment, it allowed one of my Fifth Formers to help me through the check-in at Delhi airport, first by acquiring a luggage trolley, then loading me on it and finally transferring me to a wheelchair to make sure I got on to the plane. I was incapable but my incapacity gave Jo the chance to practise his true kindness and gentleness that was not readily obvious in a naughty boy who was member of the First Eleven.

So Paul in this passage from 2 Corinthians is sharing an encouraging paradox about the work of God through our lives. There is much we can do for him in our own strength but when we are exhausted, when our energy levels are low and we feel unwell, it is then that God's power can fill the void and we can be seen to shine with a light that is not our own. It is a question of grace; God's grace is sufficient for us; his grace allows us to serve him most effectively when we feel we can do nothing. In this context, surely the words of the poet, John Milton, at the

conclusion of the sonnet 'On His Blindness' are inspirational: 'They also serve who only stand and waite'.

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,  
Amen.

*Preached at the Eucharist*

*St Bartholomew's Dinard*

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H: Sermon 20: Grace sufficient

