

Hinde Street Methodist Church
Sermon for 10am Service 7th June 2015

2 Corinthians 4.13 - 5.1

Mark 3. 20 to 35

A few weeks ago, I received an article written by John Austen on behalf of a group based in Birmingham called, "Disabled and Ministers." ⁱ Its members live with physical limitation, with pain, or depression. And their ministry has been affected or curtailed by their disabilities. The article reflects on what they're learning and near the beginning John writes. *"We are learning what it could mean to receive what God offers us to live creatively within our reality; learning what it is to be laid bare, stripped of roles, responsibilities, masks and dignity; learning the presence and providence of God within the sense of the absence of God; learning that the pain bearers continue to take their place within the redemptive process; and learning that the Church speaks much of pain and suffering but is embarrassed by it."* The article was written in 2006 and is as relevant today as it was then. But it should not be necessary for him to write like this. If the church paid more attention to the section in Paul's 2nd letter to the Corinthians that today's reading comes from, or was more willing to allow Jesus' words about "trying up the strong man" to challenge the way we think about life in today's world, we would already know these things and not need people who have been edged to the margins of the church to tell us. Let me explain what I mean.

The end of chapter 2 to the beginning of chapter 6 in Paul's 2nd letter to the church in Corinth is autobiographical. Paul did not have a good relationship with the church in Corinth. And some preferred the teaching of other itinerant preachers. Among their problems with Paul, were the facts that he wasn't a particularly impressive speaker, and his affliction – that we know about but not what it was – led them to despise him. In this section of his letters, he defends his integrity and his ministry and is much more explicit than he is elsewhere, about what is essential to him.

Today's reading is from the middle section of this apologia, and one of my commentaries calls it, *"Paul's as a ministry sustained through affliction and mortality"*. It begins with one of my favourite phrases in his letters. *"But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us."* One of the things the Corinthian have misunderstood about the Gospel is that it will make them perfect, successful, good, now. Their theology is realised eschatology. They believe the end time - when God will complete creation and perfect humanity - has already come for Christians. And so Paul challenges them with his experience. His affliction is not a diminishment of the Gospel. *"Even though our outer nature is wasting away,"* he says, *"our inner nature is being renewed day by day."* Paul is convinced that suffering is part of faith, and if it is true of him, is it also true for the Corinthians. The *"wasting away"* of our bodies, is absolutely normal and is accompanied, he says, by our inner natures being renewed. He's ever so slightly cautious about this last point. So he says we cannot be sure because we cannot see. But then he reiterates his earlier point again. *"For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens."*

Paul is offering a critique of the superficial criteria of success that rules the Church in Corinth by facing them with their reality. Corinth had many of the features we associate

with powerful cities today – including London. It was the central point of many of the region's trade routes. It was multi-cultural. Rich lived alongside poor. And Christianity was growing up alongside many other religious communities and the emperor worship of the Roman Empire. Riches, success, perfection led to power and status. You can see why Paul, with his stumbling speech and affliction, was suspect. But he challenges all this. This is not God's way. Perfection and success are not defined by the world, but by the Spirit of God who works in and through clay jars, and broken vessels. His confidence is rooted in the "witness" of those similarly afflicted throughout Scripture, and he quotes the cry of a psalmist, who said, "I believed, and so I spoke". In his life, in his own experience of faith, he says, he finds "the same spirit of faith" as the psalmist. And this mystery of a communion in the same spirit of faith is what makes his preaching authentic and spirit-filled.

If this is what he believed about God, then some in the church in Corinth were asking, whether it was really what they wanted. It's a question would be followers of Jesus need to ask in every time and place. And the people who encountered Jesus, the crowds, the religious authorities and his family, had already struggled with the same issue. In today's Gospel, Jesus' sanity is questioned by the crowd, and the religious authorities. When his family hear that people are saying he is mad they try to protect him. While the scribes use the age old trick of saying he's possessed by Beelzebub to raise doubts in the minds of the crowds. Jesus is a problem. He's broken the law, healed people and exorcised unclean spirits, and he's teaching unorthodox things. He's challenging the very structure of their religious and cultural life. And because they cannot tolerate it, they try to exclude him, by persuading the crowds that his words and actions aren't trustworthy. His response is typically enigmatic. He speaks in riddles that don't seem to make a huge amount of sense. But the crowds, the religious authorities and his family, would have understood when he said *"no one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his property without first trying up the strong man..."* They would have recognised his claim to have taken up the mantle of 2nd Isaiah as well as God's promise to liberate *"the prey of the strong and rescue the captives of the tyrants."* (Is 49.24f) He has come to free them from captivity to the very human misconceptions that power, riches, strength, perception, and invulnerability represent the divine and is the best humanity can be. No wonder they believe he's mad or evil.

Today's world – and the church too - struggles with illness, disability, and the only thing that is certain about life, our inevitable deaths. We try to remain young as long as possible. We try to prolong life as long as possible. So much so, some critics say, that it is becoming extremely difficult to die well. We've lost sight of the perspective that through suffering, illness and even death, life is renewed. John Austen's article speaks powerfully about what those the weak, powerless and vulnerable might offer those of us who still haven't been fully unbound from the cultural norms of society. He writes, *"Theology mustn't simply be left to those who are fit and strong... Theology must also be wrestled for through pain and disability: the raw materials of our encounters with a mysterious God... Through disability or illness, many of us have the experience of being laid bare, losing clothes and dignity, being taken to the lavatory by others...and being touched in our nakedness by people we don't know... For most "able-bodied" people, this... is seen as undignified or unpleasant. Can we begin to uncover theological and spiritual meaning within this experience of our bodies being made vulnerable and handled by other people? Christ at the end of his life was stripped, stretched horizontal, and handed over to others, and is shown as almost naked on the*

cross... For us, there is a need to connect that spirituality of physical weakness and vulnerability with our own experience of weakness... [As we] search for the meaning of how to share God's loving care and compassion from the places of darkness, weariness, frustration, pain and vulnerability." John Austen says they continue to search for meaning. They continue – as ministers who are first and foremost disciples' of Christ – because they continue to share their experience on the edge of a church. A church whose witness is limited because we often forget Paul's message, because we usually only remember for a short time that resurrection begins with suffering and death, and that the resurrected Christ was still marked by the scars of the nails. Nancy Eiesland, a disabled theologian, speaks of God as a "disabled God", not just after Jesus' death and resurrection, but for all time. This is far from our usual ways of speaking about God. Yet I suspect that if we could embrace such ideas, the witness Christians offer as our bodies waste away and our inner natures are renewed, might speak powerfully to those whose lives are diminished by the power of strong men in today's world. Amen.

Sue Keegan von Allmen

7th June 2015

ⁱ <http://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2006/3-march/features/%E2%80%98in-ministry-you-are-expected-to-be-well%E2%80%99>