

**Hinde Street Methodist Church**

Sunday 5<sup>th</sup> July 2015 10am

**Call to worship**

Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised  
in the city of our God.

We ponder your steadfast love, O God  
in the midst of your temple.

Your name, O God, like your praise,  
reaches to the ends of the earth.

Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised  
in the city of our God.

*Psalm 48*

**Collect**

Servant Lord  
grant us both the opportunity and the will  
to serve you day by day.

May all that we do  
and how we bear each other's burdens  
be our offering of love and service  
to the glory of your name.

Amen.

**2 Cor 12: 2-10**

<sup>2</sup>I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—  
whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows. <sup>3</sup>And I know that such a  
person—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows— <sup>4</sup>was caught  
up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to  
repeat.

<sup>5</sup>On behalf of such a one I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my  
weaknesses.

<sup>6</sup>But if I wish to boast, I will not be a fool, for I will be speaking the truth.

But I refrain from it, so that no one may think better of me than what is seen in me or heard  
from me, <sup>7</sup>even considering the exceptional character of the revelations.

Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given to me in the flesh, a  
messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. <sup>8</sup>Three times I  
appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, <sup>9</sup>but he said to me, 'My grace is  
sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.'

So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.

<sup>10</sup>Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

### **Sermon**

News of the World, Corinth edition, 55 AD.

Confessions of the apostle Paul.

Thorn in the flesh revealed.

We are such tabloid readers.

Don't we all want to know just what Paul's thorn in the flesh might have been?

There has been plenty of speculation over the years.

In the Middle Ages, commentators were convinced that it was some kind of sexual temptation.

Others have believed it was some form of physical disability: epilepsy, headaches, eye problems, leprosy, malaria have all had their advocates.

Some believe it was guilt over his previous persecution of the Christian church.

Some believe Paul suffered from debilitating depression.

Some believe it was other people.

We all know what a thorn in the flesh other people can be.

Perhaps he was referring to the show-off super-apostles in the church of Corinth who challenged his authority and made him defensive.

Some believe that Paul was gay, and his infamous anti-gay pronouncements are a product of his own repressed homosexuality.

But Paul is very careful not to identify his thorn in the flesh.

He calls it a *skolops* – a pointed stake, used as a defensive palisade in warfare, or as a device to torture your enemies.

It's a powerful image.

But Paul doesn't give us the details.

He doesn't want to make himself tabloid-fodder.

He doesn't want to encourage speculation.

That's not the point.

For once this is not about Paul.

He wants his readers to get a glimpse of the truth he has grasped, at last, after years of wrestling with what God wants from him.

*My grace is sufficient for you.*

*For power is made perfect in weakness.*

Perhaps the thorn Paul is grappling with is his own ego.

To believe that he is the super-apostle of super-apostles.

Perhaps that's why he is so careful to talk about his visions and revelations as though they happened to someone else.

To distance himself from his own inner super-apostle, whose visions and revelations are, of course, bigger and better than anyone else's visions and revelations.

Paul is grappling with the temptation that we all face, as individuals and as institutions.

The temptation to believe we are right.

That we know best.

That we never make mistakes.

At our Conference communion service in Southport on Wednesday morning, our new president, Steve Wild, told us a story.

It was set during the first world war, which began 100 years ago last year.

Four soldiers were trying to make their way back to their regiment through the mud of Flanders, when one of them was shot and killed by a sniper.

His three companions didn't know what to do.

They were alone, miles from the rest of their mates.

The rain was pouring down.

It was getting dark.

Through the murky wet, they saw the spire of a church.

They carried their dead friend towards it, and through the gate into the churchyard.

They hammered on the door.

Nobody came.

In despair, they started to dig a grave for their friend.

At that moment, a priest came hurrying over.

'You can't do that', he said.

'You haven't got permission.

This isn't your church.

Get off our land.'

The soldiers dragged the body of their friend back out through the gate.

There, outside the fence of the official burial ground, they dug a grave for their dead companion and buried him.

They found a barn nearby, and slept overnight.

In the morning, they went back to the church to say a last goodbye, before they continued their journey.

There was no grave.

Only the flat, wet mud.

What had happened?

They stood there, in despair.

At that moment, the priest came hurrying over again.

They decided to get away quickly, before they got into further trouble.

But the priest called after them.

'Wait. Wait.

Last night I couldn't sleep, thinking about how I had treated you.

I'm so sorry.

So early this morning I came out here again.

And I moved the fence.'

At Conference we spent a lot of time on church matters, passing national budgets, and debating the meaning of Methodist Connexionalism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

But we also received the report on the past cases review with a standing vote and bowed heads, as we committed ourselves to taking seriously the need for culture change in a church where many have been victims of abuse.

We unanimously voted that all Methodist employers should pay the living wage.

No exceptions.

We pledged ourselves, as individuals and as a church, to speak out on benefit sanctions, tax justice and sustainability.

We elected Rachel Lampard, head of the Joint Public Issues team, as our vice-president next year.

Then someone asked why, when we had passed a notice of motion committing to reflect further on fossil fuels and ethical investment, we each had a fresh plastic bottle of water on our tables every morning.

If we are going to take seriously our commitment to those outside the fence, it needs to be more than words.

Yes, like Paul, we are human beings.

We are not perfect.

We make mistakes.

We can't get everything right.

But that doesn't mean we mustn't try.

Like the three soldiers, we need to do all we can for those who have no power.

Like the sleepless priest, we need to be alert to our own mistakes.  
We need to be willing to revisit our selfish actions.  
We need to recognise our need of grace, in living out our faith.

*My grace is sufficient for you,  
For power is made perfect in weakness.*