

King's College Chapel
Sermon
31 January 2016, Sexagesima
The Dean

They say that March comes in like a lamb but goes out like a lion. And when they say it they mean that while March can begin with mild and temperate weather, it can often end with storms that lead to April showers. They also say that January is the month which begins with people making resolutions, seeking to take more exercise, lose weight and so on, but ends with those resolutions more or less in tatters; a shameful memory that is best perhaps forgotten. Our best intentions, it would seem, are often as unreliable as the weather.

The epistle reading today revealed St Paul to be in one of his darker moods. And we can hardly blame him for that. It was taken from his second letter to the church in Corinth. The reason he wrote this *second* letter was that they took more or less no notice of the first. The Corinthians were new converts whose approach to Christianity was rather like the approach that many of us take to New Year's resolutions. They liked the idea of living a Christian life rather more than they liked the reality of actually doing it, and by and large they continued in their bad old ways.

What, you may wonder, were these people up to? Here's one list: 'quarrelling, jealousy, anger, selfishness, slander, gossip, conceit, and disorder.' But that's not all: 'impurity, sexual immorality, and licentiousness'. All of which is a very long way from the ideals of the Sermon on the Mount.

Paul's problem was not to work out why these people were behaving like this, nor to work out what they should be doing. It was to work out how to get them to take any notice

of what he was saying. To put it bluntly, the people of Corinth were not taking much notice of him because some other would-be leaders had popped up and persuaded the people that they were wiser guides.

This is where our reading took up the story. Paul writes some very tangled sentences, and has I think some very tangled ideas. This is not because he is incapable to thinking straight, but because the situation is so stressful and muddling. He uses sarcasm and exaggeration, and points out to them that they are mugs to let the self-appointed people who big themselves up - he sneeringly calls them 'super-apostles' - push them around and spiritually bully them.

Observing that these manipulative individuals have got into a position of influence by boasting about their own qualities, and despairing of the real folly of the people who have given them credence, he himself launches into a spate of boasting. This is not because he really believes in boasting, but because he is making the point that he could easily have puffed up his own reputation, and impressed them with stories of his bravado and courage, but had deliberately not done that because he credited them with wanting to follow an authentic Christian pathway, which is obviously (so he thought) based on quite different values than self-aggrandizement, boasting and bullying.

But even as the rhetoric rages (he is certainly very cross about all this) it begins to blow itself out like a spring storm. And he ends up boasting not of his strengths and his heroic sufferings, but of his weaknesses. 'If I must needs glory, I will glory of the things which concern mine infirmities' he writes. Or rather, this is how his Greek words were translated in the Authorized Version. Translated today it reads like this: 'If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness'.

He carries on in this vein for a few paragraphs beyond the passage we heard earlier. He agonizes with the question of whether he should really say the impressive things that would make other people look up to him so that he can have a good influence on them, or whether that's really cheap and demeaning as well as misleading at the level of values. In the end he gets round to talking about a personal problem that he describes as his 'thorn in the flesh'. We don't know what it is precisely, but it is some nasty ailment that pulls him back down to earth when he gets carried away with himself.

Not that this means that he is grateful for it. He has *pleaded* with God to take it away. But the answer that came back to him in prayer was this: 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness'. Paul takes this literally, and at last finds himself preaching not a message of superiority and self-importance, but something altogether more Christ-like: 'So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. 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.'

It's important to realize that at this point Paul is not being sarcastic or ironic; nor is he still angry. He is trying as best he can to share a truth about himself that he has come to understand by hard experience. Again, we don't know precisely what it is, but physical pain is part of it, and so too are people who are being a pain in the neck. It was through the traumas of life that Paul came to discover a new kind of inner strength.

Not that this was really *his own* strength, or that it was like the sort of strength that people boast or brag about. Rather his spiritual life-lesson was that it is when our ordinary human capacities are proved to be less than adequate; when

we find that there are problems we cannot solve; when we face the hard reality that people don't actually respect us; when we hear that that our disease can't be cured or our pain relieved – it is at times like these that we begin to get in touch with the deeper yet ever present reality that is the grace of God, grace that is *sufficient* and which draws from us the peculiar spiritual power that is perfected in weakness.

The road to the grace and presence of God is rarely paved with success, any more than the road to heaven is paved with good intentions, or each New Year of our life made spectacular by the keeping of resolutions. The way we get to God, the way our deepest desires are fulfilled, and we become the person we were always intended to be, invariably involves discovering this simple yet maddening truth: 'when I am weak then I am strong'.

This discovery of strength in weakness is the discovery of the deeper layers of one's own soul and the simultaneous discovery that this is the level at which God connects with us, and where the most important and meaningful human relationships happen. And while this has very little to do with success and nothing to do with boasting, it has everything to do with grace and truth – and the way of life that is properly called Christianity.

Stephen Cherry