

## A Sermon in King's College Chapel

### *The Solidarity of the Weak*

I wonder who each of us most frequently compares ourselves to? Have you compared yourself to someone in the last 24 hours and who was it?

Some of us may well feel that we don't compare ourselves much to others. But let's think about the last time we checked our Facebook, Twitter or Instagram feeds. Did any of those posts make you feel envious, or that your life was just not as successful, fun or as colourful as others? Or did any of them make you feel superior, self-congratulatory or puffed up?

The drive to compare ourselves to others may well be innate and universal in human beings. It's one of the primary ways in which we evaluate ourselves, trying to find out how 'good' we actually are and to make ourselves feel better. It is a way in which we can potentially reduce uncertainty and anxiety in the areas of comparison and bring a sense of definition to who we are ourselves.

However, as many recent reports indicate, our digital age has made self-comparison both more prevalent and potentially detrimental to our health and wellbeing. Many studies now highlight how living too much of our lives on line can lead to severe anxiety and depression as we compare our worst assessments of ourselves with the carefully selected and best on line presentations of others.

The hard-wired human drive to self-comparison is glaringly obvious in our first reading this morning. Here Paul, in a very bullish, sarcastic and fairly aggressive tone, compares himself to other missionaries who have come to the Corinthian church:

But whatever anyone dares to boast of—I am speaking as a fool—I also dare to boast of that. Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they descendants of Abraham? So am I. Are they ministers of Christ? I am talking like a madman—I am a better

one: with far greater labours, far more imprisonments, with countless floggings, and often near death. (2 Cor. 11. 21b-23)

Paul makes it forcefully clear that anything these other missionaries could do, he could do it better!

At the centre of the entire text of 2 Corinthians is an argument about what skills and abilities make an apostle of Jesus Christ. Paul asserts his credentials to the members of the Corinthian church and defends himself against those who were undermining his work and reputation.

The Corinthians had begun to listen to voices other than Paul's. They were voices that pointed out that Paul's CV, as someone who was in the past a zealous persecutor of the church, was deeply flawed and extremely ambiguous. They were voices that claimed closer connection to the Jerusalem church and to the historical person and teaching of Jesus himself. They were voices that also offered religious experiences and signs that seemed more spectacular than Paul's.

In this self-comparative defence of his own ministry, Paul's combative, hubristic and bragging tone may at first turn us off from attending to his words. For our societies however, the most remarkable aspect of Paul's comparison of himself with others, is that he reverses the ways in which we generally evaluate success and failure.

Paul does not brag about his great oratory, his making of many converts or his administrative acumen. On the contrary Paul bears his wounds, lists his persecutions and rejoices in his weakness. In selling himself to the Corinthians he concludes:

I am under daily pressure because of my anxiety for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to stumble, and I am not indignant? If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. (2 Cor. 11. 28b-30)

Paul, like many of us in life in general and in our on-line lives in particular, is a careful curator of the images of his own life. But here we are not exposed to photos of Paul sipping a cooling drink on a nice terrace of a quaint bar in one of the Mediterranean coastal towns to which he travelled. Rather, we are shown the insides of prison cells, introduced to torturers and educated in the effects of extreme physical and psychological deprivation.

Paul, in showing the crosses that he had to bear in his own life, points us beyond himself to the life, ministry, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus. In Christ we encounter the God who is the extravagant, wasteful and super-generous farmer who sows seeds in today's gospel. God in Christ has little care for where the seeds of love are thrown. There is no calculation here which leads to rationing the seed to the sorts of ground that one might think will be more productive. A more prudent farmer would have been more careful with his throw.

Today, in the words of scripture, we encounter Paul the apostle who 'sells' himself by pointing out his weaknesses and Jesus who tells us a story in which God is seen as one who throws all caution to the wind and all the seeds of love with it.

Today too, in this Eucharistic celebration, we immerse ourselves in the fullness of Christ's story, whose life of love, service and liberation *seems* a failure that ends in the loss of life on the cross. But Christians believe that this life is returned to us in resurrection: the never-ending story of the regenerative power of the type of life which Christ lived and to which God calls us all.

The 20th century Dutch Catholic theologian Henri Nouwen indicates some of this ways in which such an encounter with God in Christ may challenge the anxieties which we have and which are generated by the excessive self-comparisons of our digital times. He writes:

Some of us tend to do away with things that are slightly damaged. Instead of repairing them we say: “Well, I don’t have time to fix it, I might as well throw it in the garbage can and buy a new one.” Often we also treat people this way. We say: “Well, he has a problem with drinking; well, she is quite depressed; well, they have mismanaged their business...we’d better not take the risk of working with them.” When we dismiss people out of hand because of their apparent woundedness, we stunt their lives by ignoring their gifts, which are often buried in their wounds.

We all are bruised reeds, whether our bruises are visible or not. The compassionate life is the life in which we believe that strength is hidden in weakness and that true community is a fellowship of the weak. From Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Bread for the Journey: A Daybook of Wisdom and Faith*

May we this morning open up the wounded and seemingly infertile grounds of our own lives and allow the seed of God’s Word to take root and grow even there. May we learn to celebrate our own weaknesses as gifts, and delight in the different weaknesses and gifts of others. And may we, fed with the body and blood of Christ, go out from here to build compassionate communities, communities of the weak in solidarity with one another, which reflect the life of God in Christ.

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2 Corinthians 11.19-31, Luke 8.4-15*

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