

Fifth Sunday after Trinity

Collect: Almighty and everlasting God, by whose Spirit the whole body of the Church is governed and sanctified: hear our prayer which we offer for all your faithful people, that in their vocation and ministry they may serve you in holiness and truth to the glory of your name; through our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. **Amen.**

2 Corinthians 12.5b–10:

I will not boast, except of my weaknesses. ⁶But 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, ⁷even 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. ⁸Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, ⁹but 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. ¹⁰Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

Gospel: Mark 6.1–13:

¹ Jesus left that place and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. ²On the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, 'Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! ³Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?' And they took offence at him. ⁴Then Jesus said to them, 'Prophets are not without honour, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.' ⁵And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. ⁶And he was amazed at their unbelief. Then he went about among the villages teaching. ⁷He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. ⁸He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; ⁹but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. ¹⁰He said to them, 'Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. ¹¹If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.' ¹²So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. ¹³They cast out many demons and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.

Reflection

Two questions today. Can we make sense of the passages today without having a literal belief in demons and the casting out of unclean spirits or of Satan putting a thorn in the flesh?

I think it is important to remember that two thousand years separate us from the world view of the New Testament writers, and whenever we approach a text, we should bear this in mind. The sense of evil as being entirely beyond human activity was much stronger then than it is today, and very few people, religious or otherwise, would make evil their only reference point for the causes of human conditions including sickness, depression or disability. Partly this is because of scientific and medical advances and equally importantly because more people now have a better understanding themselves of these conditions and how to treat and support them.

And beyond the scientific and medical advances, I think it is also important to say that Jesus, and later St Paul, were most concerned about what the outcomes were for the people they helped and healed. Enabling those excluded to be included, those scapegoated to be better understood and to encourage us all to learn from experiences of both these things.

And so to a second question. What does it mean to say whenever I am weak, then I am strong?

I would think each of us would have something from own experience of life that helps us to make sense of this. It is quite a counter cultural thing because much of what we do in life depends on resilience, on having good expertise and for some occupations physical strength. Paul himself was a great theologian, a fearless and challenging orator and particularly in the context of his time a resilient traveller. But to write in the way that he does in 1 Corinthians 13 of God's love and our showing this to others in human relationships, reveals a depth of compassion that can only have come from a person aware of his own flaws and frailty. This we find further explored in 2 Corinthians and his words about peoples' experiences of life leaving us as like cracked clay pots.

And this is picked up in the words of the hymn "Love is the Touch" that was included in Songs of Praise last week, which celebrated the re-opening of Iona Abbey, following refurbishment; and which included interviews with Princess Anne, John Bell and both the leader and warden of the Abbey.

Love is the touch of intangible joy;
Love is the force that no fear can destroy;
Love is the goodness we gladly applaud:
God is where love is, for love is of God.

Love is the lilt in a lingering voice;
Love is the hope that can make us rejoice;
Love is the cure for the frightened and flawed:

Love is the light in the tunnel of pain;
Love is the will to be whole once again;
Love is the trust of the friend on the road
God is where love is, for love is of God.

(Words by Alison M Robertson)

And finally, our two passages focus our thoughts also on Christian discipleship and on the facing of rejection and sometimes scorn especially from those who are family or friends. A reminder again today that many of Jesus' family thought him mad because of what he said and did.

The indicator for the followers of where and when to put their time and energy is again related to outcomes. If you are received with hospitality, where people are genuinely seeking to make sense of life for themselves and others and who are trying to build communities that are creative, compassionate and who are alert to the needs of all, then stay awhile.

Stay awhile to encourage people to make connections with each other, with the world around them and with God. Stay awhile and be empathetic to the needs of those who are struggling whether materially, emotionally or spiritually.

But if people are mistrustful, selfish or seek to make trouble then quickly move on. These are not friends on the road and their lack of welcome will be all too evident.

The final verse of Alison Robertson hymn brings this together connecting the impact and outcome of God's love on all who are open to receive it.

Love is the Maker, and Spirit, and son,
Love is the kingdom their will has begun;
Love is the pathway the saints all have trod:
God is where love is, for love is of God.