

MY GRACE IS SUFFICIENT

2 Samuel 5. 1-5, 9-10

2 Corinthians 12. 2-10

Mark 6. 1-13

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

One of the most notable characteristics of the Christian New Testament must be the highly unusual relationship that it suggests between strength and weakness and between success and failure.

We can see this in the life of our Lord, of course: his crucifixion, that moment of awful suffering, vulnerability and weakness, actually became his crowning moment of glory. And it is just as true of the apostles that Jesus sent out into the world, who took nothing for their journey, as we heard in our appointed gospel text from St Mark. If we have ever wondered about how *that* ended up, and what the fate of the most successful apostles was, we need only to listen to our given epistle reading from St Paul's second letter to the Corinthians.

Somewhere around the year 56 or 57 AD, the church in Corinth was in upheaval. A number of people were bitterly opposed to Paul's teaching that Gentile believers should be included in their fellowship. These critics viciously attacked Paul's character, and questioned his worth as an apostle. His response to their criticism is this epistle, written to people whom he loved, but who were increasingly turning their backs on him. One biblical scholar says this about Paul's second letter to the church in Corinth: '(It) fills much the same place in the New Testament as does the book of Job in the Old. It is a letter written by one whose heart has been broken...'

I am struck by this. Hearts can break for any number of reasons, but it seems that Paul's heart had been broken because the hopes that he had for his spiritual children in Corinth had not come to pass; and they were being led astray by his charismatic adversaries. Paul himself was not particularly charismatic, we are told; and it seems that he was lacking in eloquence, unpleasant in personality, and (most importantly for the Corinthians) he could not boast of having had the rapturous spiritual experiences that they viewed as the most important validation of a religious authority.

And this young church at Corinth, still new, without strength of tradition or depth of experience, was easily impressed by the dazzle of spiritual fireworks, but ignorant of the lack of substance that these fireworks hid from view. The interlopers took advantage of that ignorance, and the Corinthians accepted it. It broke Paul's heart. And so, while the Corinthians are boasting of their piety and religious excellence, what does Paul boast of instead? He lists his humiliations (of which this ecclesial failure is one); he lists his infirmities, his reproaches, his persecutions and his distresses.

Paul recognised that the spiritual experiences of which those agitators in Corinth were so proud *were not* the content of Christian faith: not for Paul, nor for the other apostles, nor, for that matter, for Christ himself. To acknowledge our Lord is not to be guaranteed religious elation, just as it is not a guarantee of earthly success. Whilst it is true that Paul had had an ecstatic experience (that of being taken up to the 'third heaven'), he was so modest about it that he tells his story in the third person. Moreover, Paul talks about this experience as a *passive* event: he didn't ascend himself to Paradise; rather, he was taken up (literally, 'snatched up') by Jesus himself. It was Christ's doing, not his own.

Furthermore, note that Paul does not come back from the third heaven enlightened, like a mystical sage. To the contrary, he comes back even worse off than before,

returning with a thorn in his flesh, which will constantly remind him that what has happened to him is not something about which he can boast. It is not a result of his own accomplishments. Paul was 'snatched up' by our Lord, after all.

Paul does not brag about that. Instead, in one of those wonderful New Testament inversions, he brags about his infirmities and weaknesses. Rather than being thorns that must be overcome, rather than being the things that his opponents take as proof of inferior character, these weaknesses are potential instruments of *glorification*. Rather than being things that hold Paul back, paradoxically they become the raw material that can be used by God. If they are acknowledged as weaknesses, God can transform them to his own glory. It is an odd and unexpected relationship between strength and weakness that Paul suggests here; it is the opposite of what his opponents think, and it might be the opposite of what we would typically think, too.

That may be because his opponents (and perhaps we as well) have not yet internalised the lesson that Paul learned from Jesus, which is this: after Paul begs him, three times, to have the thorn in the flesh taken away from him, Christ replies, 'No, my grace is sufficient for you, for (my) power is made perfect in weakness.' *My grace is sufficient*, the Lord says. Nothing else is needed. And if God's grace truly is sufficient, then that means that it is sufficient to transform anything and to overcome anything. It means that those weaknesses, infirmities and thorns in the flesh do not have to keep Paul, or us, from doing the work of the Gospel.

But it means more than that, I think. God's grace being sufficient also means that those weaknesses that Paul's opponents mocked him for also do not have to keep him, or us, from a relationship with God. In fact, they can even be the means by which that relationship is effected for us. Even sin itself can be a way in which a person realises his or her need for, and dependence on God; because God's grace is sufficient.

Those things about us that fill us with shame; those things about which we are embarrassed; those shortcomings that cut us off from God and each other: they need not be the final word when the story of our relationship with God is written, because *his grace is sufficient* and can transform anything for his purposes. And his purposes are not only the spreading of the Gospel (which Paul himself was trying to accomplish), but also salvation, which is eternal life with God. God's grace is sufficient for that, too.

There is another corollary to this. It also means that *nothing else but grace* is sufficient. If it is the infirmities and weaknesses that can be transformed into strength by grace, and by grace into salvation, then it is not our native strengths, or the things that we are proudest of, that can accomplish for us what we really need. They are not the means of salvation. The things that we boast of; the things that make us feel that we are better than others; those things that puff us up: they are not enough. They cannot accomplish the salvation that is the deepest desire of our heart, the desire that is the root of all other desires. Nothing else but grace can satisfy that desire.

This is what Paul is saying to the interlopers in Corinth who were bragging about their religious experiences, and it is what he is saying to us, just as clearly. The people interfering in Corinth were proud of what belonged to them. They were proud that God had given them the gift of religious ecstasy, and they saw it as proof that they were special. They thought that they had everything they needed. They thought that those religious experiences were sufficient, but they are not. They thought this way about their religious experiences; and we think this way about our successes, our natural gifts, and our cosmopolitan sophistication.

This is the bad news: those things that we are so proud of *do not* get us what we think they do; they *do not* save us. But the good news is that God's grace is sufficient, and

it is a grace that is given to us in Jesus, who himself brings us directly into life with God.

So *he* is the thing we can be proudest of; *he* is what we can boast of: Christ alone, who can heal Paul's broken heart, and who can heal ours. God's grace, and only his grace, is sufficient.

Amen.