

A Sermon by Canon Maggie Guite

Fragile vessels Proper 4B 3/6/2018

2 Corinthians 4.5-12 Psalm 139.1-5, 12-17 Mark 2.23-3.6

I wonder if you've ever been irritated by some performer who seemed too intent on drawing attention to him- or herself, rather than doing justice to the playwright whose work they were acting, or the composer whose music they were performing? Or perhaps a speaker, who seemed less interested in giving a clear and coherent message than in showing off and making people laugh or sympathise with them, while having nothing really worthwhile to say. The 'triumph of style over substance', you might call it. I guess we've all had that experience sometime or other, and maybe we only realised afterwards how unsatisfying it was, and we've kicked ourselves for being 'taken for a ride' for a while.

Unfortunately, the religious world isn't immune to this kind of thing. As we know, it's very important for choirs to keep reminding themselves that their role is to lead worship of God, rather than to *perform* to an audience, and I know that that's what David and our choir do in their preparation for services. They remind themselves of what it's for. I think you might guess that clergy and preachers have constantly to remind themselves of that, too. We shouldn't measure a service's 'Success' by whether we've impressed people in some way... In fact, there is no real way we can measure success: only the work of the Holy Spirit silently in people's hearts can do the work that needs to be done, and only

God can judge it; all we have to do is to try to be faithful and prepare the best vehicle we can for the Spirit to work with.

But slickness and performance, even in religion, can go down very well with people who are interested in their own self-presentation and are anxious to make a mark, to be successful and be surrounded by other successful people. When Paul wrote his letters to the Christians in Corinth, he was writing to a church in a city which was still relatively new. The old Corinth of Classical Greece had fallen into ruins, and had been re-founded by Julius Caesar. It had developed into a young, thoroughly modern and impressive city, doing very good trade, and attracting people who wanted to make it big. It was '*a cosmopolitan boomtown, with shallow roots*' as one commentator says, comparing it with New York, Los Angeles and Las Vegas all rolled into one!

Many of those who'd settled there were freedmen –that is, ex-slaves, who might have bought their freedom, or been left it in their masters' wills –perhaps with a large amount of money to set them up in business. (Not all Roman masters were horrible!) These people would have been wanting to leave their slave status far behind, and the characters who most impressed them would have been self-made men who showed just what was possible. As the commentator I mentioned earlier says, '*The values of the Corinthians sound surprisingly contemporary. The freedmen competed with each other for market share and for attention in the pursuit of upward mobility. In the absence of nobility or aristocracy because of the city's youth, power and recognition did not come through inheritance but by self-assertion and by flaunting one's money.. Individualism and Image marked Corinthian society.*' And if you know about classical

architecture, it's all there in the design of 'Corinthian columns' – the showiest of them all.

Paul had visited Corinth, and stayed there for quite a long time: he'd founded a church, but we know from his subsequent letters to it that it remained very immature and had many problems which he had to address. And among these was there fascination with visiting Christian preachers who seemed much more slick than Paul, who boasted of their ecstatic visions and revelations, and the wonder-working signs they performed, and threw their weight around, distorting the Gospel as they did so. Think American tele-evangelist, in a sharp suit with a Rolex watch! (and of course I'm not talking about Billy Graham, who by all accounts was a man of great integrity).

It seems that at least some of the Corinthian Christians lapped all this up from the visiting preachers, and began to look down on Paul, who wasn't a brilliant orator, and didn't look like a very successful man at all... And that's where our first reading today came in, with Paul's ringing statement: *'We do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake'* (2 Cor 4.5). What a challenge to Corinthian values – a man who was prepared to describe himself as a slave (when in actual fact he was a Roman Citizen by birth – a status that many of the Corinthian population would have given their right hands for!! But, more than that: Paul was saying that his teaching and preaching weren't, as the slogan goes, 'all about me'. However powerful his personality, and however confident his preaching, he was trying to direct attention away from himself. - to Jesus.

You may think it was a funny way to go about it, giving a catalogue of all the things he suffered, and expected to go on suffering in body and mind, through persecution and assault; but the aim wasn't to big himself up as a hero, but rather to say, 'Look, I'm a vulnerable person: without Christ I would have gone under long ago.' But, because of who Christ is, the way of vulnerability is the way of success (if such a word is valid): our sufferings become identified with Jesus' suffering, and the result is that his power – his resurrection power – breaks through and does things we could never have imagined ourselves doing. This, I think is the meaning of verse 10: *always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies'*. It certainly isn't the way of celebrity speakers who make a slick and powerful impression. Or to use the striking image that Paul employed of himself and the people who worked with him and in the same spirit, *we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us'* (v.7). I like that image – clay jars, the most ordinary and expendable of household utensils in the ancient world. Next time you pick up a shard of pottery when you're gardening, think about it: Christ's servants are like clay jars or cracked flowerpots, but God has put into us a treasure far beyond anything found in gold-encrusted chests or fine Ming porcelain.

And I've used the word 'us', because although Paul was writing in the first place about himself and his fellow messengers, it's true of us, too. We contain a treasure, the treasure of the Gospel. If we know that God is love, if we believe that Jesus is Saviour, if we trust that the Holy Spirit has been given to us, what greater treasure could we contain? But this treasure is meant to be shared.

Leonard Cohen sang a song which I particularly like: it has the lines:

*Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack, a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in*

It speaks to me of the value of brokenness in human life, the kind of cracks you find in clay jars. It's where the light gets in.

But if it's through the cracks and broken bits of our lives that God is able to shine '*into our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ*' (v.6), it may well be that it's through those very same cracks that the light is able to get out to others, too. The very fact that we're not slick and perfect Christians with all the right patter may lend us much greater conviction if we take the risk of telling others what God means to us. Or even of taking the simple step that I've invited you to this week in a new Rector's letter, of inviting someone to come to church with you.. If you haven't read the Rector's Letter yet on email, please pick one up at the back – it's inspired by a national initiative to make the 15th – 17th June a 'Weekend of Invitation'. I suggest that we all follow this nudge, in the simplest of ways – and I include myself in that. I'll be praying for the right moment and the right person to issue an invitation to.

If you have read the letter, you'll have noticed it was written in haste, and not properly proof-read, so it's full of mistakes. I apologise for that. But let's not get too hung up

on perfection: We're imperfect people, and, despite all its great qualities, this isn't a perfect Church; but it's still worth inviting people to, with the hope and the prayer that Gods light may shine into their hearts, too, '*to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ*'.