

Trinity 5

5 July 2015

2 Corinthians 12.2-10; Mark 6.1-13

There are some leisure and activities that just do not appeal to me and that I have no intention of ever trying. Bungee jumping is one; morris dancing another; but there is a third that I only became aware was a thing when I learned through the miracle of facebook that the second Saturday in May is officially designated as World Naked Gardening Day. Now, I have nothing against gardening, nor really against nakedness in its proper place, but the two together? Count me out. There is just too much that can go wrong. There is a reason that the instruction manuals for power tools advise the user to wear appropriate protective clothing. And even if you are not wielding a hedge trimmer, in most gardens there are quite simply too many thorns. It's bad enough getting a thorn in the tougher, regularly exposed parts of your anatomy, without getting one impaled in a more tender region.

I suspect I am not alone in my wariness of naked gardening. Few of us would willingly make ourselves quite so vulnerable to such an injury. A thorn in the flesh is not something that we would choose. And nor was it for St Paul. Our New Testament reading tells of how the apostle, at a point in his life when he might have become too sure of himself, too confident in his abilities and gifts, was afflicted with "a thorn in the flesh". The precise nature of Paul's affliction is not clear; we assume that this was more serious than a gardening related mishap, naked or otherwise, and that the thorn is a metaphor for something else. Whatever it was, it was not pleasant; the thorn 'tormented' him, and it would have seemed at the time, held him back from engaging in the mission and ministry to which he had been called. He prays to be delivered from his thorn in the flesh, three times - but, each time, the answer is no. He must live with his affliction.

But the lesson that Paul shares from this experience lies in the words that he discerns God as having been speaking to him when leaving him with his condition: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness". The thorn in the flesh will not prevent him from serving God; rather, it will be in and through his very weakness and vulnerability that the power of God will be able to do its supreme work.

So Paul is able to speak of the thorn as having been 'given' to him. Here, we need to be careful, just as Paul himself is careful in his phrasing. He does not say that the thorn is given by God, or is a gift of the Spirit; indeed he describes it as "a messenger of Satan". There is a world of difference between saying that God can bring good out of our troubles and our suffering, and claiming that God makes us suffer in order to achieve good ends. God is not our tormentor. We live in a world in which sickness afflicts our bodies and minds; but it is healing and not illness that belongs to the loving purposes of God's kingdom.

But in being able to see his frailty and weakness as gift, Paul is touching on something that turns upside down our normal human ideas about power. "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness". That is not the way the world works. We are used to a society in which, if you are asked in a job interview "What is your greatest weakness?", you are expected to twist the question around to advertise your strengths. Admitting to genuine weakness goes against the grain.

But the way God works is not the same as the way the world works. The kingdom of God, the perfect world order, will not be established at the point of a sword and through the exercise of raw power, but through weakness, through frailty, through thorns.

In the Gospel reading, we hear how Jesus sends out the Twelve to be, with him, the agents of that kingdom in which the forces of darkness will be overthrown. And although they are empowered by Christ's authority, it does not seem that humanly speaking they are singularly ill-equipped for the task: "He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics". They go with minimal resources; and the point seems to be that their preaching is not to be from a position of wealth and strength, but from poverty and powerlessness.

The mission of the apostles will take them from village to village, vulnerable and dependent. What perhaps is hardest is that they are not just called to be dependent on God, to live by faith and trust in him - though that is tough enough - but they are called to be dependent on the very people to whom they have been sent. They go as beggars, relying on the generosity and protection of others, whom they do not know. It is a risky business. It leaves them exposed. But only in this way can the authentic good news of God's kingdom be proclaimed. The Gospel is spoken, not in human power but in God's power and human weakness. There may be some reassurance in that for the Church, in times when we are very conscious of our limited resources. Serving God faithfully and effectively does not depend on our wealth or our strength or our numbers; but on the grace of God that is alone sufficient.

Paul, the great apostle, is given a thorn in the flesh. Just one thorn; a small sharing in the crown of thorns with which our Lord was pierced by his tormentors. A reminder that this is the path that the followers of Jesus will always be called upon to take, a path that is the way of the cross. In the cross we have the upside down truth, so important to hold onto in the light of terrible happenings in Tunisia and elsewhere, that God's purposes will never be achieved through inflicting violence upon others, but only through the courage and grace found in accepting and embracing our weakness and vulnerability. It is not easy; but the truth that Paul discovered through that unwelcome gift of a thorn in the flesh was a truth that goes to the very heart of our Christian faith in Jesus, crucified and risen; that when I am weak, then I am strong, and God's grace is and always will be utterly sufficient. Thanks be to God.