

Text: 2 Corinthians 12: 2-10

“When I am weak, then I am strong”!

An interesting comment to make! And quite counter-cultural!

The general culture of the world seems to love power! For ever and a day nations have tried to gain power over other nations. In the last 60 odd years nations have tried to harness the power of the atom!

We have the Olympics, the Commonwealth Games, the various World Cups. Those with the power to win or set records become rich and famous – if they aren’t already!

Maybe what’s wanted by many closer to home is the money and power to build a dream home and own a car that has the technological power to go from 0-100 in 7 seconds yet get 700k’s on a tank - or is that just me? Power brings respect! Power is sexy!! Maybe that’s why Mad Max was back on at the movies recently! I actually thought it was pretty good!

But is the desire for power only found outside of the church?

Well it was pretty important in some parts of the church in the 1st century. And it’s still the case today. Many look to the name of Christ in order to “experience” and revel in the power of a miracle. Many see the name of Christ as the answer to financial wealth, as the way to find self-fulfilment and a life that’s completely free of problems.

While many in the church start out by trying to find out what their particular gift is so they can use it for the good of others, many unfortunately fall into the trap of lording their gift over others. One of those gifts might even be biblical knowledge!

Some would say pastors need to be careful with the power that they have the potential to abuse. Unfortunately even in the church there is the love of power – in various forms. It’s always been the case!!

Now if we had to pick just one character from the Bible who was endowed with spiritual greatness and power, many of us would probably choose St Paul.

Paul saw the risen Lord Jesus on the road to Damascus. He spoke in tongues more than anyone (1 Corinthians 4:18). In today's reading we hear how he was even taken up into heaven!

But was this his focus? Was this what he urged others to experience?

No! He was forced to mention these things to those who thought they were superior to him and were leaving the true faith. He made himself (in his words) a fool - by boasting about these things! He did so reluctantly because he understood something that the "enthusiasts" in Corinth who valued eloquence, wisdom and power didn't understand.

He understood the glory of weakness!!

Paul had more reason than any to be full of pride over his spiritual experiences. And the Corinthians would've been all in for that! But when he mentions the "Thorn", he bursts his own balloon.

To say that he had a constant weakness would have been like blotting his resume. But whether or not the Corinthians - or Christians today - think it's a good thing, it's the truth!! And it strikes at the heart of the gospel!

This thorn, this suffering and hardship is usually more central to a Christian's reality than the blessings of a wonderful spiritual experience. Maybe some of you have experienced great and miraculous gifts and visions like Paul, and like some of the Corinthian Christians who were puffed up by them. But you would have likely experienced a "Thorn" that gives you some kind of grief and makes you feel weak.

Weakness isn't what our society prizes as a virtue. And let's face it - we don't naturally see it as good thing! But it's celebrated by Paul even if it's celebrated by very few others!

I think that one of the reasons we fight against weakness is that most human ideas of what a good victorious Christian life should look and feel like are different to God's ideas. Just as most human ideas of how a supremely powerful God should work are different to God's ideas.

Even God's idea of how we would be saved involved weakness!

When Christ was displaying His true power and glory and saving the world from sin, He was the epitome of weakness. As St Paul says in chapter 13 of 2nd Corinthians: "to be sure, he was crucified in weakness" Maybe that's because God came to save the weak, the sick, the poor...us sinners.

Weakness is a blessing because it keeps us from pride. It leads us to the Saviour who tells us: "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance." (Luke 5:31-32)

Living the Christian life is not about our personal power - it's about God's power in the midst of our personal weakness. Christianity is not about spiritual highs!! It's not about the power that can be seen in amazing gifts, in material wealth, in a problem-free life.

Christianity is about the powerful grace and love of God Who became weak! Who is with us in our weakness, who will ensure that our bodies are laid to rest, "sown in weakness... but raised in power" for eternity!! (1 Cor. 15:43)

As Christians we're set free to accept our human nature – it's the nature that God loves so much that He took it on Himself and was tested in it, wept in it and suffered and died in it. Now, as is written in Hebrews - we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been put to the test in every way, just as we are" (Hebrews 4:15)

We can accept who we are and we can rely on the sympathy and compassion of God! When we see a frog, we can be reminded to **Fully Rely On God** – but also **Fully Rely On Grace**! You're saved by grace and you keep living under grace!!! Grace that keeps you united to Jesus - ensuring you can be secure in your identity, and sure of your infinite worth - even as you experience weakness and struggles like He did.

Because God's grace and power is only perfected in weakness, we can accept our vulnerability and be free from trying to pretend to ourselves, or others, about our personal power and worth.

So what's your thorn? What's that problem or issue - maybe physical, or emotional - that you just want to be rid of?

Well whatever it is God might be thinking differently about it!!

You see He knows about it. He could take it away – and maybe He will in His own time. But there will always be a trial or temptation so long as we live on this earth. To ensure that we're brought to fully rely on God's all-sufficient grace! As a church and as individual Christians; the experience of weakness is to be expected!! Jesus even tells us "in this world you will have trouble" (John 16:33).

But we don't need to be afraid or ashamed of what looks like weakness in worldly terms! We have the promise "that in all things God works for the good of those who love him" (Romans 8). God is on our side! Through struggle and weakness God works to draw us closer to Himself. He grows us to rely more fully on His grace, His powerful love that can only be perfected in weakness. He kills pride and makes room in us to grow faithfulness, trust, patience and humility.

Whatever the thorns are that we experience as a church or as a dearly loved child of God - keep praising our God who works in mysterious ways!

His love is unfailing. He's the master craftsman - making masterpieces! And through us God can channel His love and acceptance to others struggling with their own thorns. So they too can know Christ and say with St Paul and with us "when I am weak, then I am strong." Amen!