

## Chapel of St Peter and St Paul, ORNC

11.00am Choral Eucharist

Sixth Sunday after Trinity [7 July 2024]

readings: Ezekiel 2. 1-5; 2 Corinthians 12. 2-10; Mark 6. 1-13

The Bible is full of excuses. Or to be more precise, the Bible is full of people who make excuses. Excuses for why they can't do or be whatever it is they know that God wants them to do or to be. And some of the biggest excuses come from exactly those people who will go on to become some of the most important figures in all of scripture. To start with, we can immediately turn to the greatest prophet of them all – that is, Moses – who despite God's assurance that he will possess divine power when leading his people out of slavery from Egypt, repeatedly begs to be let off the hook. And when all else fails, Moses points out to God just what a terrible public speaker he is: 'Oh, my Lord, I am not eloquent,' he protests, 'either before or since thou hast spoken to thy servant; but I am slow of speech and of tongue' (Ex 4.10). Consider also Jeremiah, who, when called by God to prophesy, excuses himself on the basis of his own immaturity: 'Ah, Lord GOD,' cries Jeremiah. 'Behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth' (Jer 1.6). Or then of course there's Ezekiel, who may not object so directly to his calling, but who nonetheless manages to drag his feet in various ways just to make clear his lack of enthusiasm for what God is asking him to do. So, in this morning's reading we find God – not for the first time, it has to be said – pushing Ezekiel along, ordering him to get off backside and become the person whom God has ordained him to be. Whether or not the people of Israel actually pay attention to what Ezekiel has to say is not finally the point, for as God tells him: either way, 'they will know that there has been a prophet among them' (2.5). As with all those in the Bible who have received some special calling or mission, there is no guaranteed outcome here, save that God promises to remain faithful in whatever process God has seen fit to initiate. And so it is, precisely out of this uncertainty, this vulnerability, indeed this weakness, that these figures discover what it means to act in and through the power of God.

Like the Hebrew prophets before him, St Paul also knew something about being called to fulfil God's purpose amidst his own limitations. Scholars have spilled a lot of ink speculating about the precise nature of Paul's affliction – what in our reading today he calls his 'thorn in the flesh'. Is it a physical illness or condition that Paul suffers from, an emotional wound, or some kind of spiritual torment perhaps? No one really knows. But clearly for Paul himself, this 'thorn in the flesh' serves as a constant reminder that whatever he may do or whatever he may be, it's a result not of his own ability or willpower but rather a confirmation of his dependence upon God. When he asks God to relieve him of this burden, the answer he receives is not sudden healing but instead a message: 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness' (2 Cor 12. 8-9). My power is made perfect in weakness: this has got to be one of the most important but also one of the most difficult messages in all of Christian teaching. Because from almost the very beginning of our lives, the world in which we live encourages us – indeed, coerces us – to think the opposite. Be strong, be tough, be smart, stand on your own two feet, don't let people take advantage of you, make sure you get your piece of the pie. Yet everything about the life and death of Jesus himself reminds us that if we are always focused upon our own sense of power, then we cannot possibly hope to grasp the infinitely greater power of God working within us. It is only by embracing this essential truth that Paul will be able, in his words, 'all the more gladly [to] boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me...[F]or when I am weak, then I am strong.

It's surely about helping them to discover God's power in their weakness that in today's Gospel we see Jesus sending forth his disciples to preach and heal with so little preparation. He orders them to take nothing for their journey that will shield them from their own vulnerability: 'no bread, no bag, no money in their belts' (Mk 6. 8). All they have is the Gospel itself. Yet by doing this, he's showing them the kind of power they've already been given, if only they can see it for what it really is. At the same time, he's also reminding them that when we seek out power in

and through our weakness, it has a way of leading us that much closer to other people. So it was that back in the 1960s, there was an experimental training programme for American clergy that designed to teach them about the realities of urban life. And the first thing that happened each time a new group arrived for their training was that they spent a week on the streets of Chicago fending for themselves, with no bread, no bag, and no money in their belts. The purpose of this experience was to impress upon the ministers first-hand what it's like for so many people in our society, who have nothing to protect them save the grace of God made tangible in the mercy and compassion of other human beings. It showed them just how quickly their own sense of respectability and competence and control could evaporate when they had no choice but to accept whatever might be offered to them. In this they followed in the footsteps of the disciples, who are instructed by Jesus that 'where you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place' (v. 10). Only when the vestiges of our own power are stripped away from us can we truly experience the power of God. And whether it be by choice or by chance, it's only when we face this weakness in ourselves that we can become more open and more accepting of the people around us.

There are of course plenty of people in the world who already know too well what it feels like to be weak, to be disempowered, to be marginalized. So it's really important that we not make the mistake of assuming that to be a Christian simply means rolling over and becoming a doormat. There are lots of people around for whom this would be the worst possible advice. On the other hand, there are plenty of others for whom experiencing a bit of weakness, a bit of vulnerability in this life, might just save their souls. But whoever we are or whatever our condition may be in the eyes of the wider world, we remain bound to God in a relationship of radical dependence. And really to know God requires that we be ready to acknowledge our most profound weakness: those places in ourselves that hurt the most; of which we're most deeply ashamed; and which we're most desperate to conceal from the gaze of other people. For as agonising a prospect as it may seem, those are the places precisely where God is waiting for us. Those are the places where we still have something to learn, where there's still room for growth, where being a follower of Jesus remains a matter of life and death. So contrary to all common sense and conventional wisdom, each of us is called, as a Christian, not just to know but to embrace our weakness, for it's most certainly here that God will be working out his purpose for our lives. In this weakness is in fact God's power; in the wounds of Christ – again and again and again – we find the source of all our healing.