

If you were here a couple of weeks ago, you might remember that we began a little sermon series on the book of 2 Corinthians, Paul's second letter to the church in Corinth. The lectionary re-invites to go look at that letter in some detail over the course of the next few weeks. So in our sermons, we'll be following those readings, and I must say I'm very pleased about that because Paul's second letter to the Corinthians is one of my favorite books of The Bible. It's a very rich book where Paul seems to distill much of his thinking in to a number of very vivid and pithy images and metaphors.

You might remember last time I was talking on the subject, I was talking about one such metaphor which I found very helpful, where Paul talks of himself as a clay jar with treasure within. I think we can all find that helpful, to think of ourselves as St. Paul did, as a clay jar with treasure within. So I'm going to be picking up on some of those things in today's sermon.

But first, let me give a bit of context for those who didn't hear it last time, because it's important when reading this letter to know something of the background. So Paul's founded this church in Corinth. Then he's gone off on his ... His missionary journeys have taken him elsewhere. Some other people have come into the church in Corinth.

I don't know whether they called themselves "super-apostles", or whether Paul did, but anyway they're known as the "super-apostles" who came into the church to try and lead it. They bad-mouthed Paul and said, "He might have got us off to a good start, but he's out of the picture now, and he's actually not worth listening to. Listen to us. We know how this church should go forward."

We don't know exactly what they said about St. Paul, what their criticisms were, but we get something of an idea reading between the lines. We could even see in this passage that we had read to us today that Paul talks about them as those who boast in outward appearances. So we know that that was important to the "super-apostles", what things looked like on the outside.

In Chapter 10, Paul actually puts something in quotation marks that they were saying. He says this quoting a specific allegation. Paul writes, "They say his letters are waiting in strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible." So St. Paul is clearly not an

imposing physical specimen. If he was alive today, he wouldn't be a televangelist. He was very aware of his own weaknesses. He compared himself to a fragile, ordinary clay pot.

His detractors got him on the back foot, which is why so much of this letter sounds defensive, because Paul is being defensive. He's having to rebut what's being said about him. So he'll say in chapter 11, "I think that I'm not in the least inferior to these 'super-apostles'." Well, he's saying that because they were clearly saying that he was inferior. So he's fighting back.

These "super-apostles" were concentrating on outward appearances. A human trait that's as evident in first century Corinth as in 21st century La Jolla. That's still around. But Paul says, "There's another way. I walk by faith, not by sight." He says, "I don't boast about outward appearance. I focus on the heart." Paul's interested not in what is seen, but what is unseen.

To get back to the central image I was talking about last time, Paul doesn't focus on the clay jar. He focuses instead on what's inside, on the treasure within the jar. I think we could read today's passage as St. Paul spelling out three things. Three bits of treasure that he finds within the clay jar. Three treasures we find in Paul's heart.

Firstly, confidence. See how the passage begins. "We are always confident." I think we can assume he's using the royal "we" there. "I'm always confident," Paul says there and actually elsewhere throughout his writings. The "super-apostles" were saying, "Well, what's Paul got to be confident about? He's not got much going for him. He doesn't preach well, he's weak, he's not much to look at, he's always suffering, he's always getting into scrapes." But they missed the rock on which Paul's confidence was built.

He actually addresses this subject in another letter to the church in Philippians. Paul writes this, and he starts off by listing all the things he could be confident about. He says, "If anyone has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more. Circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews as to the law a Pharisee, as to zeal a persecutor of the Church, as to righteousness under the Law, blameless. Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ.

More than that, I regard everything as loss, because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord."

That's the rock on which Paul built his life. That's where his confidence came from, knowing Jesus Christ, knowing Him as Lord. It was that key relationship on which his life was built. That's where his confidence rested. Everything flowed from that, his sense of self, his understanding of the world, all based on knowing God made known in Jesus Christ, and knowing Him as Lord.

What about us? Where's our confidence placed? It could be misplaced. There's a story of a county fair where there were lots of boys playing. One of them fell out of a tree and actually did quite a nasty injury to his head. But fortunately, there was a neurosurgeon nearby who was tending to him. The crowd gathered round as the surgeon did an initial take on the situation. Then a young voice was heard. It was a 12 year old boy saying, "Okay, people. Time to move on. I'm a Boy Scout, and I have my first aid badge." That's misplaced confidence. It wasn't enough. It didn't provide a satisfactory foundation on which to build one's self-confidence.

Paul would say those whose confidence is in outward appearances are making the same mistake, choosing the wrong things to have confidence in. We need to find a secure place to anchor our soul. Knowing Jesus, developing a relationship with Him, that's the only secure foundation on which we have to build.

Purpose. Paul had confidence. The second treasure is purpose.

He spells his purpose out in this passage. He says, "Knowing the fear, or rather the awesomeness of the Lord, we try to persuade others." He goes on to count himself as one of those who live no longer for themselves, but rather for Him who died and was raised. Paul was utterly convinced that everyone he met needed to hear the good news that Jesus died for all. He says, "One has died for all, and therefore all have died." Paul spells out what he means by this more fully in the fifth chapter of the book of Romans, where he goes into the theology behind it in more detail.

What he does in that chapter is compare Jesus to Adam. He calls Jesus the second Adam. He says in the same way that we're all linked to Adam, in the sense that we're tainted by the sin which has come into the world,

so too we can be linked through the death and resurrection of Jesus to He who was the second Adam, the second one to whom we can all be linked. Therefore, His victory over sin and death can be our victory, too.

Just to give you a bit of flavor for what he says in Romans, he says this, "Therefore, just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. For justice by the one man's disobedience, the many were made sinners. So by one Man's obedience, the many will be made righteous."

God offers in Jesus Christ the free gifts of life, grace, righteousness, forgiveness, through what Jesus has done for us on the cross. Through Him, we can be put right with God. We can share in that relationship with God that was Paul's anchor. Paul was so gripped by this message, so convinced that everyone should hear it, that he spent his life traveling around the Mediterranean preaching, persuading others.

I came across a quote this week from the historian Barbara Tuchman. She was writing about the nation of Israel. She says this, "With all its problems, Israel has one commanding advantage, a sense of purpose. Israelis may not have affluence or the quiet life, but they have what affluence tends to smother, a motive." What's true of a nation is true of us as individuals. We all need a purpose. We all need a motive.

Thirdly, love. I want to say something about the source of St. Paul's motivation. It was love. See what he says, "For the love of Christ urges us on", he says. I've heard it said that there are only two great motivating forces, that at the end of the day, we're all motivated either by fear or love. Paul was motivated by love. He knew all about love. He wrote that beautiful hymn of love that we so often read at wedding services in his first letter to the church in Corinth.

He wrote two of these magnificent words, also in the book of Romans. These are words coming deep from Paul's heart. In all these things, he writes, "We are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor heights, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Right at the core of his inner being, St. Paul knew that he was loved by God. Everything he did flowed from that knowledge. It drove him forward, he says, that Christ's love urges him on. The word "urges" mean compressed, to hem in. You might think of a river. You know, you can very broad rivers which are very shallow and gentle. You just kind of drift gently down the river. But if you get to a gorge, where the river's hemmed in, and it gets narrow and deeper, it's gets more turbulent. It rushes on as it ... If you were in the boat, you who've been floating along gently suddenly have to hold to the sides, because you're rushed on. There's a surge in the water.

That's what St. Paul says, Christ's love does for him. It urges him on. It propels him forward. My prayer for St. James is that we as a church community feel that urge. It's when you get that urge that you're driven forward, that you live the Christian life not drifting, but with vigor, being pushed forward, living a life of service, seeing the need to tell others of the good news that we find in Christ Jesus.

May we as one, be urged on. In this communion service, it's a service where we remember and celebrate and partake in the death and resurrection of Jesus. That's at the heart of it. Perhaps as we come forward to receive the bread and the wine today, make a point of remembering that you are the one for whom Christ died. Christ died for all. He died for each one of us. We too, as we share in that meal, can know that redeeming powerful surging love that urged St. Paul forward. May that be the sense in which we experience Christ's great love for each one of us.

Confidence, purpose, love. These sum up much of what Paul would see and identify as the treasure within his soul. That's what was in the clay pot that made it so special. He knows that he's been made new in Christ, he's a new creation. Everything has been made new. He's a clay jar from the outside. From the outside he looks like any other weak, fragile clay jar. But what treasure lies within! For what St. Paul knew of himself, may that be true of us, too.

We're clay jars with treasure within.

Amen.