

May I speak in the name of God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit? Amen.

Well we come to the end today of a brief sermon series we've had on 2 Corinthians, Paul's second letter to the church in Corinth. We've followed through this letter for about the last five weeks, and if you've been here on any of those weeks, you'll know that we're finishing more or less just as we started, with Paul on the defensive, rejecting some of the lies, the fake news that has been said about him.

It must be said, St. Paul, like everyone else, doesn't sound at their best when they're justifying themselves. The accusations that Paul is rejecting here in this passage is made clear in verse 16. "You say since I was crafty, I took you in by deceit." That's what they were saying about him. As I've said in previous weeks, Paul founded this church in Corinth, was there some time and then went away, and founded other churches, but he kept in touch with the church in Corinth.

He obviously was in touch by letter. We don't have any of the letters that they sent to him, and we don't have all the ones that he sent them. But we've got a few, which are collected in the New Testament. But after Paul has moved on, some teachers have come in, who St. Paul mockingly refers to in this passage as super-Apostles. They were the ones who badmouthed Paul and sought to undermine him, and his ministry.

It looks here like they were saying that Paul had tricked the Corinthians by not letting them pay him, because Paul didn't want to be a burden. We know from elsewhere that he was a tentmaker by trade. That's how when he was founding these churches, he carried on making tents. He didn't want to take money from the churches, but somehow, in his absence, that's been twisted. What's being said, is that Paul had this ulterior motive for not taking money from them, that he's tricked them.

In these verses, Paul fights back and seeks to put the record straight. He chooses an interesting line of self-defense, by claiming, and I quote, "I am not at all inferior to these super-Apostles, even though I am nothing." I wonder what his readers would have made of that, but it's typical Paul. Paul's very comfortable speaking about his weaknesses. He has this strong sense of self-confidence, of his own identity, but it's not a confidence based on his talents and abilities.

We read this. This is the first two verses before where our reading starts. Paul writes this, "So I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecution and calamities, for the sake of Christ. For whenever I am weak, then I am strong."

Paul's opponents, the super-Apostles, were super self-confident. We know Paul was weak. He often was ill. He didn't speak well. He wasn't physically imposing, whereas his opponents, the super-Apostles, were no doubt slick, powerful speakers. They probably had perfect teeth. If they were alive today, they'd have their own TV channel, but Paul was confident in his weakness. He knew that God's power was made perfect in his weakness.

Do you remember the image he used to sum up this line of thinking? It's come up several times in our sermons on 2 Corinthians. Paul described himself, the central image of the gospel. He was a clay pot with treasure within. He was an ordinary, fragile pot, but he knew that the treasure of God's spirit dwelt within him. So he didn't rely on his own talents, but on the power of God's indwelling Spirit, so that he knew that when he was weak, the Spirit within him was strong.

That's how Paul can say these super-Apostles are no better than me. Even though I am nothing, I'm a clay pot, but with treasure within. I was thinking of this image as I was preparing this sermon. We've had some rather odd readings in previous weeks, from this letter of 2 Corinthians. Today's is a bit odd. We've heard in previous weeks, Paul talk about his travel plans. Then another reading was about him making a collection, taking up a collection for the church in Macedonia.

All the way through, there's been a sort of unfortunate line of self-justification. We've heard one side of Paul is caught up in this petty dispute with the church. Why you might ask, are these peculiar and very particular readings included in our scriptures? Can't we find something a bit more poetic, something a bit more polished? I mean they're very old. Has nobody come up with anything better recently to supplant these writings of St. Paul?

These are very valid questions. I'd answer them by drawing again on Paul's image. We best understand scripture I think as a clay pot with treasure within. The

power and the authority of scripture lie in the fact that it's through these texts, these sometimes rather unpromising texts, it's these texts through which God, by his Spirit has chosen to speak to his people. That's what makes them unique. That's what sets them apart. That's why each week, each day, we're called to wrestle with these scriptures, because these are the texts through which the church has found over the centuries, that God speaks to his people. There may well be other books which look more promising, but they don't have that treasure within.

Moving on, it's clear that St. Paul was planning to visit the church in Corinth, we think for the third time. He shares his fears of what he might find when he visits them. Verse 20, "For I fear that when I come, I might find you, not as I wish, and that you may find me not as you wish. I fear that there may be perhaps quarreling, jealousy, anger, selfishness, slander, gossip, conceit and disorder."

It's clear from this list that the church never had a golden age. This is the church in Corinth, founded by St. Paul within 25, 35 years of Jesus dying. Look how Paul talks about them. I sometimes meet people, in fact I quite regularly meet people who say, "Well I'm not Episcopalian. I like to go to a church that follows more closely the model of the early church," which makes me think, what? You want to go to a church that's full of quarreling, slander, deceit, dishonesty and licentiousness? If that's what you offer, you might as well have stayed with the Episcopalians.

Maybe even the church could be understood as a clay jar with treasure within. I read two sets of statistics recently. The first was about the future of the church, more particularly I think in England. It predicted the virtual extinction of the church in the coming century. It said that if trends carried on as they are, by 2040, under 2% of the population would be going to church, and the average age of that 2% would be 69.

The other survey I read was American. It was about Elvis impersonators. When Elvis died in 1977, there were 1800 Elvis impersonators. Now there are 85,000, which means that if this trend carries on, by the year 2038, one-third of Americans will be impersonating Elvis. What a truly terrifying thought that is. Statistics can say anything.

The rumor of the church's imminent demise has been exaggerated because what they failed to realize is that yes, we're frail, clay pots, but there's treasure within, God's treasure. We are not some human institution that's condemned to run out of steam. Of course, we can't be complacent. Of course, we need to do what we can, but it's God's church, God's treasure within.

Let me finish by posing a question. St. Paul was fearful of what he might find when he visited the church in Corinth. So my question is this. What might St. Paul find if he paid a visit to us? What would we want him to find if he made a pastoral call? I'm pleased to say that I don't think he would encounter the quarreling, deceit and anger that he was expecting in Corinth.

We've started to set out in recent months the positive qualities that we hope someone like St. Paul would find. We had a congregational meeting a couple of weeks ago, which we shared what the vestry's been thinking of over these last few months about planning the future, the kind of church we want to be. That makes it clear that we want to focus our energy and resources on serving others, to have an outward focus, to care for those who might otherwise be left behind.

We're keen too, to treasure the treasure within, and to share the good news that we find in Jesus outside of our community, with those who don't know the God who made us, who's made known in Jesus and who dwells within us by his Spirit. We all know there are plenty of clay pots around, with no treasure within. St. Paul says here, everything we do is for the sake of building you up.

Join me in praying that God will build us at St. James up. St. James is not just another social club. We don't come together for our own mutual enjoyment and benefit, to maintain a status quo. We're a group with treasure within. A group of people bound together in our worship of the one true, holy God. We're a people with treasure within. We're a people on the move. May God build us up, so that we can be the church that God would have us be.

Amen.