

I want to begin by just offering a couple of words of introduction. The first is that I want to speak this morning from that wonderful passage from the book of 2 Corinthians that was read to us earlier, and our lectionary over the course of the next five or six weeks, includes, each week, a reading from 2 Corinthians. So I'm taking up that invitation and we'll be looking through the book of 2 Corinthians and some magnificent passages there and some extremely helpful images. It's one of my favorite books.

Second thing I'd like to say by way of introduction is that they say that everybody has a book in them, and in them is where it should stay. The book that's inside me is about identity. I'd love to address the question of how we understand ourselves, our sense of worth and our self-image. And I'm interested in today's passage from 2 Corinthians because it speaks exactly to that theme and there's an image I want to unpack that I think is very helpful in helping us to form a healthy self-image.

But before I say more about that, let me say a few words about the context for this letter of 2 Corinthians. Am I saying that right? I know how you say 1 or 2 Corinthians is a bit of a live issue over ... yes, second. Well, in England we say 2 Corinthians, so forgive me if I keep lapsing into that. But I'm referring to the same book, which over here, you call second Corinthians. And so Paul wrote this book of Second Corinthians when he was facing a certain amount of hostility. He'd founded this church in Corinth and then he'd gone away for a time, and the church had grown and while he'd been away, certain factions emerged in the church, some of whom were quite opposed to St. Paul.

And they were saying, "Don't listen to Paul. He's so uninspiring. He doesn't even look the part! He's not worthy to be an apostle. He's always sick and he's always ill and suffering," and we know this is what they were saying because these were the questions that Paul responds to in the epistle, which is sometimes why on first reading, it can sound a bit defensive, because Paul is being defensive. He's answering his critics in Corinth. And Paul attempts to construct a case for why he should be taken seriously. And he spells out the source of his authority and the basis for his confidence in doing what he does and saying what he does. And the key image that he uses to develop this argument is found in the passage that we heard read.

Paul describes himself as a jar of clay with treasure within. And this is the image I want to explore, because this, I think, is a very helpful way for us to understand ourselves in our time and context. We like St. Paul are jars of clay with treasure within.

Our situation is very different to the one in which St. Paul found himself. But we deal with similar questions. There's a well-known professor, or at least he's well-known in England, called Frank Faraday. He gave a lecture at the Royal College of Arts some time ago, which attracted a lot of attention in the media. It was about similar questions to the ones that Paul was tackling, namely, where do we turn for authority, or who do we turn to for authority? And where do we derive our self-confidence?

And what Professor Faraday has noticed that is as a society, and it's true, just as true in England as it is over here, that we've lost confidence. Whereas it used to be just church figures who pronounced on things and made authoritative statements, now everybody's at it. We have people to turn to, to tell us what to wear, what not to wear, what to eat, what property to buy, how to bring up our children, how to stay looking young, how to lose weight. The list goes on.

And the thing is that we lap it up. We look to Martha Stewart, Dear Abby, Dr. Ruth, or any number of bloggers because we've lost confidence in ourselves. We need direction from an expert to find our way. I quote Faraday: "There's nothing we can trust ourselves with, not even the most fundamental and primitive things, such as eating, having sex or raising a child." I think Professor's right.

He's right to say that the collapse in traditional authority figures has not resulted in a less-deferential and more questioning society. But rather a society more enslaved to therapists and hustlers. He concludes, "We're entirely subservient to unacknowledged forms of authority." Where, he asks, did we lose our self-confidence?

St. Paul never lost his self-confidence. But it's clear when we read Second Corinthians that he had an unusual form of self-confidence. It's based on this image he had of himself as a clay jar with treasure within. And the clay jars he's referring to were a common sight all over the Middle East; we've all seen them, in various museums. Every archeological dig

there's ever been has dug up an earthenware jar. They were used for storing and carrying everything; water, oil, grain, olives. And they were common. But fragile. They were only used for a few years, that's why they were discarded and are still being dug up today.

So by comparing himself to a clay jar, Paul's regarding himself on one level as quite ordinary. Transitory. Fragile. He's a clay jar. Not a Ming vase. But! He's a clay jar with treasure within. And Paul knows what that treasure is. He says, it's the light of the knowledge of God in the face of Jesus Christ. Paul had this deep sense of knowing God, the light of which he spoke was the light of the knowledge of God.

Paul is speaking about the joy of knowing God, of being in relationship with Him, about knowing that the spirit of Jesus was in-dwelling him. And he uses the word treasure because he can't think of anything more valuable than the joy of knowing God in Christ Jesus. Something to be prized above all things.

And what lies at the heart of Paul's image is a balance between the ordinariness of the clay and the value of the treasure within. And this allows Paul to maintain the balance between the humility of knowing that he's a mere pot to knowing too that he can have the confidence of having an amazing treasure within.

St. Paul is comfortable saying to the Corinthians that he has the authority to teach them and to chide them and to build them up, whilst at the same time, being ready to admit to his fallibility and weakness. It's a great balance, the treasure and the clay jar. The humility and the pride, as it were. And my experience is that most people we meet and I include myself either are very aware of their very precious nature or they think of themselves as an empty clay pot.

We know people who are at one extreme or the other. But what St. Paul is encouraging us to do is to hold those two things in tension. We're not to think so highly of ourselves that we're just some great national treasure, but neither on the other hand are we to have such a low opinion of ourselves that we're worth nothing.

Paul holds them together. We're clay jars with treasure within. Paul's confidence is not in himself and in his own abilities, but in the God who dwells within him. He says, the power is from God and not from us. But Paul knew

himself to be powerful. Paul's enemies in Corinth made the mistake of seeing only the clay jar. They missed the treasure within.

There was a British ambassador to the States after the war called Sir Oliver Franks, and you can imagine, after the war, it was a very busy time in Anglo-American relations, lots of messages going backwards and forwards. And often, they went in diplomatic bags, as they still do today. But Sir Oliver said that if he had something really important, really confidential to say to the American government, he didn't use a diplomatic bag, he just stuck a letter in the post on the grounds that nobody would look there for anything important or confidential. He knew that people would make the mistake of looking past the ordinariness of the container, and they would miss what was within.

And the image that Paul is using, clay jars with treasure within, one reason it's very helpful to us is it helps us to understand our flaws and our imperfections, because it doesn't demand perfection, which is inachievable anyway, but so often, we waste so much time striving for it rather than finding a self-image that helps us to embrace our flaws.

I've a story to illustrate this point. I'll tell you, it's not a true story. My wife always tells me that I should differentiate between things I've made up and things that are true. This isn't true. But it does involve talking pots, so you might have worked that out for yourself anyway, but it's a story about a water bearer in India who had two pots, two large pots hung on each end of a pole that he carried across his neck.

One of the pots had a crack in it, while the other pot was perfect and it always delivered a full portion of water at the end of a long walk from the stream to the master's house. Whereas the cracked pot only arrived half-full.

So for two years, this went on daily with the bearer delivering one and a half pots of water to the master's house. And of course, the townspeople laughed when they saw the man spilling 25% of his water on every trip. The perfect pot was proud of its accomplishments, perfect to the end for which it was made. But the poor, cracked pot was ashamed of its own imperfections, miserable that it was only able to accomplish half of what it had been made to do.

He felt even worse that the water-bearer was mocked due to his inadequacy. And so after two years of what it perceived to be a bit of failure, the pot spoke to the water-bearer one day by the stream. "I'm ashamed of myself and I want to apologize." "Why" asked the bearer. "What are you ashamed of?"

"Well, I've been able for these past two years to deliver only half my load because this crack in my side causes water to leak out, all the way back to the master's house. Because of my flaws, you've had to do all this work and you suffer mockery from the others," the pot said.

The water-bearer felt sorry for the old, cracked pot and in his compassion he said, "As we return to the master's house, I want you to notice the beautiful flowers along the path." And indeed, as they went up the hill, the old, cracked pot took notice of the sun warming the beautiful wildflowers on his side of the path. But at the end of the trail, the pot still felt bad because it had leaked out half its load, and so again, it apologized to the bearer for its failure.

The bearer said to the pot: "I hear the laughter of the others, but I want you to notice something. Did you notice that there were flowers only on your side of the path, but not on the other pot's side? That's because I've always known about your flaw and I took advantage of it. I planted flower seeds on your side of the path and every day, while we walked back from the stream, you've watered them. For two years, I've been able to pick these beautiful flowers to decorate my master's table. Without you being just the way you are, he would not have had this beauty to grace his house."

Our wonder, our uniqueness. Our God-given beauty involves our flaws. We're not to seek perfection in ourselves or others.

So I've said something about how clay jar image says to us in the here and now and before I close, I want to say something briefly about how this passage helps us to locate ourselves in time.

As this passage develops, Paul introduces the perspective of eternity, which enables him to draw some significant contrasts between outer failings and inner renewals, present troubles and future glory, what is seen and what's not seen. The jar has a limited life-span. But the treasure is forever. The knowledge of God

of which Paul was so confident is an enduring knowledge. It's a relationship that will last, that treasure will continue beyond death. And this knowledge made Paul a "but-not" Christian.

We are hard-pressed, but not crushed. Perplexed, but not in despair. Persecuted but not abandoned, struck down but not destroyed. St. Paul may often have been at his wits' end, but he never got to his hope's end. And St. Paul would say that's largely because or entirely because he never forgot the value of the treasure within. And so, he encourages us, don't get caught up with the outside, the surface of life. We're a clay jar. The treasure is within. Treasure the treasure within. Put your confidence and hope in the God who is made known in Jesus Christ and by whose spirit dwells within us.

You're a clay jar with treasure within.

Amen.