

I want this morning to pick up on a theme that Paul introduced last week. We saw it in the epistle that we had from Paul's second letter to the church in Corinth. It's reiterated in today's reading. You might remember that last week I was talking about Paul's statement that we look not at what can be seen, but at what cannot be seen. And Paul is contrasting himself here with the opponents who have taken up residence in the church that he founded in Corinth. And he was writing to them because in his absence, this group was trying to undermine Paul and was generally causing mischief.

In chapter 10, Paul repeats their charge against him. They were saying his letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak. Paul was clearly not a physically imposing figure. We might surmise that if he was alive today, he wouldn't be a tele-evangelist. His opponents were saying, "How can we take this guy seriously? He's so frail, so weak, so prone to sickness. If God was really blessing him, surely he'd look much more impressive."

Paul writes to his readers to encourage them to look beyond outward appearances and focus on what he calls the inner nature. Remember this from last week, "So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day." Paul is more interested in the inner nature. His opponents are focused instead on the outer nature. He's writing, he says in these verses to answer those who boast in outward appearances, not in the heart.

Let's follow Paul's lead to see what might be the characteristics of his inner nature. Let's look into his heart, and what do we find there? Firstly, confidence. See how this passage begins. "We are always confident," he writes. And I think we can presume there he's using the royal we, and this theme of confidence is actually prevalent throughout Paul's writings.

Paul's opponents were saying that he didn't have much going for him. He's weak. He doesn't preach well. He looks frail. He's not much to look at. He's always suffering. They miss the rock on which Paul's confidence was built. He might have lacked those things, but yet his confidence was rock solid.

He writes about it in the Book of Philippians. He says, "If anyone else 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 lore 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 a loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord."

Paul's confidence was built not on outward things, but on the fact that he knew Jesus as Lord. That was at the center of his life, his relationship with a God made known in Jesus. Everything else flows from that, his sense of self, his identity of the world, how he relates to people. It was all based on his knowledge of God has revealed in Christ Jesus.

What about us? On what do we base our confidence? Sometimes it can be misplaced. There's a story of a county fair where a young man sadly fell out of a tree and hurt his head quite badly. But thankfully, there was a neurosurgeon close by who was able to tend to him. And then a little shrill voice could be heard amongst the crowd saying, "Move aside, move aside. Don't worry. I'm here. Move aside. I'm a scout and I've got a first aid badge. Don't worry."

In that context, the first aid badge was no sure grounds for hope. It didn't provide a satisfactory foundation on which to build any confidence. Paul would say that those whose confidence is in outward appearance, in material things, are making a similar mistake. That's not a secure place to anchor your soul. Knowing Jesus, developing a relationship with Him, that's the only secure foundation on which we can build a sense of self.

The second thing we see in Paul's inner nature, his purpose. He had confidence and he had a purpose. He spells this out. "Knowing the fear or rather awesomeness of the Lord, we try to persuade others," he says, and he goes on to count himself as one who lives no longer for themselves, but rather as one who lives for Him who died and was raised.

Paul was utterly convinced that everyone needed to hear the good news that Jesus Christ had died for all. He says, "One died for all. Therefore, all have died." And Paul spells out what he means here more fully in the fifth chapter of the Book of Romans. In that chapter, he compares Jesus with Adam and he says that we're all linked to Adam. We're all tainted by the sin, which came through him into the world. But in a similar way, we can

all be linked with Jesus Christ. Therefore, His victory over sin and death can be our victory too.

Let me read just a bit of what Paul says in that Book of 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, the one man's disobedience, through that disobedience, the many were made sinners. So by the one man's obedience, the many will be made righteous."

God offers in Jesus Christ the free gifts of grace, forgiveness, justification, and righteousness through what Jesus has done for us. 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 had to share it with everyone he met. His life was given over to persuading others, sharing the good news that he'd heard.

I came across a quote this week from the historian Barbara Tuchman. She was writing about the nation of Israel and wrote 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. And what's true of a nation can be true too of an individual. We all need a purpose, a motive."

The third element of Paul's inner nature was love. This was the source of Paul's motivation. See what he says here. "For the love of Christ urges us on." I've heard it said that there are two essential motivating forces in life, love and fear. Paul's was most definitely love. Paul was motivated by love. He knew all about love. It was Paul who wrote that beautiful hymn about love in 1 Corinthians that we often hear at wedding services.

He also wrote these magnificent words in Romans 8. "Now in all these things, we are more than conquerors through him who loved us, for I'm convinced that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, 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 St. Paul's inner being was the knowledge that God loved him. Everything else,

everything he knew, everything he experienced flowed from that knowledge. It drove him forward. He says that Christ's love urges him on. And the word urge here comes from a Greek word meaning to compress, to hem in. It's the word that would be used if a wide gentle flat river, as it meanders along, suddenly comes to a gorge, a very narrow, deep gorge, and all of a sudden the water that was so slow-going and flat becomes churned and flows quickly as it's compressed and forced through the rock of the gorge. It's being urged on. That's the word Paul uses. The power in the river becomes compressed.

And my prayer is that we might know something of the love, the power of that love amongst us, that we too might be urged forward. We see into Paul's heart in this passage and we catch a glimpse of three key elements of his inner nature, confidence, purpose, and love. These are three things that do not waste away. Remember the words we heard last week. "So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day."

May we, like St. Paul, pay attention to our inner nature, so that as later in this service we remember graduates and as we remember all those who graduate today, we might be able to say that every day is a graduation day for our soul. Our outer nature may be wasting away, but our inner nature is being constantly renewed. Amen.