

2 Corinthians 4:3-18. Resilient Faith

Jay was watching the Winter Olympics on TV this evening, and as I wandered in, I caught the tail end of an inspiring story. It was about a young woman with cerebral palsy, who had an amazingly resilient spirit. Though her disability meant she couldn't participate in anything like the Winter Olympics, she had a passion for sport. She was able to be part of an athletic event that included something like seven marathons in seven days over seven continents - I didn't quite catch the details - with other athletes pushing her in her recumbent wheel chair as part of the marathon. She endured the same hardships as the athletes; the harsh climate, the long hours and the disappointments. She also joined in the excitement and shared in the striving of the athletes. She had a spirit that wouldn't quit!

In our passage from two Corinthians this morning, we see something of that same enduring spirit. In these verses Paul gives several reasons why in the midst of great difficulty he never loses heart. Each one of those reasons is applicable to us.

First of all, in the midst of all the difficulties and challenges of his life, Paul was encouraged, because he knew **he was given charge of a most valuable treasure**. That treasure was Christ. He was also very aware that he, Paul, was nothing special.

On this side of the New Testament, we know a lot about Paul, and we know that he was an amazing apostle: how he was responsible for the spread of the Gospel through the known Gentile world of his day; how he eloquently defended the Gospel in the face of great opposition; how tenaciously he preached the truth of what he knew, despite persecution, and how he cared for and supported the early church through his visits and letters.

However, Paul's opinion of himself was rather less elevated. He saw himself as the 'least of all men'. He was very conscious of the wrong he had done in persecuting the early Christians, and he certainly didn't see himself as a great orator or preacher. He merely saw himself as a simple, flawed clay pot, that carried a very great treasure.

I have a favourite hand made mug that was given to me by Libby some years ago, and I use it for my cups of tea when I'm at my desk. The design on the outside is starting to fade, and the inside glaze is now all cracked from use and the occasional trip through the dishwasher.

Sometimes I look at the inside of the mug with all its crazes and cracks, and am reminded that I'm much like that myself. There are cracks and imperfections in my life from the mistakes I've made, and sometimes my zeal and enthusiasm fades a little like the design on my mug. But the most

amazing thing is that the treasure I bear - that we all bear - is not diminished by the container or vessel; rather, the vessel is made valuable by the treasure it contains.

We might not feel particularly valuable; perhaps we have been damaged or beaten up by life; perhaps we're getting on a little and don't have the energy or enthusiasm for our faith we once had - but there is something that we can hold on to, and that is:

We still carry within each one of us a most valuable treasure - the very presence of Jesus himself!

Then secondly, in these verses, we see Paul encouraged because *life had not thrown more at him than he could handle*. When we read verses [2Co 4:7-10](#) we are likely to focus on the bad things that had happened to Paul. Perhaps we notice the words "*afflicted*," "*perplexed*," "*persecuted*," "*struck down*," and "*always carrying about in our body the death of the Lord Jesus*" ([2Co 4:10](#)). Sounds pretty grim, doesn't it?

Given all the bad things that had happened to Paul as a servant of the Lord, we wouldn't blame him if he became bitter, or left the ministry, or had a nervous breakdown. But if we go back and pick up the other end of each phrase, we find Paul also said he was "*not crushed... not in despair... not forsaken, not destroyed*," and that the "*life of Jesus*" was being made manifest in his body.

If we read carefully what he has written, we see a note of celebration coming through, that even though life had knocked him down, it had not knocked him out; he was still hanging in there.

As God's people, we are a lot tougher than we sometimes think, and it's encouraging for us to realise that we can cope with a great deal with the strength that Christ gives.

I'm sure we have all known fellow Christians who have been able to deal realistically and triumphantly with tragedy, illness, death, and loss. Perhaps we've stood beside them during these times, knowing that they would not be abandoned by Jesus. And with time and patience and encouragement from Christian friends, we may well have seen them bounce back with renewed faith and confidence.

In a previous parish, there was a man who had experienced a heart breaking and messy divorce. Both he and his ex wife still attended our church, which wasn't easy for either of them. Then while he was still reeling from that, he was involved in a car accident, and found himself too injured to go back to work. Through all of his very real heartbreak, pain and disappointment, he

managed to hang on to his faith, and to have a cheerful word for his fellow believers. His treasure was shining through the cracks in his earthen vessel!

Thirdly, we see in this reading that Paul was encouraged by God's ability to renew his spirit when circumstances got him down. Though he was confronted by both the aging process and the possibility of death, he could still write, *"So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day."* ([2Co 4:16](#)).

I'm sure many of us can relate to that. The process of aging is inevitable. Many of you will have attended Enid Shepherd's funeral on Friday. Like me, you may have looked wonderingly at the photo of a much younger and very beautiful Enid on the cover. Unfortunately we can't hold on to our youth and beauty - it fades with the passing of time. But the beauty of our inner nature - that treasure we all carry in Christ - is constantly being renewed and refreshed as we trust in God.

Paul's punishing agenda and lifestyle took its toll on his body and his spirit, but he said that through God's Spirit he daily experienced renewal. This helped him to face what was tough about his life in the present, and gave him hope even about facing death.

You know, even something as simple as the passing of the seasons can remind us of this. At the top of our long and steep driveway is a prolific frangipani tree. During the autumn, its beautiful fragrant flowers drop off and rot away. Then the leaves fall off, leaving it stark and bare. But then as the spring kicks in, and the weather warms up, the leaves spring forth again, almost overnight, and then before you know it the tree is once again bursting with beautiful, fragrant flowers.

Believe it or not, I love taking the bins up in summer. The bin spot is right next to the tree. I stand there and breathe in that heady fragrance, and am reminded that the barrenness of winter lasts but a season.

Sometimes our spirits can grow cold and they can seem as barren as winter. It happens. Sometimes, we can't even find a reason. But God is always there within us, just like the life force within the frangipani tree. It doesn't go anywhere through the harshness of winter. The winter doesn't kill it. And neither will our tough times extinguish the life of God within us. That treasure is always there, within the clay pot of our physical selves. If we can hang in there - in Christ's strength, staying connected to our God - we will soon find that he will restore and revive and renew our spirits.

Lastly, in this passage, Paul was encouraged about his ministry when he set what he was doing into the larger context of things. A little further on in this

passage, in verses 17-18 we read this: “For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.” Paul put the "moment" in the context of "eternity" and the "visible" in the context of the "invisible," and it gave him a different perspective.

When an artist is working on a painting, he or she will often step back to get a more distant perspective. A small patch of paint looks totally different in the context of the whole painting.

We need to take care that we don't become too spiritually nearsighted, living as we do in a world of "instant everything." There is an eternal element to all things. The difficulties we may be experiencing in the now, may well pale into insignificance in the the months and years to come.

In the eternal scheme of things, everything we experience is part of a much greater whole - the coming of the Kingdom of God. All our experiences help make us more like Christ, as we trust him to bring us through them.

One of my favourite quotes comes from (I believe) a Persian Sufi poet, and it helps me when things are starting to get tough. The poet said, wisely, “This too shall pass.” I like that. It gives me perspective.

Our clay pots, our earthen vessels, hold a great and glorious treasure - the very presence of Christ, and his message of hope. I hope that we like Paul, may find great encouragement in this.