

My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness. Amen

“My grace is sufficient for you.” Are there any more comfortable words contained in all of scripture? Over the last few weeks we have been hearing about Jesus’ deeds of power in the Gospel of St Mark. Jesus raises the dead to life, he heals the sick, casts out demons, and calms the raging waves and winds of a storm. And faith has been at the centre of it all. “Do not fear, only believe.” “Your faith has made you well.” “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” Even in today’s gospel passage faith is at the centre when Jesus could do no deed of power in his own hometown. “And he was amazed at their unbelief.” With these stories, it is easy to be lulled into thinking, “if I just have enough faith my prayers will be answered.” And when they are not, “What does that mean?” “Does it mean deep in our hearts we doubt that God will even hear our prayer, and maybe blame ourselves when our prayer goes on unanswered?”

Here, in St Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians, we have a pillar of faith who prays earnestly three times, but finds no relief. He does get an answer, though. And the answer is “No.”

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Over the centuries there has been a lot of speculation about just what the thorn was in St Paul’s flesh. Was it some chronic disease? An unhealed injury? Or some other aspect of the broken human condition: greed, depression, envy, lust, fear, addiction, shame? Paul does not say. He only describes it as a messenger of Satan to torment him. Well, that can apply to any of those things or any other aspect of the human condition – a condition that affects each and every one of us.

It’s hard to get our hands around what Paul is saying. It is not in our nature to boast of weakness, rather we work hard to present and promote our strengths. University and job application forms require us to boast about our strengths and abilities. We give very little insight into our weaknesses and failings. Sometimes those come up at interview, but even then we spin our answers so as to mask our true weakness and failings – and we cast them in as positive a light as possible. What would a resume be like if we boasted about having amassed a pile of credit card debt? Or that we had a habit of lying, or that a fear of failure causes us to overwork? We wouldn’t dare think of it.

Yet how aware are we of our own failings? Our own shortcomings? How often do we repeat the very thing we are ashamed of? In another of his letters, St Paul says “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate....I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do....I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin.” The thorn in our side.

Oh Lord, that our shortcomings could be taken away! “No! My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.”

While we are busy promoting our strengths and presenting our best, we are quick to criticize and judge others. Take a look around social media and comment sections on news websites. From afar (and often with the protection afforded by the anonymity of the internet) we feel free to say whatever we want and “believe” to be right – whether we are right or not. The same is true when we gather with our friends and family who are likeminded with us. We are quick to stand in our own place of righteousness and to demean those whom we think are wrong.

The danger is, when we build up ourselves and boast in our own righteousness, we don’t give ourselves permission to be wrong. When our failings and shortcomings pile up and eventually break forth to the surface (which they do) we find that the righteousness we’ve been standing on collapses like a house of cards, and our enemies will be there to pick them up.

St Paul boasts in his weakness so that he can give a measure of God’s grace to others in their weakness. We too should approach others from our own place of weakness to share God’s grace with them.

Moses had a speech impediment and was afraid to speak in public and God called a nation into existence through his words. King David used treachery to cover-up an illicit affair, yet God promised to bless the world through him. St Peter who, like the other disciples in today's story, had the power to cast out demons and heal the sick in Jesus' name denied even knowing who Jesus was when things got tough, but through his witness, here we are today. God works with us in our weakness so that none of us may boast. My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.

Earlier in the Gospel, St Mark tells us that when Jesus called his disciples he called them for two purposes: "He appointed twelve, whom he also named apostles, to be with him, and to be sent out to proclaim the message, and to have authority to cast out demons." Up until today's story we have seen the disciples "being" with Jesus – even when they have had no direct impact on what's going on. Mark felt it was important for us to know that they were there. Today's story focuses on the second aspect of their calling – to be sent.

Jesus sends out the twelve, and this significantly raises the profile of his ministry. Before they return, they have caught the attention of King Herod himself, and soon the Roman government. Despite his popularity in Galilee, the impact of Jesus' ministry had barely gathered the attention of the religious establishment before. If the church is going to be effective and relevant, then it too must uphold the two-fold calling of the disciples. It is not enough that we are with Jesus, that we gather here in this place to worship and to pray. To be Christian, to be followers and disciples of Jesus Christ is also to be apostles, to be sent – to carry the message of the kingdom of heaven into our lives in the world – away from this place – away from Jesus.

Jesus instructs his disciples to take nothing with them, and he really doesn't give them any instructions as to what to do or say. Jesus is, in effect, saying, "Tell the story, whether they listen to you or not. You don't need to take anything with you or make any special preparations. You are all that you need." Jesus does not need you to be a Bible scholar, nor to be a saint, to be eloquent or even particularly good. Whomever you are, with whatever weakness you have, Jesus calls you not to be perfect, but to be faithful, and to share his Grace out of your weakness with the world.

His grace is sufficient for you. Amen.