

2 Corinthians 4:16-5:10

We are now at the midpoint of our sermon series on Second Corinthians. So let's pause briefly and take a look at the author of this letter, the Apostle Paul. How would you describe Paul based on his letters?

He was not much to look at. 'Bald-headed, bowlegged, strongly built, a man small in size with meeting eyebrows, with a rather large nose.' Years after his death that's the way the apocryphal Acts of Paul and Thecla describes him, and Paul himself quotes somebody who had actually seen him: 'His letters are strong but his bodily presence is weak.' It was no wonder. Paul shares his experience: 'Five times I have received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one,' he wrote. 'Three times I have been beaten with rods, Once I was stoned. Three times have I been shipwrecked. A night and a day I have been adrift at sea. In danger from rivers . . . robbers . . . my own people . . . Gentiles. In toil and hardship, in hunger and thirst . . . in cold and exposure.' He was also sick off and on all his life and speaks of a 'thorn in the flesh' that God gave him to 'keep him from being too elated.' Epilepsy? Hysteria? Who knows? The wonder of it all is that despite his complications he was still able to get around.

Nobody is sure whether or not he ever got to Spain the way he'd planned, but either before he went or soon after he got back, he had his final run-in with the authorities. And the story is that they took him to a spot about three miles out of Rome and right there on the road, where he'd spent most of his life, the place that could be considered the beginning of his life, they lopped off his head.

At the end of the less than flattering description of his personal appearance, the Acts of Paul and Thecla says that 'at times he looked like a man and at times he had the face of an angel.' If there is a God in heaven, as even in his blackest moments Paul never doubted there was, then bald-headed and bowlegged as he was, with those eyebrows that met and that over-sized nose, it was with angel-eyes that he exchanged a last long glance with his executioners.

Back in Corinth, Paul is under pressure to defend his ministry. Other missionaries have turned up with more impressive credentials. The criticism against Paul has been growing. And, as usually happens, people seem to have accumulated as much malicious gossip as possible, including allegations that Paul collected money only to benefit himself and that when he changed his travel plans he showed himself a scatterbrain rather than a spiritual person guided by God. Worse still, he did not have an impressive presence and was no match for his rivals as far as miracles, powerful speech, and high connections were concerned. Some saw him as a rather weak, pathetic figure.

Paul continues his ranting and raving against his “super apostle” foes. Paul also makes it clear that he himself has endured a bevy of woes, travails, beatings, and that mysterious thorn in the flesh too. Back in his celebrated Pharisee phase Saul’s star, as Paul had been known back then, had been ascending, and no small amount of various perks or benefits and other pleasant things accompanied that rise. But ever since the Jesus, whose name Saul had been trying to wipe from the face of the earth, had met Saul in a blinding flash of transformation – Saul-turned-Paul’s star for Jesus had also been rising, but in this case the results were anything but favourable. The world roughed up and killed Jesus, and as Jesus himself had promised his followers, it would keep doing the same to them. “Tell me about it” would doubtless have been Paul’s reply to that promised persecution.

Paul will not let himself be bullied by his rivals. His confidence rests, however, not in his oratory or achievements, but in his identification with Christ's death and resurrection. He is not embarrassed about not being impressive and powerful. On the contrary he is prepared to be vulnerable and take Christ and his suffering as his model. For Paul the evidence of God is not to be found primarily in impressive achievements, but in love and caring, including when it exposes one to suffering and weakness.

Paul turns it around and claims that he has been prepared to face hardship and danger precisely because he is committed to letting Christ's ministry be active through him - for them! Rather than failing them by not being sensational, he has served them with sensitivity and love. He has not been preoccupied with his status and achievements. He has been quite happy to change travel plans, if that served his caring ministry better. Paul's confidence derives from taking Christ's self-giving and resurrection as his model. Christ's resurrection is for him the assurance that he can live in hope and with confidence. He does not depend on winning people's praise. He is not looking to be elevated by popularity and influence, but to be elevated and vindicated by God, as Christ was. And even then his focus is not his own reward but being a loving and generous person. Thus he resets their focus, telling **them** – that it is all **for them**.

If Paul had been one of the world’s first “bi-vocational pastors,” then we know that his day job was tent-making. And so unsurprisingly he reaches for a tent metaphor when describing what was going on to his physical body (and the bodies of his roughed-up apostolic colleagues). “My outward tent is wasting away” Paul writes, seemingly without complaint. “The fabric is torn, rain gets in, the more vibrant colour of the original tent fabric long ago faded away to now some dull gray, pale-looking thing. I’ve lost half my tent pegs and two of the supporting cord ropes have frayed to almost nothing. One strong gust of wind could knock this old tent down to a flattened mess.”

This sounds like the rhetoric of a defeated man. But “defeat” is a far cry from Paul’s tone here. Yes, it is at least as bad as Paul describes it, but yet he is able to dismiss all that as “a light and momentary affliction.” Sounds pretty miserable. How can Paul keep his chin up, keep going, carrying on for the kingdom of God when his earthly tent is in undeniable tatters? Because through Christ Jesus he knows a larger truth: there is a divine Tentmaker who is even now designing and fashioning something quite wonderful for us all. This earthly tent is not the end of the story.

There is this thing that Paul eloquently labels a kind of “weight of glory” that had gotten itself deep inside him through faith. Paul doubtless knew that the Hebrew word for “glory” is *kabod*, which also means “heavy or weighty.” Glory has power behind it, it has oomph. This glory is heavy enough to create its own gravity well. Just as the planets orbit the sun because the sun’s weight and mass bend space around it, so also once the weight of glory gets into your core being, everything else in your life orbits around it. Everything gets focussed on that glory and that glory’s own hefty nuances, qualifies and helps us to see even the more difficult things in our life in a new light.

Paul would probably be the last person to wave off someone’s lament over life’s hardships or the persecutions one might endure for Christ’s sake. We often tend to brush off every bad thing by comparing it to something else. “I used to complain about my migraines until I met a man with a brain tumour The crippling arthritis in my feet seemed bad to me until I met a woman with no feet at all....” Paul probably would not do that. Some bad things happen in our lives and they are not the way it is supposed to be. They hurt, they wound and there is a whole biblical tradition of prayer designed to deal with life’s difficulties and woes – that is lament.

Still, by faith a weight of glory exists inside each one of us now, and while that does not mean the tattering of our earthly tents is no big deal, it does mean that this is not the final deal. Fixing our eyes on the eternal things of Christ helps us to not lose heart, not ultimately, not finally, not as the last word on anyone’s life.

Few people need to be convinced that our earthly tents waste away in one form or another. What they need is the Gospel word that their doctors and therapists and home health care providers cannot provide: the Good News about that weight of glory that cannot be dislodged from inside these sagging old tents. The Good News that there is a master Tentmaker who is even now sewing and stitching something together for each one of us—something quite extraordinary. Our troubles may not seem light or momentary but in the face of all eternity, they are. They will give way to something glorious.

Today's passage serves as a demonstration of Paul's certitude in God's power. Within this context, Paul's words illustrate his profound faith in God's salvific acts. For a God who can defeat death itself, frail mortal bodies are no challenge to God's power. Instead, God demonstrates God's power in choosing mere mortals to bear witness to divine glory. With so great a God working among the Corinthians, there is no need to allow the sufferings of the present age to deter them from testifying to God's new creation.

Underlying the entire message of Second Corinthians, and indeed Paul's whole Gospel, is the apostle's certitude in God's power. God made Paul a minister and it is by God's mercy that Paul has survived numerous hardships. As we heard over the past weeks, God is a God of consolation and forgiveness. We know God has chosen mortal bodies in which to display God's power.

God is in the act of transforming bodies that are so fragile and vulnerable as we heard last week, that Paul likens them to jars of clay. That the passion of God has chosen such fragile vessels is to make clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. The good news is only possible because a powerful God is at work.

Influenced by Greek culture, Paul speaks in the language of popular philosophy, from which the following images are drawn: death as a stripping away of the body; the body as a temporary dwelling; and the body as a burden - a stoic's attitude toward death: but this heart is never more divine than when it reflects upon its mortality, and understands that humanity was born for the purpose of fulfilling life, and that the body is not a permanent dwelling, but a sort of inn, which is to be left behind - when one perceives that one is a burden to the host.

Every momentary affliction, every pathos we undergo, now becomes a place where the excess of an "eternal weight of glory" gets worked out in our lives. This takes place precisely as we interpret what we can see, what is temporary in our lives, from the standpoint of what we cannot see, what is eternal.

To describe how all this takes place in our lives, Paul mixes two metaphors for mortal vulnerability: nakedness and a tent. Longing to be "clothed" with a heavenly "building," we groan - much like a mother groans as she gives birth to a child - yearning for protection against life's fluctuations and a permanent space for ourselves. But amid all this God is producing the very things we groan for within us. We have been given God's spirit as a guarantee, and the Spirit, as Paul will say later in Romans, groans within and through our very groans.

So we can always be confident, even amid our yearning for an immediate intimacy with God

where we can be completely “at home.” But we walk by faith not sight. God’s consolation does not take place in some ethereal heaven or out of body experience; it does not provide us with immunity from life’s travails or our responsibilities to one another. Like everyone else, we too will have to appear before the judgment seat of Christ and receive recompense for what we have done in our bodies, whether good or bad.

Paul talks about the reality of experience. Things, life seems so far short of the Kingdom of God. Paul is talking about the “in between” nature of the life of faith, the contradictions that are born of following God who we cannot see, of having a loyalty and even authority that is out of sight. To whom we belong can come into question when the one we are called to count on feels distant and unresponsive to our day to day needs, concerns and afflictions.

Paul offers encouragement to those who are struggling, not in order to dismiss the reality of that suffering, or even to glorify it, but to offer a faith, even though unseen, and the spiritual life as a way of persevering through it. Having faith that God builds “eternal in the heavens” is not an escape route. It doesn’t set us free from the pains and burdens of this life, but is a reminder to whom we truly belong. In that way it also guides our living in the here and now.

Our confidence, Paul reminds us, is found in the promise that we belong to God. Through the difficulties of the present, with the hope of the future that is to come, we will find the path on which we can walk in faith.

Amen.