

Sunday 7th July 2024; Benefice BCP Holy Communion, Stonegrave.

When I first became a hospital chaplain someone said to me, “Won’t you get depressed constantly encountering the sick, the dying and trying to make the weak strong?” I have come to realise in doing this work that it generally has the complete opposite effect on me. Yes, it can be distressing and emotionally draining, but over and above all that, I derive great inspiration and affirmation of God’s love for us, despite witnessing so much apparent ‘weakness.’ If anything, I have often walked away from an inspiring encounter with a sick or dying patient with my own weak faith strengthened, because God’s grace shone through them.

In today’s Epistle, St Paul describes from his own experience that our weaknesses are not hindrances but opportunities for God's grace and power to shine. He tells the Corinthians to embrace vulnerabilities, boast in weaknesses, find joy in adversity, and in so doing, become sources of comfort to others. He says that his weaknesses are an important part of his faith, yet St Paul had plenty of reason to boast of his abilities. He was obviously enormously talented as a leader, theologian, and writer, but he says, “To keep me from being too elated, a thorn in the flesh was given to me.” The meaning of the word “thorn” is closer to a ‘stake’, driven into his body in pain. Whatever his ailment, it lingered with him, and Paul prayed three times for God to take it away. Instead, God did not, but gave St Paul the strength to bear his pain. “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” Whatever limitation Paul faced; his sense of weakness helped him rely in a deep way not on himself but on God.

This way can be difficult. When someone is suffering it is easy for those of us who are not suffering to be glib and patronising. Or we may think that it's hard to rely on someone else when we're weak, but this is what God calls us to do. We naturally want to be independent; self-sufficient, we have pride thinking that we can do all that we need, that we don't need anyone else. But in times of weakness, we must accept help graciously, from each other and especially from God. That's why Jesus spent much of his time with what society considered powerless and weak people---those who were hurting and oppressed. His mission was to invite weak and wounded people, to enter the Kingdom. His starting point with them was their weakness and He transformed it into strength. The question for us is whether we too will allow God to turn our weakness into strength too.

This can also be hindered by our own community. As we heard in the Gospel it can be those in our own community who set about weakening us, by rejection, a thoughtless word, or gossip. This conveys a negative and destructive message to others and undermines God's work. But even then, God will give His strength, grace, and inspiration for us to persevere on His path despite the hurts inflicted on us.

After all, God even allowed Jesus, His own Son to appear weak by taking on the weaknesses and pain as a frail human being, but who then overcame weakness to save us because of the strength He received from His Father.

So, as we face weaknesses in our lives, do we view these as occasions by which we can come to know what it means to rely upon God's strength and to know His grace in an ever-deeper way in our life? Are these occasions for deep and profound growth in communion with Christ or are we

tempted to avoid our weaknesses at all costs, hide and cover them as best we can by highlighting other people's perceived weaknesses or criticising them with self-righteous justification? Or do we view these as an opportunity to know what God had invited St Paul to know, that "My grace is sufficient for you", or in other words, 'You can come to know what a truly powerful life is if you are willing to embrace your weakness and abide in me.'

'Sufficient' means that the help that God gives will take care of us no matter what our weaknesses are. If God's grace was sufficient for St Paul, then it will be sufficient for us as well and in our weakness, we will be strong.

Thanks be to God. Amen.