

2 Corinthians 9:1-10 and Mark 6:1-13 (4th July 2021)

A high achiever; a natural leader; a reliable team worker; someone who 'gets things done'. These might perhaps be some of the common expressions you'd find on your typical CV – the sort of thing designed to shout out "I've got all the gifts and talents you're looking for", "I'm the ideal candidate for this role". I can't have any chinks in my armour – so no indication of any shortcomings, trouble spots or chequered past.

If there is a question somewhere on the application form or in the interview asking me what I think my 'weaknesses' are, there's a few things I can throw in though: I can be a bit impatient, I don't always suffer fools gladly, I can have a tendency to work too hard and neglect myself and my family. 'Sort-of weaknesses' which actually help show how good and effective I am in 'getting things done'.

But as we'll see, the apostle Paul takes a very different approach to 'writing his CV' in our epistle reading today (from his second letter to the Corinthians). Now, Corinth was a large, influential, commercial city in Greece. It set considerable store by ideas like enlightenment and knowledge, material prosperity and individual moral freedom. Sound a bit familiar? Quite a lot in common, I'd say, with 20th/21st century western culture...

Paul had first visited Corinth during what we now call his 'second missionary journey', staying there for about 18 months. Then, 3 to 4 years after that visit he wrote them a series of what seems to have been at least 4 letters, of which just 2 are preserved in our Bibles today.

Our passage from 2 Corinthians 12 comes to us as being very much towards the end of that correspondence (or at any rate the end of what we know about that correspondence).

And in the last 4 chapters of 2 Corinthians, a key issue Paul is trying to address is the influence of a group of so-called 'super apostles', who (among other things) were discrediting Paul and undermining the true gospel message that he'd brought to them.

These 'super apostles' had a very impressive CV in a culture that lauded 'success' and 'prestige'. They stood tall; they were magnetic personalities; they were great communicators; they wooed people with their (apparently) deep spiritual insight and their glowing stories of visions and revelations.

So how was Paul going to respond? With proud claims of success and blessing which could comfortably trump those of his detractors? Well, no – chapter 11 instead sets out a long list of things that have 'gone wrong': relentless opposition, poverty and hardship, arrests and beatings, how he's in effect a convicted criminal on the run from the governor of Damascus.

"If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness", concludes Paul (as he comes to the end of that list – his 'CV' if you like – in Chapter 11). And at the beginning of Chapter 12 we then see him refusing to boast about his personal spirituality, the depth of his personal relationship with God, (and) whatever 'wonderful visions and revelations' he may or may not have had.

It seems there was indeed one, particularly special experience he'd had – which he says was 14 years ago, meaning that it was relatively early on in his life as a follower of Jesus, and probably before any of his main 'missionary journeys' that we read about in the book of Acts (because this letter was most likely written about 20 years after his conversion on the road to Damascus).

But we don't hear about this experience anywhere else (either in Acts or in Paul's letters). And we don't actually learn terribly much about it here either. Paul's so diffident about it that he speaks of it in the third person: "I know a man", he says (like we might say "I've got this friend..." when we've got some tricky question to ask and don't want anyone to know it's about us).

And in 'trying' to describe this event he keeps saying "I don't know – (only) God knows". And that whatever it was that 'happened' he just cannot tell us: this person (he says) "heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat".

For sure, this experience must have been a very significant and inspiring one for Paul – perhaps as part of preparing him for his future ministry, as a 'banked' source of ongoing encouragement in that ministry. But the point he's making here is that it wasn't something for him to be talking to anybody else about, certainly not something to boast about.

So what might we be invited to learn from this? What might it be saying to us about what we should be sharing with others about our spiritual lives and experiences? Is it telling us that we British have traditionally got this sort of thing right by keeping our religion (our Christianity) out of all polite conversation?

No, I think that would be going rather too far. Sharing testimony is something important we do as Christians (for our own encouragement as well as the encouragement of others), and we can certainly find other Bible verses to support that – for example, from 1 Peter chapter 3: "always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have".

And the apostle Paul himself frequently – in Acts and in his epistles – gives testimony about his conversion on the Damascus Road, both about the incident itself and about the transformation it brought to his life. The key point though in talking about that experience is that, when he did so, he was able to ensure that all the glory for what had happened was given to God.

And that's what needs to be our focus too, when giving testimony, so that we don't share things in a way which (by accident or design) 'bigs us up' (rather than God), and so deflects that glory away from him and onto us.

Paul was subject to exactly the same temptation that we are. And he admits as much in the second half of our passage, when he moves on to his 'thorn in the flesh' – which he says was "given to him, to keep him from becoming too 'puffed up' (that's 'too elated' or 'conceited', depending on the particular Bible translation), by his wonderful 'third heaven' experience.

Quite deliberately, we aren't told what this 'thorn in the flesh' was. All sorts of explanations have been offered (based on other things we know about Paul from elsewhere in the Bible) – a physical ailment (bad eyesight, epilepsy perhaps), a speech defect, a tricky character trait, a difficult relationship, the discouragement of opposition even.

But it doesn't matter what it was – the important point was that he knew it was a 'weakness' which made him always aware of the need to rely on God and to draw on the strength that only he can give. For whenever we think we can do everything fine by ourselves (in our own strength) we miss out – we miss out on that experience of the love, friendship, power and strength which come from holding on tightly to Jesus.

Verse 9 is a verse well worth remembering: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness. So I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me."

This 'boasting' isn't because hardships, difficulties and weaknesses are somehow good in themselves. Rather, it's a 'boast', a realisation, that it's only in our weakness that we best discover the source of true strength – the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

'Weakness' is therefore not something to be despised – to be taken advantage of, or to be squeezed out of the world through 'natural selection' (the survival of the fittest).

The greatest example of 'strength in weakness' must be Jesus himself. God entered the world as a tiny baby, and then (as we read in our Gospel passage today) he lived on earth like an ordinary human being, allowing himself to be rejected by his own people and eventually put to a humiliating and agonising death on a cross.

But that act of 'weakness' had the strength to break the stranglehold of sin and death which had gripped the world ever since the days of Adam and Eve – the strength to bring us back into the glorious relationship with God for which we had first been created.

And it's in our weakness and his strength that we carry on, in this mission. In the second half of our gospel passage, the disciples hit the road with almost nothing of their own in their suitcase as they go out to proclaim the good news – then back they come with stories of lives transformed, demons cast out, and the sick cured.

Maybe we feel increasingly 'weak' these days as a Church, as interest appears to wane, congregations age, finances get ever-more tight and clergy numbers fall. But a poorer Church, a marginalised Church, a 'weaker' church is not necessarily a bad thing – if it brings us back to a realisation that it's not our strength which counts, but the grace and power of God through Jesus Christ.