

## **Sermon on 2 Cor 4:7-15**

### **Treasure in Jars of Clay**

This famous passage in the bible is often quoted and has been much preached upon. It contains my son's favourite verse, he has it tattooed in Greek around his wrist – "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed." Paul was of course describing his struggles, the shipwrecks and imprisonment and beatings that he suffered for the sake of his mission to bring the Gospel to as many people as he could.

We may not have been shipwrecked, imprisoned, or physically beaten, but we all have times in our lives when we feel afflicted, perplexed, struck down and maybe even persecuted. But our faith keeps us from being crushed, driven to despair, and destroyed, however close we may feel we come at times, and we know that we are never forsaken. Then Paul says this extraordinary thing, "always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh". This is quite dense and hard to understand, and I think there are layers of meaning here. We understand that in some way, spiritually we died to sin, or at least to the eternal effects of sin and then rose to new life in Jesus when we were baptised. We also know that we are physically dying, in that sense we all carry death in our bodies but at the same time we have the eternal life of Jesus in us by the power of the Holy Spirit – in fact Paul goes on to talk about how just as the power of God's Holy Spirit raised Jesus from the dead, that same Holy Spirit lives and works in us and through us and will eventually raise us from the dead. We are also, hopefully, continually dying to self. This does not mean dying to who we are, but rather dying to our selfish sinful nature and becoming more fully our true selves as we grow in the Christian

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life. There is much mystery here - when Paul says, "so death is at work in us, but life in you", there is a sense that every Christian, by faithfully enduring affliction somehow builds up the body of Christ, builds up other Christians in life and joy. A reminder that we are all spiritually connected to one another. I want to come back to the beginning of the passage. "We have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us". There is always a danger when we see Christians like Paul or Mother Teresa, or brothers and sisters who are being physically persecuted, or even just other Christians that we know who seem to be so much better at it than us, there is a danger that we will look at them and admire them, admire what they do, admire how they suffer and persevere. But it is the power of God in them that is at work and that is their strength. This treasure, this message of hope, this Gospel of God's love and saving grace made possible through the life and death of Jesus is in every one of us, this gift of life, is in every one of us. And every one of us is just an ordinary somewhat fragile, almost certainly cracked, and damaged in some way, jar of clay. Paul was just a jar of clay, Mother Teresa was just a jar of clay, and we all carry the same treasure as them and that treasure that light and life and hope that we have been given will shine out of us if we allow it to. The power of God, the Holy Spirit is who enables us to keep going on the hardest days and who enables us to shine on the best days. It is not us it is Him; we are just ordinary jars of clay. But we are Holy jars of clay. Anything that is set aside for God to use is Holy and each one of us is called to be set aside for God to use, so we are Holy.

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I want to read you something written by the Lutheran Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber. It is about the beginning of John's gospel, the word made flesh, but I think it has something to say to us in this context:

*"In the beginning was the Word made flesh, the living water, who kept interesting company and taught some counter-intuitive stuff and preached forgiveness of sins, and also healed the sick and raised the dead and fed the hungry. And that was more than we could bear, so we betrayed and denied and accused and flogged and crucified Him. And this Word of God made flesh still spoke only of forgiveness.*

*The Word became flesh and made its home in the body of a human woman. The Word became flesh and washed human feet, and smelled luxurious perfume, and tasted abundant wine. When Jesus wanted to heal the blind man, He didn't use good vibes or send positive energy, He used spit and dirt. Very real tears of salt ran down Jesus' face as He smelled the stink of death on Lazarus, the one he called friend.*

*Death could not contain the holy and defiant and pure love of God, and on the third day Christ defeated death and rose from the dead and then spent a little time really freaking out His friends before ascending back to the Father. The word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we were given grace upon grace to become children of God. And in doing so, you, dear people of God, you are now flesh become Word."*

This struck me quite profoundly, it had never occurred to me before. Jesus the Word of God became flesh and now if he lives in me, as I believe he does, if in some sense I am one with Him, which I believe I am, then I am indeed flesh become Word. A humble cracked and damaged jar of clay that contains the light of Christ and the Spirit of God and the gospel of salvation. Wow!

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**That is indeed heady stuff to think about. And on good days when all is going well, we might even feel it. But we live in difficult and trying times, we all have troubles and distractions and sadness and anger and irritation and illness and family stuff going on. We have all suffered and continue to suffer the collective trauma that has been caused by the coronavirus, enforced isolation and separation through three lockdowns. Life is uncertain and so like Paul we are back to feeling afflicted, perplexed, and struck down. And God knows and understands. He does not want us to pretend that we are not feeling what we are feeling. If you are joyful right now – fantastic, worship and give thanks and enjoy what God has given you but don't forget to pray for and uphold your brothers and sisters. If you are struggling right now – tell God, tell Him how you feel – read Psalm 22, but don't forget to be happy for your brothers and sisters who are rejoicing and ask them to pray for you. We are in this together. And as we work out our faith together, as we journey together we must be praying that, as Paul says at the end of our passage, that grace which is in us, however we are feeling, will extend to more and more people and that will increase our thanksgiving and be to the glory of God!**