

## PAUL'S THORN IN THE FLESH – 4<sup>th</sup> July 2021

Thinking about today's epistle, I came to the conclusion, though it couldn't be verified by any theologians or Bible commentators, the conclusion I came to was that St. Paul played golf!

How else can you explain in one moment an ecstatic experience and the next moment being in agony and torment.

Some days you play like a pro (well sort of) and another day you go out do exactly the same thing and can't get out of the rough. It is like when you play 2 or 3 times a week and then go on holiday with your wife who rarely plays golf and she beats you on a par 3 course!

It happens even amongst the golf superstars and low handicappers. Golf is a very humbling game with many "thorns in the flesh" – lost balls, wayward shots and impossible bunkers.

And yet golfers still play on in spite of the ups and downs!

Our epistle this morning is full of contrast as Paul talks about his ups and downs

On the one hand, Paul recounts an intense religious experience – being caught up into Paradise, the park of heaven, in a kind of out-of-body experience.

And, on the other hand, he is very conscious of his own weakness by having what he calls a "thorn in the flesh", something obviously painful and debilitating which he says, keeps him from being too elated, keeps him from boasting about how "spiritual" he is.

Paul founded the church in Corinth to which he is writing around 50 AD. Indeed, he stayed in Corinth to teach and nurture the new Christians there for about 18 months. When he felt he had done his job, he then moved on to Ephesus, to start the same process all over again.

But after he left, what he calls "super apostles" (11:5) came into the church in Corinth and began to undermine his foundational leadership. They seemed to attack him on 2 fronts. One, his physical appearance, and two his teaching.

A few chapters previous, (10:10) Paul tells us that his critics, these super apostles, said that his "bodily presence was weak and his speech contemptible". Paul was not a smooth, good-looking, sharp suited evangelist. And he knew it. Writing to the Galatian church he commends them for not letting his physical appearance put them off what he preached (4:13). One writer has described Paul as "short, weak, insecure and tactless." (Barbara Brown Taylor)

And it appears that the super apostles who came to Corinth didn't think him polished enough in appearance or speech. He didn't have "presence". He was always rubbing people up the wrong way. He had a way of presenting the truth in a rather unvarnished way. Surely, they thought, God would need leaders a bit more refined and polished – people like themselves!

And, human as he is, Paul is hurt by this criticism. And even though he knows he shouldn't really, he hits back, and in the second half of the previous chapter to today's epistle he lists his credentials as an apostle and servant of God. A true Israelite, trained in the very best seminary. And if that isn't enough he lists all the ways he has suffered for the Gospel – imprisonments, floggings, shipwrecks, vendettas, sleepless nights, hunger and so on.

And if that wasn't enough to convince them, he goes on to recount the extraordinary vision he had as he was given a glimpse of heaven.

But then, in complete contrast, he comes down to earth with a bang and tells his readers that he suffers from what he calls "a thorn in the flesh." Whatever it is it keeps him from being too proud of his spiritual and religious accomplishments – just like the golfer who has a wonderful hole, even a hole in one, and then puts his next shot in the water or out of bounds!

Many have tried to surmise what this thorn in the flesh might have been. Was it his physical appearance and tactless nature? It has been suggested that it was something like epilepsy or migraine, or, most likely of all, a type of malaria which was prevalent along the coasts of the eastern Mediterranean. Sufferers said that when it struck it was like having a red hot iron thrust through your forehead, leaving you flattened and exhausted.

Though an apostle, mightily used by God, Paul suffered not just sickness and weakness, but from insecurity, opposition and failure.

Just like us.

Which of us hasn't spent sleepless nights of worry or regret. Who hasn't had some kind of personal shipwreck in their lives? Which of us have never failed about something?

And how did God respond?

He said, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness."

It doesn't depend on us, but on the power of God working in us and through us, vulnerable, fragile and imperfect though we may be.

The preacher and writer, Barbara Brown Taylor, puts it like this:

“I believe it is how God defends us from the ‘super apostles’ of this world, those stainless-steel Christians who want to cleanse the church of problematic people.” And she goes on to say that “Paul is proof that God won’t go along with that. Every one of us suffers from some thorn or other....The good news is that none of that disqualifies us from serving God. The fact that the church survives with people like us...is the surest proof that Christ is alive and well, and dwelling in us.” (Home by Another Way).

Many of the great leaders in the past had their thorns in the flesh. Julius Caesar, Oliver Cromwell and Napoleon all had epilepsy.

The famous J.F. Kennedy had Addison’s disease which gave him constant pain – he had a rocking chair brought everywhere for him to give him relief, and Franklin Roosevelt was paralysed from the waist down, yet projected a strong and bullish presence.

But like Paul, through it all, they kept going.

We don’t have to be super apostles or super Christians or super anything for God to work. He works not only despite our weakness and defects, but through them and with them to fulfil his purpose. His “grace is sufficient for us, for power is made perfect in weakness.”

In God’s Golf Club it doesn’t matter whether you’ve above or below par. All you need is a handicap and be prepared to have a go, like I’m sure St Paul did in Royal Corinth – a course renowned for its ups and downs, its deep waters and impossible bunkers!