

Sermon for Fifth Sunday in Lent 2020, Passion Sunday.

Isaiah 52:13-15. 2 Corinthians 4:5-11. Psalm 43:1-4. Mt. 16:21-17:8

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, Amen.

2 Corinthians 4:7 ‘But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us’.

If you are in the habit of reading doctoral dissertations, you might come across the verse just quoted. It was cited in the Title page of a thesis that was the result of six years research, the text being limited to 100000 words. The reason it was included was to signal to the examiners that the researcher had treasure contained within the tome, yet it was but an earthly reflection of a greater source of insight; namely, divine transcendent power. Nevertheless, it might still appear to be a bit boastful. However, the Greek text translates even more immodestly ‘that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us.’ All this illustrates the paradox of being a Christian. She or he is one who is an earthen vessel, even a cracked pot, but yet carrying the pure water of the Fountain of Life. Saint Paul goes on to tell the Corinthians that (v.8ff) ‘We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies.’

Today is Passion Sunday. *We* know that this is a theological use of the word passion. The term Passion derives from the Latin word ‘passio,’ which could be construed as ‘suffering,’ or ‘an affectation of the mind.’ But the Thesaurus in Microsoft Word doesn’t know this and suggests later derivatives to do with strong emotions (e.g. fury, desire, rage). Here is another illustration that human comprehension is partial; constrained by the limitations of being earthenware pots. Passion Sunday starts with Christ, but the world thinks it is about itself.

In our appointed readings for today we see paradox upon paradox. First, in Isaiah, we see the exaltation of God’s servant (Christ), yet startlingly marred and shocking to behold. The rulers and the nations will see that which has not been told them, nor heard about, and they shall understand. The Corinthians have to be reminded by Paul that true Christian faith is not about our own intrinsic worth simply as humans, and yet, we have divine treasure within us, though not without suffering. Then St Peter is rebuked for denying that Jesus will have to suffer even unto death; after

which he is taken to witness the transfiguration of Jesus and partly recognises that Jesus the man is also Jesus the divine.

So, what about us? Do we look to ourselves first, and to Jesus only secondly (or not at all)? Do we look at our own simplistic 'reaction' to life and the people around us, and assume that whatever explanation we settle on is enough? In fact, the majority of people only react, they do not reflect. Even if they did pause for thought, they wouldn't have enough information to make full sense of the problem. The dissertation mentioned above explored what effects a person's 'locus of control expectancies' had on preventing clinical problems for those in their care. In short, people divide into those who expect life (clinical care) to be controlled primarily by 'me', 'them', or 'fate'. What does all this imply for the Christian?

Simply, it means that Christians have to remind themselves that they are an earthenware pot, yet can contain divinely inspired treasure. Being a Christian is about being created from the dust, or being formed into a pot by the potter. It means that we are going to suffer and to be perplexed because that is what happens in a world where we come up against people who think they are self-thrown pots. It's a world where people live in the dark without knowing their own limitations or ignorance; but still feel they have the right to throw stones at other people. We live in a world where people think the 'locus of control' is within themselves, or that 'things are bound to happen outwith my control' or '*they* won't let me take control'.

In short, a Christian's approach to life should contrast to a worldly approach. We know that God is in ultimate control, not fate. We know that we are dependent on God, not on ourselves. We know that God is really powerful, not just assumed to be so. We know that: 'If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it'. (Matthew 16:24,25). So, we look to God, we give Him the credit, and we are prepared to do it with a Passion.