

“Strength in Weakness”

<u>Occasion</u>	Evening Service at Therfield Chapel
<u>Day, Date & Time</u>	Sunday 6 March 2005 at 18:30
<u>Basis</u>	2 Corinthians 12:11 – 13:14
<u>Reading</u>	2 Corinthians 12:11 – 13:14 (from the Living Bible)
<u>Hymns</u>	315, 263, 302 from Mission Praise
<u>Songs</u>	307, 405, 254, 389 from Mission Praise
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What is it that distinguishes Christianity from secularism?

In what ways are you,
as a Christian,
different from your fellows at work
or at school
or in the community,
who are not?

You could name a few:
Honesty,
integrity,
truthfulness,
Patience?
Love?
Morality?

All of these are Christian virtues demanded by the word of God,
but I could show you non-Christians who are better at them than we are!

So, “Yes”,
we should be all these things,
but do they actually distinguish Christianity from worldliness.

I put it to you that one of the most eloquent and all pervading differences is our world-view.
Our view of reality;
The way we see the world we live in;
The values,
the aims,
the direction,
the goals of our lives
are, or should be, fundamentally different
from those of the God-less world in which we live.

The idea is well founded in Scripture,
though you will not find the term worldview in our Bibles.

Few would argue that the teachings of Jesus turned the world on its head.

“Whoever wants to save his life, will lose it. But whoever loses his life for me ... will save it.”

(Mark 9:35)

“Many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.” who is first, shall be last, and he who is last shall be first.

(Matt 19:30)

“He who is least among you all – he is the greatest”

(Luke 9:48)

“Anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.”

(Mark 10:15)

“You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them. Not so with you.”

(Matt 20:25-26)

I leave them in the world, but they are not part of it.. The world does not know me, but I know you and you are in me and I am in them. Keep them in your love.

(from John chapters 15-17)

“Whoever wants to become great among you must become your servant.”

(Mark 10:43)

He, the creator of the world washes Peter’s feet with the words, “Unless I wash your feet, you have no part with me”.

(John 13:8)

Jesus came to serve.

He epitomises the idea of suffering on behalf of others;
of sacrificial giving, not only of his time, but also of his life.

He gave up, for a time, his position as the Son of a Father God,
equal in power and authority
and accepted for a while the ridicule,
hostility,
hatred
and cruelty
of those whom he had made,
but who refused to recognise who he was.

And so as we seek to follow Christ,
this self-giving,
this humility,
this willingness to serve others
and promote their interests,
their welfare
above our own
becomes a hallmark of the Christian.
Again this is not the way of the world in which we live,
and work
and play.

Interestingly,
the difference is most marked at a corporate level,
where companies pay lip service to the idea that their employees are people with
feelings and needs,
but in practice, treat them as commercial commodities,
there to serve the ends and aims of the business and nothing more.

At a personal level,
there is more humanity,
more compassion and care for other individuals,

because we are all made in the image of God,
and though marred,
that image still shines through.

On the other hand,
personal abuse,
thuggery
and corruption are on the increase.

Since I have retired,
I have taken to using a bicycle as I did in my youth.
And I commonly hinder traffic flows as I negotiate the mini-roundabout at the
junction between Orchard Road and the Old North Road.
There is insufficient space between the bollards and the kerb as you turn up towards the station,
for a car to overtake a bicycle.
So cars have to wait as I negotiate this chicane at 2 miles an hour.
This occasionally results in a hail of verbal abuse
as some boy racer is finally able to use the accelerator
rather than the brake,
and his mates vent their frustration through the open window
as they pass within inches of my ears.

But what I really want you to see is the bigger picture

What I want you to see is that we cannot simply tag Christianity onto the secular world view of
existing British culture.
Sooner or later we will find ourselves at loggerheads with the values and practices of
society.

An example of this occurred this week when a group of evangelical Christians calling themselves
the Christian Congress for Traditional Values
demonstrated outside Broadcasting House
with the symbolic destruction of a wide screen Television.

“The Christian Congress for Traditional Values is demanding a stronger emphasis on the sanctity of marriage
and family life in the corporation's drama, documentary and news output.
The group, which is threatening a series of high-profile protests if its demands are not met, says that the BBC
is failing to represent family life as experienced by the majority of people. It says that the corporation is
instead obsessed with "alternative lifestyles".”

(Ruth Gledhill -The Times 3 March 2005)

Nevertheless,
I have some problems with the concept of aggressive protest in the pursuance of Christian
ideals.
You see this is the world's way,
it is not the way of Christ.
True you might argue that Jesus' actions when he overthrew the money changers' tables in the
temple in Jerusalem,
was aggressive protest,
but Jesus was actually merely exercising his authority as God's Son
to expel the unscrupulous profiteers from his Father's house.

What set me on this line of thought was the apostle's evident weakness and vulnerability in this letter to the Corinthian church.

For much of the letter,
he has been defending his calling as an apostle of Jesus Christ.

Where is the apostle who fearlessly stormed through Asia minor and through Greece,
preaching the gospel,
planting new churches,
teaching the new converts,
moving on to fresh challenges,
defying the authorities,
confronting the critics?

Where is the strong man of the early church –
the bold one –
the aggressive preacher –
the tireless worker for the Lord.

You don't see him in this letter.

Here you see him in all his weakness.

The super-apostles' takeover of the Corinthian church has completely wrong-footed him.

His earlier painful visit has knocked all the stuffing out of him.

He is weak in the face of their apparent strength.

And he is forced by their criticisms to defend his apostleship
and to plead with the Christians in the church
for their love,
their allegiance
and their return to Christian principles and practice.

The Gospel which Paul had preached was a gospel of selfless devotion to Jesus Christ;

- so contrary to the self indulgence of the idolatrous culture
which was prevalent at the time,
and which had re-infiltrated the church.

So let us have a closer look at some of the things he is saying to the Corinthian Christians as he closes out his letter.

The closing verse of the previous section sets the scene for our portion this evening:

"That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong."
(2 Corinthians 12:10)

He then goes on to bemoan what a fool he has been to boast about all that he is,
but says they drove him to it.

How often,
when we complain at our leaders,
point out their faults,
they are forced to defend themselves,
when really,
we should be defending them
as they attend to the ministry of the word
and the pastoring of the flock.

Not that leaders are perfect,

they are very imperfect,
but our role as members of the body of Christ
is to fill the gaps
rather than expose them.

He says that he did everything that would mark him out as an apostle of Christ.

He did all the signs and wonders,
the preaching
and the teaching.

There was and is no evidence that he is anything less than an apostle should be.

But these super apostles (as he calls them)
who have taken over as leaders of the church
have undermined his apostleship
and clearly described him as nothing!
He didn't even accept their financial support!

I want to comment in passing,
on the subject of apostles.

There has been a trend in recent times
for self-styled apostles to arise in the evangelical church
and for these men to assume authority over groups of churches who come
under their leadership.

Sometimes such authority is supported by a signs and wonders ministry.

These men act as kind of area managers
and exercise authority over the local leadership.

We reject this idea on the basis that there is no scriptural support for the notion that apostles will
suddenly arise in the 20th century,

noting that the great apostle Paul set up elders in every church,
not apostles.

Hence we practice an elder-based leadership model,
where the elders accept responsibility to lead the church
in ministry
and pastoral care,
but it is a service based leadership,
rather than an authoritarian leadership
such as is practiced in many of these apostolic led churches.

Moving on,

Paul tells them of his impending visit.

He confirms that once again he will not be dependent on their financial support.

He wants, not their money, but their souls for Jesus Christ.

Yes he would love them to contribute to the collection for the beleaguered church in Jerusalem,
but he is certainly not putting his hand in the bag for his own needs
as some have maliciously suggested.

Again you can sense the pain that these malicious allegations have caused this sensitive man.

How hurt he is that anyone could suggest that he wanted to trick them into supporting him
financially,
by asking for money for Jerusalem and then using it for his own needs.

Note here how worldly attitudes have so taken over the Corinthian church

that they are willing to attribute ulterior motives to the apostle Paul.
This is the way of the world.

Look at the way the popular press takes every opportunity to denigrate Posh & Becks.
Look how many times the rumours have been found to have no substance.

No, of course they're not perfect,
but they've achieved more than many of us.
And how would we like to be subjected to the 24 hour scrutiny of our lives that they
have to live with?

Look at the unfounded allegations made against Neil & Christine Hamilton.
They had to drag their case through the courts to clear their names.

Hardly anyone now thinks they are nice people.
Their reputation has been ruined by a lie.

Look at the unwarranted destruction of Prince Edward and Sophie,
engineered and applauded by the press
and condoned by the British public.

Listen to the conversation around the lunch table at your place of work
and note the destructive whining
and negative nature of the table talk.

See how good is derided
and bad is often applauded and encouraged.
And we are tainted with it.
We enjoy it.
We go along with it.
But it is not the way of Christ
and it should not be ours.

The Bible teaches that we should build one another up.
That we should look for and encourage what is good.
We should be incisive about what is bad
and do all we can to discourage and correct it.
And we should live upright and honest lives
as witnesses to the goodness and righteousness of the God whom we serve.

And this is what Paul is looking for
in the Christians at Corinth.
He says that he is afraid that when he comes to visit them
he will find that they are still following the sinful ways of the world.
Clearly these super apostles had been so busy destroying Paul's reputation
that sin was rampant in the church.

He is worried that he will find quarrelling,
jealousy,
anger,
factions,
slander,
gossip,
arrogance
and disorder;
and that they may not have repented from previously identified sexual sins,
immorality

and debauchery.
As I have said before,
 unless we constantly hold ourselves up to the light and teachings of God's word
 we bring the guerrilla morality of the ungodly,
 their attitudes
 and their values,
 the thought forms of the secular amoral worldview
 into the church
 and the church becomes corrupted.
We must always strive against such infiltration
 into our lives
 and into our church.

And so we come to the final chapter. -
 Suddenly Paul asserts his apostolic authority.

Though he is weak and hurt,
 downcast and despondent,
 he will find the strength of Christ in his weakness.
 The strength of the power of God
 as he exercises the apostolic authority that God has entrusted to him.

He requires them to examine their own faith.
 To check that they are true to Christ
 and that their lives are free from gross sin.

He hopes and prays that when he comes
 he will find them submissive to Christ,
 but he will deal severely with those who are still in rebellion.

He longs that this will be unnecessary,
 so that he can use his gifts to build them up in Christ,
 rather than tear them down with discipline.

No church leader appointed by the Lord likes to discipline members of the flock.
 How much more satisfying
 to use the gifts and authority that God has endowed
 to teach and build up the church.

But God has given responsibility for both
 and the calling demands that both roles are fulfilled.

Paul longs that whatever his weakness as their teacher,
 they will be strong in Christ.
 He reminds them that Christ Jesus dwells in them,
 if so be they are his
 and he pleads with them to do nothing wrong,
 to live out the righteousness that goes with the claims of Christianity
 and to strive for perfection.

As a church,
 to be of one mind
 and to live in peace.

I wonder, if Paul had been writing to us,
what he would have said?

I think he would have reminded the leaders
that they are called to love and serve the church.
Not to lord authority over them
but to nurture them in Christ who anointed them for the task.
To preach and teach with authority and conviction.
To remember that their strength comes from the Spirit of God
in spite of their own weakness and failure.

I think he would have reminded the deacons that theirs is a servant role.
To nurture and support the many facets of the church's work
and to be dependent on the Holy Spirit
for the holiness required to emulate Jesus.

And I think he would have encouraged the church as a whole
to demonstrate the love of Christ
both within and without the church.
To encourage one another in the Christian path,
to view the world from God's perspective
and to live out his ways and his righteousness
in every area of our lives.

Remember that God's strength is made known in our weakness
and that the indwelling Holy Spirit will lead us into all righteousness
if we acknowledge our sinfulness
and submit to Jesus Christ.

May the Lord richly bless us,
each and every one,
so that when he comes,
he will find us ready and waiting
to spend the rest of eternity with him.

The Lord be with you.

Amen

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