

Sermon

2Corinthians 4:7-5.1

Let the words of my mouth and and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.

Around this time three years ago, I arrived in Lara, your new priest, and started unpacking boxes in the recently repainted and refloored vicarage, reorganizing the church office, originally in the Op Shop sorting room, and doing a lot of walking with my dog Quinn, around my new home, exploring the various bike paths and of course the walks up in the You Yangs. Next Sunday, in fact, is the 3 year anniversary of my commissioning here by Bishop Kate, in a semi-locked down, and zoomed out service. So I'll organize some cake for next Sunday!

I also looked back to see what we were preaching. For the first time, I am in the same place when the 3 year lectionary cycle rolls around again. Three years ago, Revd Warren and I preached on Mark's Gospel for the four weeks following Trinity Sunday. So this year, I'm going to follow on from Leon's great sermon last week and preach through Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians. Philip will conclude this series in 5 weeks' time with a sermon on chapter 12 of the Letter. As usual, I encourage you to read the Letter in full over the next week or two. Perhaps set yourselves the challenge to read a chapter each night for the next 13 nights! Today we're going to continue to delve into chapter 4, immediately following on from last week's reading. But first let me give you some background to this Letter.

According to chapter 18 of the Acts of the Apostles, Paul visited Corinth after Athens and stayed for 18 months. During this time, he established the church there, initially from the Jewish community but later, after he started getting into trouble with the Jewish leaders, converting gentiles, or non-Jews who predominantly worshipped the gods of Greek mythology. Corinth was a seaport, a wealthy centre of trade and commerce, which at that time, was established as the Roman capital in Greece. It was

cosmopolitan and liberal, with a diversity of life styles and religious beliefs. Perhaps, not dissimilar culturally, to modern Melbourne and surrounds!

Some years later, as the church in Corinth grew and divisions became known, Paul wrote to them a series of pastoral letters, two of which have survived and made it into scripture. You might remember I preached on Chapters 12 and 13 of the First Letter a couple of years ago. This surviving second letter is probably the 4th Letter in the series. Some scholars even suggest it might be an amalgam of two letters. We'll probably never know exactly the order of correspondence but nevertheless these two letters to the Corinthians showcase Paul's mature theology, honed by years of missionary work, and they provide us with insight into how he viewed the character and life of the church. I think his writing, inspired by God, is as relevant today as it was 2000 years ago.

So last week, Leon unpacked the first part of chapter 4, that God shines in our hearts, that Jesus is made visible in our bodies. Paul uses the metaphor of treasure in clay jars. As vessels, we might be plain, fragile and prone to breaking, but we have this treasure within us. God pours into us life so that we are renewed day by day. It's one of the beauties of living a faith filled life. Every morning I wake up knowing I have another chance to live for the glory of God. How am I going to show Jesus to my world today?

If we look at today's reading, which continues on from last week, this concept of God's renewal in our lives and our faith in the eternal God is what Paul develops. Paul speaks into our faith, this treasure we have, and he does it quite brutally, addressing the harsh realities of human existence, suffering and physical decay.

How many of us suffer? How many of us are living with bodies or minds that are deteriorating or wearing out? When I look back on my own life, all 61 years of it, I see many joys, many blessings, and also many challenges. There has been grief and sorrow at failed relationships, there has been pain and anguish from multiple rounds of cancer. I actually don't think I would be in as good as shape as I am today without my faith, without that

treasure I have in this clay jar that I cart around day in, day out; without that renewal I have day by day through faith in God. Because as Paul tells the Corinthians:

“So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day.”

Being a person of faith means that despite all the challenges we face in our lives, we do not lose heart, we always have faith and hope. And this message is key in this chapter. At verse one Paul says “Therefore, since it is by God’s mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart.” God is our source of renewal, our treasure, our reason for being, our reason for ministry.

You know, I think we humans have a great tendency to use our gifts to maximize our agency and purchase in this earthly life. Our medical advancements, for which I personally am most grateful for, have extended our lives. The media, which surrounds us and dominates our airwaves and internet, gives us messages of how to live longer, live better, look more beautiful or get fitter, stronger, or even retain our youth. This focus on the outer nature, the here and now, what we can see, is driving, I think, an epidemic of anxiety and depression. It does us no good to be so self focused on the material benchmarks required of us by this inherently transient world. Paul says:

“For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.

Yes, Paul tells us our life on earth is momentary, even temporary, but it is a time to prepare for eternal glory. This glory he speaks about, what is it? We hear this word glory across scripture but what does it mean? Well, we can’t see God in a literal sense can we? Paul says “what cannot be seen is eternal”. But God chooses to show us the “glory” or the brightness. God displays glory for all to see by day in the brightness of the sun and by night with the moon and the stars. I’ve actually been amazed at how bright the

moon is here in Lara (and Little River). God revealed glory to Moses at the burning bush and atop Mt Sinai, and at the Transfiguration God's glory was revealed in Jesus to the three disciples on the mountain. Paul himself saw the glory of God on the road to Damascus creating one of the most dramatic of conversion stories. As we heard last week, through the gospel, God shines his light into our hearts to give us the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

And this brings us back to the first few verses of our reading today when Paul says.

“we also believe, and so we speak, because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence. Yes, everything is for your sake, so that grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.”

Our belief, our faith, is that we will be raised with Jesus into the presence of God. This is the eternal weight of glory, beyond all measure. This is where our day by day renewal is taking us. “For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.”

What a wonderful message. God is preparing us for eternity. So let us not be shy about this message. Yes, everything is for your sake, so that grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God. How can you show your thanksgiving to the glory of God? Let's extend this invitation to the people of Lara and Little River, that God shines a light into our hearts and renews us day by day. Who will you invite to Alpha?

Let us pray. Loving God, we do thank you for the Apostle Paul and his message today about your eternal presence in our lives. We pray that you will give us courage to share with others how you renew us day by day and have changed the way we look at our lives. We pray for all who are new in their faith, that you will strengthen them and show them your glory. We pray this Jesus' name, Amen.