

**SERMON – 4/11/18**

2 Corinthians 12:1-10

‘My grace is all you need, for my power is greatest when you are weak.’  
(2 Cor.12:9)

Right at the heart of Matthew, Mark and Luke's Gospels a story is recounted of something that happened to Jesus when only three of His disciples were present. In each of the accounts it comes right after Peter has recognised Jesus to be the Messiah and the Lord has revealed to His followers that that means He must suffer and die. Jesus takes Peter, James and John up a hill to pray and there they have an experience that is called the Transfiguration, when Christ's face is changed and His clothes become dazzling white. Moses and Elijah appear in heavenly glory and speak with Jesus in front of the amazed disciples and then they are all enveloped in thick cloud and they hear a voice saying 'This is my own dear Son – listen to Him!' What a mysterious event it is, but what always strikes me when I read it is how they come back down to earth with a bump as they find the other disciples arguing with the teachers of the Law and the crowd about their inability to heal a boy who is suffering from convulsions.

It highlights the tension that exists in the experience of Christian people between those sublime moments of spiritual joy and peace that we enjoy from time to time, those heavenly moments of revelation, and the harsh realities of everyday life on the ground, up against the struggles we endure in a world where there is pain and struggle and dispute.

It was that episode of the Transfiguration of Jesus and what led up to it and what happened after it that came to my mind as I reflected on our passage this morning from 2 Corinthians because here too we are lifted into the heights and plunged into the depths. In the previous chapter, the apostle has revealed his opponents in Corinth to be the frauds that they are by mimicking their boastful style. The difference with Paul is that he is happy to boast about the hardships he has endured and the weakness he felt in the midst of his trials, whereas the false apostles apparently wowed their audience with tales of sublime spiritual experiences – visions, revelations, encounters with angels. Paul will not speak of such experiences directly although it is widely assumed that the ‘certain Christian man’ that he describes in this morning's reading is Paul himself. Fourteen years

previously, he says, this man had been caught up into the highest heaven in a mystical experience of paradise where he heard things that cannot be put into words, things that human lips may not speak. The timescale takes us back in Paul's life to a time that is not described in the Book of Acts, a time when he was in his home town of Tarsus, the time immediately following his conversion when, as he hints at the opening of his letter to the Galatians he was working out the consequences of his conversion for his understanding of the Scriptures, a time when he would obviously have been much in prayer seeking the mind of Christ. The highest heaven that he speaks about is actually called 'the third heaven' in the Greek which we suppose is a way of describing the very presence of God – the first heaven being the skies where the birds fly, the second heaven being space where the stars and planets orbit. We are dealing here with mysteries that it is foolish to dwell on – Paul will not boast about them: that is the point he is making, and that is what he is criticising the false apostles for. He doesn't want anyone to think more of him than is warranted by his words and actions, which is actually some very sound advice for us too. You can speak about sublime spiritual experiences till you are blue in the face, but no-one can ever verify what you are saying – what matters is whether there is *fruit* from that experience in the way you speak and the way you act.

Paul gives himself away in v.7 when he identifies the man in Christ who had these surpassingly great revelations as himself – 'to keep *me* from being puffed up with pride' he writes, but here again he is emphasising his weakness – the 'painful physical ailment' that the Good News Translation has is translated by others as a 'thorn in the flesh.' There has been much discussion over the centuries about what the thorn in the flesh actually was. Some say that it was a physical ailment of some kind, a chronic illness, a weakness of the body, a disability perhaps, a stutter maybe. Others identify the thorn as his enemies, those who were making life difficult for him by undermining his work in different places and leading the churches astray. Either of these things – illness or opposition – could be regarded as messengers of Satan, because they had the potential to hold back the work of the Gospel. In a sense, it doesn't matter what the thorn actually was. Certainly for Christian people down through the ages there have been many different things that have been regarded as thorns in the flesh and that have been treated in the way that Paul describes here. 'Three times I prayed to the Lord about this and asked Him to take it away. But His answer was:

“My grace is all you need, for my power is greatest when you are weak.” That is what spurs the apostle on to boast all the more gladly about his weaknesses – he can’t lose! If his opponents accuse him of being weak and ineffectual, he rejoices the more because he recognises all the more that any achievements that have been made through his ministry have been accomplished not by him but by God.

What I want to highlight for you very simply this morning is that highs and lows *both* have a place in our Christian experience, and that if we learn to deal with them from a biblical perspective then we need not fret but rather increase our trust in the Lord as we rattle along the roller-coaster of life.

First of all, imagine yourself in a situation where you are full of joy and praise. There you are on the mountain-top of faith – your only problem is to find the words to describe your joy and the peace that is within you, and to find ways to glorify God. The Lord Himself is very near to you. Perhaps you want to cling on to that experience and remain there in the heights for ever. Now think of a time when you have been struggling in the depths – everything is set against you and you feel terrible. Will there ever be an end to the darkness and the heart-ache? Where is God in the midst of it all? Has He forsaken me altogether? Will I *ever* know again what it is to be at peace? Surely this is the work of the Evil One, to torment me like Job suffered of old.

But that’s not the only way to look at these scenarios. Without taking away from the spiritual joy of the mountain-top experience or the sense of the presence of God that floods you as you are caught up in sublime worship, what we often fail to see is the way that such experiences can sometimes even draw us away from God because we can become obsessed with the idea that it is only when we *feel* good or when our heart is bursting with joy that God is present, and we begin to seek after the experiences rather than seeking after the Lord Himself. Paul was wise enough to see how easy it would be to become conceited because he had been taken up to the third heaven. Whether or not the false apostles had indeed had genuine spiritual experiences, the fact that they were putting so much emphasis in what they said on those experiences was actually leading people away from God and not towards Him.

At the other end of the spectrum, we mustn’t ever assume that when bad things happen to us (when, not if), that these things are actually the work of

the Devil. Paul's 'thorn in the flesh' was at least in some measure a gift from God to keep him from becoming conceited, and the fact that the Lord said 'No' to its removal meant that, like the circumstances that Job faced, the matter was very firmly under God's control. Paul's acceptance of that 'No' from God was, in the fulness of time, a source of grace to him as he learned to depend and rely all the more on God when his thorn started to give him trouble or pain, whether it was illness within or animosity from without.

It is sometimes very hard to pin down what exactly it is that causes us to feel elated or depressed – for no apparent reason you can suddenly be filled with joy and excitement or you can suddenly feel very low – so it is very hard to engineer things so that we are able to maintain the kind of experiences that leave us rejoicing and avoid the kind of depressing circumstances that we know will leave us flat. For the fact of the matter is that you can feel at your most alone and frightened in the midst of what others would consider to be a time of great joy, and equally you can experience the deep transforming joy of the Lord in the very lowest places. What we need to seek in fact is not an experience but a presence, the presence of the Lord 'God with us' in the heights of sublime joy keeping us from becoming conceited or self-satisfied, and the presence of the Lord in the depths of profound darkness, keeping us from sinking when all around us is giving way. Peter said to Jesus on the mountain top, 'Lord, it is good for us to be here.' Even through his fear he could see that it was a moment blessed by the presence of the Lord Himself. What he needed to learn was that he couldn't bottle it and preserve it by putting up tents for Jesus, Moses and Elijah as he suggested they do. What he needed to learn was that it was just as good to be at the bottom of the hill too, where their fellow-disciples had met with failure and there were arguments and recriminations, because the Lord was also present with them there.

Perhaps you are bubbling over with joy this morning, full of faith in the goodness of the Lord and rejoicing in all that He has so graciously done for you, lost in wonder, love and praise. Or maybe you are struggling even to be here today, burdened by questions, bitter with anger at the lot which has fallen to you at this time, unable to see what God is doing. God is no less present in the valley of the shadow of death than He is on the mountain-top – He is working His purposes out and He says to us still as once He said to

the apostle Paul wrestling with his thorn in the flesh: 'My grace is all you need, for my power is greatest when you are weak.'