

## Reflection July 4<sup>th</sup>

Mark 6 v 1-13 and 2 Corinthians 12 v 2-10

I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows. And I know that such a person—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows— was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat. On behalf of such a one I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses. But if I wish to boast, I will not be a fool, for I will be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think better of me than what is seen in me or heard from me, even considering the exceptional character of the revelations. Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, **“My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.”** So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

In our world, weaknesses are not always welcome. In Corinth this was also true, beauty and physical strength were honoured. The apostle Paul, however, highlights the centrality and benefits of weaknesses through which God is manifested (2 Corinthians 12:10). After his dramatic conversion, which included temporary blindness, the tent-maker’s life was filled with trials and sufferings—enough to make even the strongest person turn back from serving God. Paul himself admitted that he could not count the number of floggings he received. He suffered close to 40 lashes five different times, was stripped and beaten with rods three times, and stoned once. He was shipwrecked and left for dead, betrayed by those portraying themselves as Christians, and imprisoned. We know Paul talked about a ‘thorn in his side’- perhaps a psychological and physical weakness.

When we are asked as Christians, to prove the existence of God or God’s presence in our lives, we have to be careful not lift up our “visions and revelations,” but also to have the humility to speak about our experiences of God’s grace and compassion in seasons of sicknesses, exclusions, isolations, death of loved ones, and all painful life episodes.

As Christians, we can know that the transformation and formation of not just ourselves but our Christian communities comes when we surrender to God with the good and difficult aspects of life. God gives the grace for us to support each other in our strengths and weaknesses. Perhaps the more we know our weaknesses, the more open we can be to let others serve us, and the more open hearted we can be with God to receive the strength God can give.

This Sunday we celebrate the fact that throughout various lock downs there have been many graces. We give thanks for the many people who have encouraged and supported us- those who have been God’s gift to us. We also celebrate the grace of God at work in Mike Badger as he joins us in worship for the first time as curate.

Things to ponder- how can weaknesses as well as strengths be a gift?

Revd Becky

*Sometimes the biggest strength can be found in how you understand and confront your greatest weaknesses.*

- Michael Springer

Almighty God, **by whose grace alone we are accepted and called to your service:**

strengthen us by your Holy Spirit and make us worthy of our calling; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

## HYMN REFLECTION from Malcolm Sturgess

John Newton is surely one of the most interesting people in the realm of hymnody. First point: do we tear up all his hymns because he was once involved in the slave trade? Of course not. He was most certainly not a hypocrite. Like Edward Colston, he was indeed involved in the slave trade, but also did a great deal of good, and we should look on both their lives complete, overall and in the context of the age in which they lived.

Second point: St. Ignatius Loyola, founder of the Jesuits, said, "Give me a child until he is seven years old and I will show you the man". Newton's mother was a non-conformist, who crammed his head with Christian doctrine until he was seven, then she died of TB. For the next 23 years he lived what must have been an incredibly hard life, not only physically, but spiritually. Even while still a slave ship captain he "sought to restrain the worst excesses of the slave trade", and "promote the life of God in both his crew and his African cargo." His mind must have been in turmoil. We know he called himself a "wretch" in his most famous hymn. "The man" finally emerged in 1755, and took Holy Orders.

Slave trader to Christian benefactor; Jesuit exemplar to Evangelical Anglican; last week's complicated Public School hymn to this, the simplest possible, emerging from the school of hard knocks. The Grace of God is everywhere, if we can recognise it.

This hymn has been sung to an unusual number of different tunes, some more suitable than others. In my first three years as a chorister, 1944-6, the choir sang it in the vestry after every service, still remembered from boyhood as a lovely gentle moment. We sang it to an old German tune, harmonised by Bach, now variously known as *Gott des Himmels*, *Waltham*, or *Albert*, so to me that is the right tune.

May the grace of Christ our Saviour,  
and the Father's boundless love,  
with the Holy Spirit's favour,  
rest upon us from above.

Thus may we abide in union  
with each other and the Lord,  
and possess, in sweet communion,  
joys which earth cannot afford.