

Faith's defiance

The man we know of as Paul had one major problem with the Church in the ancient city of Corinth: there were evidently people there who simply did not rate him. The fact that he had founded this church, that it owed its very existence to his preaching and witness, did not prevent members of the church there from looking down upon Paul and mistrusting him. Some of them apparently rated other leaders of the early Christian church more highly than him. Some of them apparently resented his authority. And some of them wanted to know why they should respect him and pay any attention at all to his teaching and direction.

Now, that puts Paul in a difficult position. He does not want to come across as defensive and so he is faced with the dilemma of how he commends himself to these quarrelsome Corinthian Christians. And we might wonder what we might do if we were Paul, how we would assert ourselves. Maybe we would try to draw attention to our CV, to our impressive qualifications and experience. We might try to hype ourselves as much as possible, to point to our proven strengths and abilities. Well, Paul, to his credit, does the very opposite. He seems to almost glory in his weakness. He seems to revel in the fact that he has nothing to offer the Corinthians to impress and to persuade them. All that he has is the Spirit of God at work in him. His weakness, his lack of any qualifications, his lack of anything to boast about, are just an opportunity for the grace and power of God to be demonstrated more fully and completely in him. He is not interested in proclaiming himself: all he can do is testify to the power of God at work in him. After all, says Paul, this is the God who in the beginning called light to explode out of darkness. And then he goes on to use a striking image, of a clay jar: maybe he is thinking of a simple clay lantern from which there shines a light. He is just such a jar, but within it there is housed the treasure that is the Holy Spirit of God: as he puts it, 'so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power' – the power at work in him – 'belongs to God and not to us.' And from there he goes on to list a series of hardships that he has endured, hardships that could so easily have destroyed him but which by the grace of God did

not: ‘we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted but not forsaken; struck down but not destroyed...’ And as we read this extraordinary testimony there is one word that come to mind and that is ‘defiance’ – defiance in the face of difficulty. And I would suggest to you that defiance is a key Christian quality, a feature of the people of God called to bear witness to Christ, however hard their circumstances.

We see defiance in Jesus, as he was stalked and hounded by those who wished him harm. We see defiance in the incident we read of in our gospel reading where he defies the inhuman practice of the law that made the sabbath an oppressive day instead of one of rest and recreation. We see defiance in Paul and his fellow Christians who, when thrown into prison for their witness, drove their captors mad by singing the night away in their jail cells. Here was a refusal to submit to the regime of death. Here was defiance.

You see, it is abundantly clear that being a Christian is not an insurance policy against trials and tribulations. It is not a ‘get out jail free’ card. But with the grace and strength of God at work in our lives we defy and rise above that which would destroy us.

When I think of such defiance there is one image from my own ministry that comes to mind. In my church in London some years ago there was a wonderful West Indian woman known as Gransie, for she was a grandmother but in some ways she was also like the grandmother of the church. She had known her fair share of hardship. She had migrated to Britain in the 1950s as part of the so-called Windrush generation that we have been hearing about lately. She’d experienced racism and rejection, but she was a serene and a wise woman. Some years previously she had suffered the death of a daughter. And then, while I was her minister, one day tragedy struck again. Another daughter died. Gransie was grief-struck and it fell to me to take her daughter’s funeral. One thing in particular stays with me from that funeral – an image that will be forever imprinted on my mind as a symbol of the Christian life. Right at the end of the service, before the final hymn, Gransie came to the front and addressed the congregation. ‘You are going to have to pray for me’, she said. ‘I am relying on you because I can’t possibly pray at the moment’ – too much pain. But then we began the final hymn which was ‘How great thou art’:

‘ O Lord my God, when I in awesome wonder,
Consider all the works thy hand has made...’

‘Then sings my soul, my Saviour God, to thee,
How great thou art, how great thou art...’

... and so on. And as we sang that hymn, as the singing swelled, Gransie slowly raised a clenched fist in the air. It’s a defiant gesture usually associated with Black Power, but this was not about black power. This was about spiritual defiance. It was gesture said it all: yes, so much I have endured – and now this. And I am weak and beyond praying – but how great thou art and I will not be overcome. That image has stayed with me.

Afflicted in every way, crushed, struck down... But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.’ Amen.

Gracious and loving God,
we rejoice to gather here today and to honour you
with our worship and praise.
We rejoice that once more you have brought day out of night,
light out of darkness,
showing your faithfulness to the world you love.
We praise you that you have given us strength
and health enough for a new day, a new week.
And here you meet us in one another,
and in our worship, and in bread and wine;
and here we turn to the source of the life
that is at work in us.
Forgive us, merciful God, that we come here
compromised by the world we live in;
forgive us that we come here conscious of the ways
we choose darkness over light,
so aware of our weakness and frailty
and the power of death at work in us.
We thank you that here we are reassured of your love.
We thank you that here we find Jesus in our midst
and we are fed by your Holy Spirit.
So bless us in this time, we pray.
Come to us and renew us
that the life of Jesus may be made visible
in our mortal bodies, to the glory of your name.
and we pray in the words Jesus taught us to pray,
saying...