

Since I was last in church, I've gained a son-in-law and a new lectern, and I'm very happy with both. Sam became my son-in-law a couple of weeks ago at a very beautiful ceremony at a 950-year-old church back in England. And I got the lectern from which I'm now speaking at a flea market in Spitalfields, because I've had lots of complaints over the last few years about the music stand that I've been using, so this looks a bit more ecclesiastical, I hope.

I'd like to thank Christina who held the fort so well in my absence. It's great to have such a wonderful and reliable colleague, and I'd like to congratulate you Christina on your new appointment, which was very much in the offing when I left, but I was delighted it was firmed up in my absence.

I do like being away, but it is nice to come back, and my re-entry into parish life this year was eased by the fact that when I looked at the reading set for today, the reading from two Corinthians, which we heard earlier, the epistle. is one of my favorite readings in the whole Bible. So, I want to speak about that. There's lots of sermons I could give on that passage, but the one thing I want to speak about today addresses something we hear a lot about in the news and in the media, which is about identity. And there seems to be, in our current crisis culture, a crisis of identity, to which I think this passage from two Corinthians speaks.

We seem to struggle these days to have a good understanding of ourselves, our sense of worth or self-image, and this is a passage which speaks directly to how to develop a positive and healthy self-understanding. But before I get into the details of that, let me just say a few words about the context which is relevant here and about the situation in Corinth, the church there to which Saint Paul is writing.

And he's writing to them particularly to counter some lies which have been said about him because there were people at the time who were very against Saint Paul, and they would go into the churches that he'd founded and kind of speak against him, and they would say things like, "Don't listen to Saint Paul. Why bother it with him? He's so weak and he's always ill and he doesn't speak very well, and he's not much to look at," all of which I think was possibly true. And Paul is writing to counter that.

And we see throughout the letter him saying "this isn't true" and attacking those who would attack him, which is why sometimes his letters like this one can feel a bit

sort of defensive, is because, well, he is on the defensive, he's countering those who speak against him. But he's addressing their complaint, which is why listen to Saint Paul because he wasn't actually one of Jesus's disciples. Where does his authority come from? Why would you listen to him? Why should he be the one who teaches you? And the key image he uses to counter this attack comes in this passage. Paul describes himself as a jar of clay with treasure within. And this is the image I want to explore because as I've said, I think it's extremely relevant, not just for Saint Paul, but for all of us to explore what that means, to understand ourselves as a jar of clay with treasure within. Our situation is different to Saint Paul, but we deal with similar questions.

Professor Frank Furedi gave a lecture at the Royal College of Art some time ago, which caused quite a stir. And it was about the questions that Paul is tackling, namely, where do we turn for authority? Where do we derive our self-confidence, our sense of worth? And what Professor Furedi noticed was that as a society, as a culture, we've lost confidence. Whereas it just used to be that there were figures in the church or elsewhere who would make pronouncements as authoritative, now everybody's at it.

We have people who tell us what to wear, what not to wear, what to eat, what property to buy, how to bring up our kids, how to stay looking young, how to lose weight. The list goes on and on. So-called experts. And the thing is, we lap it up. We look to the likes of Martha Stewart, social media influencers, anybody called Kardashian, to get tips on how to live because we've lost confidence in ourselves and our own judgment. We need direction from a so-called expert to find our way, and I quote Furedi, "There's nothing we can trust ourselves with, not even the most fundamental and primitive thing, such as eating, having sex, or raising a child." And I think Professor Furedi is right when he says that the collapse of traditional authority figures has not resulted in a less deferential and more questioning society, but rather a society more enslaved to hustlers, therapists, influences. He concludes, "We're entirely subservient to unacknowledged forms of authority. Where," he asks, "Do we get our self-confidence?"

Saint Paul never lost his self-confidence, but it's clear as we read two Corinthians that he had an unusual form of such confidence. It's based on this image of a clay jar with treasure within. And the clay jars he's referring to, you know what he's talking about, they were a common site in the Middle East. They'd carry everything from

grain to wine to water. And every archeological dig that's ever happened seems to dig up these clay jars.

They were common but fragile. They were only used for a few years. So, by comparing himself to a clay jar, Paul's speaking to himself on one level as very ordinary and transitory, fragile. He says, "I'm a clay jar, not a Ming Vase." He is clear too about what the treasure is that's within the jar: It's "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." Paul had this deep sense of knowing God and the light of which he speaks was the knowledge of God.

Paul's talking about the joy of knowing God, of being in relationship with God. That's a treasure that he knew he had. He can't think of anything more valuable. And what lies at the heart of this image is the beautiful balance between the ordinariness of the jar and the value of the treasure. And this allows Paul to maintain the balance between humility of knowing that he's just an ordinary, fragile jar, but he has that confidence of knowing the treasure that's within that jar.

So, Paul is comfortable saying that he has the authority to teach the Corinthians, to chide them and build them up, but he's also ready to admit his own fallibility and weakness. And it's hard to maintain that balance. We all know people who go off at one end of the scale. They're either horribly brash and unnecessarily confident, or they struggle with any sense of self-worth and can't see any value in themselves. And Paul has got this image which holds both of those extremes together and allows him to say at the same time, "I'm a clay jar, but this treasure lies within." And Paul's enemies in Corinth made the mistake of only seeing the clay jar. They missed the treasure within.

There was a British ambassador to the States after the war called Sir Oliver Franks, and this was a very busy time in Anglo-American relations, and there were lots of messages going backwards and forth. And the ambassador said that he often would send messages in diplomatic bags, but if he had something really important, really confidential that he wanted to send to America, he'd put it in the mail, because he said no one would look there. They weren't expecting to find anything in the mail. And that's the mistake that Saint Paul's enemies made. They didn't look past the ordinariness of the outside. They failed to find the treasure within.

And this way of understanding ourselves can accommodate the fact that we are flawed, we are clay

jars, we are weak, we are fragile. It doesn't demand perfection of ourselves. And let me just tell you a little parable from India to illustrate this point. It's about a man who had two jars either end of a pole and his job was to go down to the stream every morning, fill up these two jars on the poles and take them up a long path to a rich man's house so he had water for the day. And one of the jars was perfect, the other jar was cracked, which meant that every day when he took his walk, he'd arrive with one and a half jars full of water at the house, one was full, the other was half empty.

And this upset the cracked pot who was very apologetic and said to him, "I'm sorry that I can only carry half the water." He said, "Don't worry." He said, "When we go up today, look at the flowers on the path as you go up." And sure enough, when he walked to the house that day, he saw a whole load of wildflowers on the path. And the man said to him, "Well, for two years I've been planting seeds on one side of the path because you'll see the flowers are only on one side." And he said, "As we've walked to the house every day, you've been watering that side of the path. So, you're the one that's enabled me to pick all these flowers, to take with the water to the house." Our woundedness, our flaws, are part of our uniqueness and can be put to use for God's glory. We're not to seek perfection in ourselves.

So, I've said something about what the clay jar image says about us in the here and now. And before I close, I just want to say something about how this passage helps us to locate ourselves in time. As this passage develops, Paul introduces the perspective of eternity, which enables him to draw some significant contrasts between outer failings and inner renewal, present troubles, and future glory, what is seen, and what is not seen. And the jar has a limited lifespan, but the treasure within, is forever. The knowledge of God of which Paul was so confident, is an enduring knowledge, something that persists beyond the grave.

And this knowledge made Saint Paul a "but not" Christian. We are hard-pressed, but not crushed. Perplexed, but not in despair. Persecuted but not abandoned. Struck down, but not destroyed. Paul may have reached his wits end, but he never reached his hopes end. Saint Paul would say, "Attend to the treasure within." Don't get caught up with the outside, the surface of life. You're a clay jar, treasure the treasure within. Put your confidence and hope in the one who is made known in Jesus Christ, whose Spirit dwells in you. You are a clay jar with treasure within. Amen.