

If you were here a couple of weeks ago, you'd have heard me talking about one of my favorite passages in the whole Bible from Paul's letter to the 2 Corinthians. And the reason I like it is because Paul expounds there upon an image by which he understands himself, a metaphor he uses to apply to his own life. He says he's a clay jar with treasure within. And that's an image that over the years I've found very helpful when understanding who we are, how we're to see ourselves. We're clay jars with treasure within. And I want to return to that theme now because I think this passage, the epistle that we've just heard read from 2 Corinthians which follows on from the readings of previous weeks, builds on that image. And I think what we can see here is Paul explaining a bit more about the treasure that's within the clay jar of his flawed mortal body.

So, I want to pick out three things that I think describe the treasure within. But first, let remind you of the context in which Paul is writing because that's very important, particularly when looking at a passage like this. You'll remember that Paul founded this church in Corinth, and he stays there and gets it going. And then he goes on to somewhere else around the Mediterranean to plant another church. And what's happened in Corinth is that some teachers have come in who really don't like Paul, and actually they badmouth him and speak against him. And they call themselves the super-apostles and they're causing trouble, which is why Paul had occasion to write this letter. So, these super-apostles, they're always criticizing St. Paul. And we can get some idea of the criticisms they were making by things that Paul himself says in the text. So, for instance, Paul refers to those who boast in outward appearances. And in a later chapter, he actually uses quotation marks to quote a specific criticism that they're making. He said, "For they say, 'His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak and his speech contemptible'."

St. Paul was clearly not an imposing figure. If he was alive today, he wouldn't be a televangelist. He doesn't have that kind of charisma. He was very aware of his own weaknesses. He compares himself, remember, to a fragile clay pot, ordinary, flawed. His detractors are constantly putting him on the back foot. So, in 2 Corinthians, he can sound as elsewhere a bit defensive. Chapter 11 he says, "I think that I am

not in the least inferior to these 'super-apostles'," which means they were saying he was inferior. That's why he's forced to sound so defensive. And these opponents of Paul, they're concentrating on outward appearances. They don't like Paul largely because of what he looks like. And that's a human trait that's as evident in 21st century La Jolla as 1st century Corinth.

But St. Paul says there's another way. "I walk by faith, not by sight," he says. He says, "I don't boast about outward appearances. I focus on the heart." Paul's interest is in what is unseen, not what is seen. To put it in terms of the central message or image that I was talking about the other week, Paul doesn't focus on the clay jar, he's more interested in the treasure within. That's what's important to him. So let me offer a reading of this passage, spelling out three bits, three elements of the treasure that Paul sees in the clay jar.

The first is confidence. See how the passage begins, "We are always confident," and I think he's using the royal we here, and that's a thing that runs throughout Paul's writings. The super-apostles are saying he doesn't have much going for him. He's weak, he doesn't preach well, he's not much to look at. He's always suffering. He's always ill. But they miss the rock on which Paul's confidence was built.

He spells it out in the book of Philippians where he writes this. "If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more. Circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews. As to the law, a Pharisee. As to zeal, a persecutor of the church. As to righteousness under the law, blameless." Top of the class. "Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord." Paul's confidence is built on the fact that he knows the God made known in Christ, that he has a relationship with Christ Jesus. Everything flows from that. His sense of self, his understanding of the world, it was all based on his knowledge of Christ Jesus.

What about us? What's our confidence based on? It can be misplaced. There's a story of a country fair, and there was a boy climbing in a tree and he fell out, and he fell quite a long way and really damaged his head. But fortunately, there was a neuroscientist in

the fair as well, who was tending to him. And there was a little crowd around the injured boy. But then there was a voice piped up and said, "Okay, move away. Move away. I'm coming through. I'm a boy scout and I have a first aid badge." In that context, the first aid badge wasn't good enough. That wasn't a suitable grounds for confidence. It didn't provide a satisfactory foundation on which to build our self-confidence. And Paul would say that those whose confidence is in outward appearance or achievements are making a similar mistake. That's not a secure place to anchor your soul. Knowing Jesus, developing a relationship with him, that's the only secure foundation on which to build.

So secondly, the second element of Paul's treasure is purpose. Paul had confidence and Paul had a purpose. He spells his purpose out. "Knowing the fear or rather the awesomeness of the Lord, we try to persuade others." And he goes on to count himself as one of those who live no longer for themselves, but rather live for Him who was raised. Paul was utterly convinced that everybody, everybody he met, needed to hear the good news that Jesus had died for all. He says, "One has died for all, therefore all have died," which can sound a bit odd, but he spells it out in Romans. What he's saying here is that he's comparing Jesus and Adam, and he's saying just as somehow we're all connected to Adam in the sense that we're all tainted by Adam's sin, so in a similar way we're all connected to Jesus and we can all benefit from his victory on the cross and in the resurrection so that his victory can be our victory.

So, Jesus he presents there as like a second Adam. So, God offers in Jesus Christ a free gift of grace, forgiveness, and justification. Through what Jesus has done for us, we can be put right with God, we can be reconciled with God, we can share in that relationship with God. And that was the anchor of Paul's soul. He was so gripped by this message, he was convinced everyone should hear it, that he had to share it with everyone. That was his purpose. His life was given over to persuading others.

The third element, third and final element of the treasure in Paul's clay jar was love. This was the source of Paul's motivation. See what he says here, "For the love of Christ urges us on." I've heard it said that there are basically two motivating forces in life,

fear and love. Paul was definitely motivated by love. He knew all about love. He wrote that magnificent piece in 1 Corinthians that we read at weddings so often. Then he writes these words in Romans 8, "For I am convinced that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Right at the core of his inner being St. Paul knew that God loved him. Everything else flowed from that knowledge. It drove him forward. It says the love of Christ "urges him on". And the word urge here is a Greek word, which means compressed or hemmed in. It's like if you are going along a big river in a canoe, and it's a wide river with banks on either side, you're not going very fast. But then if the river gets narrower and the cliffs are on either side, the water gets choppy because it's being compressed, it's being hemmed in. And that's when your canoe is going to go really fast because the water is urging you on. You go fast. That's what Paul is saying here. The love of Christ urges him on.

And my prayer for St. James is that we might be urged on by love just as St. Paul was urged on by Christ's love. It's when we're gripped by that knowledge that God loves us, that we push on in faith. That's where we find our confidence and our purpose and the resources to serve others. So, confidence, purpose, love. These are the treasures within Paul's clay jar. These are characteristics of the inner nature that we are to pursue.

David Brooks talks about two perspectives of living your life. We can pursue resume virtues or eulogy virtues. So, resume virtues are what you'd boast about at a job interview. We're all conditioned to seek those. Eulogy virtues are what get talked about at our funeral. They speak of the inner depth of character, not merely our accomplishments, our wealth, our power, our status. Eulogy virtues are the treasures within. So, let's aim to follow the wisdom of St. Paul. He knew he was a clay jar, but he had treasure within. Amen.