

SERMON FOR PENTECOST 7

7 JULY 2024

ST DAVID'S, BURNSIDE

“So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.” 2 Cor 12.9b

The Corinthian church was a troublesome church. To get a fuller taste of Paul's difficulties with the Corinthian congregation one should read Paul's first letter. Corinth was a thriving city on the isthmus leading to the Peloponnese and standing at the cross roads for trade and commerce between Spain and Italy to Asia Minor in the east.

Factions within the church concerned Paul and were the occasion for writing this first letter to the church there. *“I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another that there may be no divisions among you, and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought.”* Paul continues, *“There are quarrels among you; One of you says ‘I follow Paul’, another ‘I follow Apollos,’ another, ‘I follow Cephas,’ still another, ‘I follow Christ.’”* 1 Cor. 1. 10-12

In Paul's second Corinthian's letter he reveals the accusation that his personal integrity and authority as an apostle is false. There are what I call interlopers who, during Paul's absence in Ephesus, challenge his teaching with their own. And this is where our New Testament reading finds its context. Paul's response is in two parts as we shall see. The first part is his experience fourteen years ago that can best be described as an ecstatic experience. The second is that in spite of his ability to boast about that experience it is his humility and weakness he chooses to boast about.

“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. 2 Cor. 12. 2-5

Of interest is the use of the word Paradise in verse 4. I didn't know until researching for this sermon that the word Paradise, adopted into Greek, was the name of a Persian nobleman's park and used of the Garden of Eden. It was here in verse 4 that Paul, or should I say 'a man,' was caught up to the 'Third Heaven'- 'Paradise' and heard inexpressible things; *‘that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat.’*

C.K. Barrett remarks on Paul's words in 2 Corinthians. *“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.”*

Barrett comments that Paul does not seem to know whether this rapture, this transportation, was experienced from within his physical body or within his spiritual body. This is why Paul says his experience, this rapture, is one he cannot place. Did his soul leave his physical body and have dealings with spiritual, non-corporeal beings?

Regarding Paul's experience of the third heaven Barrett mentions that in the apocryphal Book of Enoch, Enoch is transported to the second heaven then the third, and then the fourth, and then the fifth, and so on to the ninth heaven. I mention this detail because it reveals the long standing presence of mystical writings and expressions of transport to the heavenly realms that existed in Greece during the time of Paul. (*The Book of Enoch* preceded the birth of Christ).

So the contest of experience between Paul and the interlopers and the internal factions reveal Paul's method to contain those forces distracting the Corinthian church. The first we have dealt with, that is, the ecstatic and revelatory experience of fourteen years ago. The second is his explanation that in spite of his ability to boast about this experience he would rather admit to his personal weaknesses, so that any merit in his ministry as an apostle solely rests on what he says and does for Christ's sake. *"Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weakness, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong."* 2 Cor. 12. 9b-10

So, importantly, what are we going to take away with us now?

- The Corinthian church was riddled with factions and delighting in the promotion of their credentials.
- There were interlopers in the Corinthian church dissuading the congregation from following Paul's teaching, and claiming he was not an apostle.
- Paul contests these destabilising elements by relating his ecstatic experience of fourteen years ago. Something he could boast about.
- Paul reveals that any worthiness in his ministry is because of the presence of Christ. It is his personal weakness that reveals the presence of Christ and it this that he will boast about.
- If we take away with us an acceptance that any benefit there is from what we say and do in Christ's name is because Christ is with us. That is where there is room for us to boast.
- And not least, it gives us a better understanding of and acknowledgment that there is a very long history of revelatory language and practice within the church during the early part of the first century and towards our own time.
- And hopefully it gives us a better appreciation of the early difficulties facing the church and it's teachers, like Paul.

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Fr John
Saturday 6 July 2024