

Homily for the Fourteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year B)

St Paul's second letter to the Corinthians is one of his most passionate pieces of writing. He is responding to those who have criticised him, people who have said he is no real apostle. Paul is feeling hurt, rejected and misunderstood. The Corinthian church is made up of people that he has trusted, people that he has loved, and they seem to be turning on him. This would have turned a lesser person to self-pity, but in Paul it brings out some of his most appealing and passionate writing. He responds to those who accuse him of not having enough miraculous achievements with real frustration. They seem to have completely misunderstood the whole pattern of the life and death of Jesus. It is not strength, but weakness, that allows the power of God to be seen. When Paul has prayed to be set free of some physical trial that has struck him, the response he received was 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness'. While others are looking for powerful miracles, for mighty deeds, for success on all sides, Paul points out that this is not the way of Christ. Jesus willingly left the safety of heaven to live among us, to live as one of us, to make himself available to us, even to make himself powerless in our hands. He did not ever grasp onto power: when he healed people, instead of telling them to spread the message, he told them to keep it to themselves; when huge crowds came to hear him, he did not manipulate the crowd with clever oratory or cheap rabble-rousing, but he almost deliberately alienates them by confronting them with hard teachings, difficult things to accept, so that they turn away. Immediately after feeding the 5000, when they would have done anything for him Jesus realises that the people want to take him and make him their king, he slips away all by himself (Jn6.15). Shortly after that, when the crowd is still looking for him, Jesus tells the people that he is the bread of life, destined to be betrayed, and 'because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him' (Jn 6.66).

It is very clear from the gospels that Jesus utterly rejects the 'will to power', that idea of humanity as motivated by achievement and ambition directed at overtaking others. St Paul understands this very clearly when he writes to the Philippians that Jesus 'though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave...being found in human form he humbled himself...even to death on a cross' (Phil 2.6-8). The Corinthians have fallen for a flashy kind of religion with plenty of wow factor, but this is not what St. Paul sees in the life of Jesus. He says 'If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness' (2 Cor 11.20) and 'whenever I am weak, then I am strong' (2 Cor 12.10).

This is very difficult for us to understand. It does not seem to be the way that the world works. Looking around us it seems that on every side the strong impose their will on the weak. Strong governments oppress and silence their people; violent men terrorise and enslave ordinary decent people; the rich impose their will on the poor. Has St Paul completely lost the plot? In fact, a little thought shows us that on a simple human level there is a lot to be said for weakness. It has turned out to be a powerful (if that makes any sense) political tool. It was Gandhi's weakness, not his power, that helped to end British rule in India; the same is true of the 1989 velvet revolution in Czechoslovakia; in Burma and in Iran the weakness of ordinary people who speak up against power have needed

and infuriated the powerful. Power feeds off power. My gang beats up one of your gang, so your gang beats up two of mine so my gang beats up three and so on, and so on. People stop taking any notice, because it seems everyone deserves what they get. But if my gang beats up one of you, and you just sit there I am confused; what should I do next; I expect a reaction, so I get more and more violent, trying to provoke you to respond. In the end other people see what is happening and they intervene. My violence has been the instrument of its own destruction. Your weakness has unmasked my violence, has shown it up for what it really is. If you had responded with violence, no one would have been very interested, but because you remained weak, I have been shown up for what I really am.

St. Paul, however, is not delivering a lecture in political non-violence. This is exactly what happened with Jesus. If he had gathered his supporters to fight the Jewish leaders or the Romans, he would have died as just another revolutionary. But when Peter strikes the High Priest's servant Jesus says 'Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword' (Mt. 26.52). Jesus does not resist, he does not respond. As first the priests, then the Romans try to provoke him, he refuses to be led. He soaks up their insults and their violence and their hatred without a sound, and in doing so he unmasks their hatred and the emptiness that lies within. Whenever we are tempted to respond to provocation, to the goading of others with acts of violence, or with a sharp word or a cutting glance, we should remember the crucified Lord, soaking up a world of cruel violence: do we want to make the burden heavier? We should remember St. Paul who says 'If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness' (2 Cor.11.30). Violence springs from a fear of appearing weak. A little honesty with ourselves helps us see this. Weakness is nothing to fear. Who would you trust more, a doctor who had acknowledged his mistakes and tried to learn from them, or one who claimed never to have made a mistake and blamed them all on someone else? Who would you rather vote for, an MP who admitted he had made expenses claims that were wrong and said he was sorry, or one who said he had done nothing wrong and that what looks to us like dishonesty was only an error of judgement, or was well within the rules that he had helped to make?

One of the reasons that Christianity so infuriates people is that it resolutely insists on standing up for the weak. When other people want to forget them, or hide them, or ignore them, or annihilate them, we insist on caring for them, loving them, telling the world about them. People who rely on their own strength don't need God. They think they can manage without him. When St Paul hears 'My power is made perfect in weakness' he realises that this means that when we admit we are weak, when we admit we cannot manage alone, when we admit we need help, we leave space for God to work; but when we pretend to be self-sufficient and all-powerful, we shut God out. The people of Jesus' home town were unique. Everywhere else people came to him for help, for healing, for forgiveness, and they received what they wanted. In Jesus' home town the people refuse to believe they need anything he can offer, so 'he could work no miracle there'. (Mk 6.5). St. Paul's words today look like madness; but like everything Christian they turn the world upside down, and from that angle what he says makes perfect sense, and all our worship of power looks destructive, shallow and insane.