

Fifth Sunday after Trinity 2021 (4.07.2021)

2 Corinthians 12: 2 – 10; Mark 6: 1 – 13

The first reading we heard today, from 2 Corinthians, is part of the Bible. It's Holy Scripture. And therefore I'm conscious that we've got to approach it with a certain amount of respect and deference. The problem is that when I hear passages like this from St. Paul – and there are others like this one – I can't help but hear double-speak. Paul says he saying one thing, but what's effectively communicated – the message that's received – is the exact opposite.

In this passage Paul speaks of his weaknesses; he says he's tormented; he says "on my own behalf I will not boast"; and he says he want to be kept from being too elated. But I don't know about you: the message I receive from this passage, what's communicated, is Paul saying "I'm entitled to boast"

St. Paul *was*, by any reckoning, probably the most significant Christian there has ever been. When the

Church Fathers, in the third and fourth and fifth centuries, were hammering out what Christian doctrine is, they were ranging over what he wrote in these letters to like the ones to the Corinthians. St. Paul is responsible for Christian doctrine, although it had to be formulated in a systematic way by others subsequently – and that admittedly was a drawn out and contentious process. And of course, in the Protestant tradition, there are churches where St. Paul overshadows Jesus – and I'm not joking: there really are churches where much greater authority is attributed to Paul's letters than to the Gospels.

And Paul cannot have been unaware of the leadership he was exercising and the influence he was having; how he instrumental he was being in the transition from Christianity being a minority sect within the Jewish faith to being a world faith in its own right. And what Paul is trying to do in the passage we've heard today – whether convincingly or not – is to demystify himself. There was no point in trying to

deny what his achievements were. But he was saying, look at the end of the day I'm just a bloke called Paul.

I hope that by now, if I mention the Living Christ's Story consultation, increasing numbers of people will know what I'm talking about. It's a consultation across York Diocese about how we restructure our ministry and mission so that we grow younger congregations and turn round the financial crisis we as a Diocese face. The Priory's PCC met during this last week for the first of a series of additional meetings to engage with the present round of consultation. The Archbishop of York has described the challenge as being about the church becoming simpler, humbler and bolder. It's going to involve discerning and releasing lay leadership from within congregations and becoming less dependent on clergy. Part of that process will have to include demystifying clergy just as St. Paul was trying to demystify himself to the Christians in Corinth.

Not so long ago I was trying to encourage someone within the Priory community to do something and they said to me that they couldn't possibly do what I was asking because they were just a simple Christian. I just managed to bite my tongue and prevent myself from saying "But I'm just a simple Christian as well." Now of course if I had said that it would have been crass and looked as if I wasn't listening to what was being said to me.

There is an enormous perceived gulf between a simple Christian on the one hand, who's not had much Christian instruction other than perhaps Confirmation classes decades ago and absorbing weekly sermons, which might be of variable quality; and on the other hand someone like me who is a professional Christian, who's been a full time student at Theological College, has the benefit of being ordained and who takes a professional and intellectual interest in keeping abreast of what's being published.

But, you know, clergy training is very thin. Most clergy, even full time paid clergy, train by going to evening classes and some weekends on top of whatever else they did pre-ordination. Even though I had the privilege of going to college, we were only there just over five terms. We skimmed over the surface of a lot of subjects.

Our daughter did A-level RE and she thought she had this secret weapon, an in-house vicar, someone the initials after whose name suggests he's a Master of Theology. I was hopeless! I couldn't answer any of her questions. I don't know as much theology as the A-level syllabus.

And then added to that – I've been here eight years now – many people here will know my faults, my weakness, the flaws in my character. It wouldn't have been at all helpful if I'd said to the person I was talking to that I was a simple Christian. But standing here week by week, that's how it feels to me. There's certainly nothing to boast about.

But of course there is a difference. And the difference is simply that I had the audacity – and it is a question of audacity – I had the audacity to believe that I was called: simple and flawed, just a bloke called Matthew though I am.

And that shouldn't really come as that much of a surprise. It's how it's always been, going right back to days of Jesus himself. The twelve people we heard about in the Gospel reading whom Jesus sent out two by two: they had no professional training; they took no resources with them. They simply went out and proclaimed that all should repent. And look what happened: they cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.

If we are to grow simpler and humbler and bolder churches, simple Christians – even simple Christians like you – are going to have the audacity to believe that Jesus is calling and sending you.

Amen.