

Looking Not to Ourselves, but to God

2 Corinthians 4 v5-12, Mark 2 v23-36

St John's Keswick, 3rd June, 2018

Have you ever seen one of those visual puzzles, where you see something different depending on how you look at it? For example, if you look at it one way all you see is an abstract pattern and if you look at it another way the shape of a face emerges. I find them quite fascinating!

Looking at such a puzzle is just a bit of fun, but sometimes how we look at things is very important. Do we have our focus on what is truly important and life giving or not?

Both of our readings this morning challenge us not to focus on the rules, gifts and weaknesses of human beings but rather on the life, power and healing of God.

In our gospel reading, the Pharisees are watching Jesus and looking to trap him; they want to find some dirt on him as it were. They find an ideal opportunity when they see him and his disciples eating grain on the Sabbath; he's breaking a Jewish religious law, one of the 10 commandments, so surely they can discredit him for that. But Jesus replies by pointing out a situation in their own scriptures when David and his companions were on the run and desperately hungry and end up eating the holy bread in the temple. Look, Jesus is saying, this rule was broken for good reason. Jesus then goes on to back up his words with his actions when he heals the man with the withered hand in the synagogue, again something not lawful to do on the Sabbath. The rabbis had declared that the sick could be treated on the Sabbath

but only if their injuries were life threatening, so the man with the withered hand wouldn't have qualified. Again the Pharisees are wanting to trap him.

Jesus is angry and grieved at their hardness of heart, asking them is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath? And he goes on, of course, to heal the man.

The point of these conflicts with the Pharisees is not that Jesus is saying 'forget about all rules, chill out, they don't matter.' It's not that Jesus is a free spirit throwing all regulations to the wind. (That might perhaps be the Jesus we'd sometimes like to create in our own image!) But Jesus, elsewhere says 'do not think I have come to abolish the law and the prophets. I have come not to abolish but to fulfill'. But the important thing is to realise what these commandments and disciplines of Jewish life and practice were *for*; what is their *purpose*?

For the Pharisees, it seems that the law has become an end in itself, a way of focusing on their own identity as opposed to others. It's become about *them* rather than about *God*.

Originally the Sabbath was a way of remembering God the Creator and his life giving gifts in creation and redemption of his people. But it seems that for the Pharisees 'the rule mattered more than the reality' as one commentator puts it. Jesus challenges them – what are they looking at? where is their focus? On themselves and their rules for their own sake, or on the life and power of God?

Jesus emphasises that the commandment to keep the Sabbath is there for human flourishing not just as a rule to keep for its own sake. 'The Sabbath was made for humankind and not humankind for the Sabbath' he says.

Perhaps we need to ponder too... Are we sometimes in danger, on the one hand, of focusing on religious rules and spiritual and moral disciplines for their own sake in order to make us feel good about ourselves and to draw attention to ourselves over and against others? Or, are we on the other hand, sometimes wanting to get rid of Christian disciplines and moral boundaries - again to make us feel better? Can we instead see the disciplines and morals of the Christian life as being important in order to allow the life of God to flourish in us and in others? I remember once, when I was a university Chaplain trying to commend the Christian understanding of sex and marriage to a student, and the light dawning in her eyes when she realised that she wasn't being told 'don't do this' just for the sake of it, but that disciplines, morals and boundaries were there for human flourishing and might actually be good for her!

How we look at things matters. In our NT reading, Paul challenges the Corinthians not so look at their preachers and leaders from a human point of view – focusing either on their great talents and gifts, or their flaws and weaknesses, but rather to focus on the life of God in Christ which they proclaim.

There were lots of divisions in the Corinthian church with different groups supporting and following different leaders. Some of them looked down on Paul for not being a very good speaker. Paul's response is to say 'We do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake.' You are looking at the wrong things, Paul says, your focus isn't to be on the speaker, the preacher or leader, but on the life God gives, the light of God in Jesus Christ which has shone into our hearts.

Paul goes on: 'we have this treasure in clay jars'. The 'treasure', the light and love of Christ, is held in and communicated by flawed human beings, who are like 'clay jars'. The Corinthians shouldn't be focusing on the clay jars themselves – whether on the polished shiny surfaces of their leaders, or on their cracks, flaws and weaknesses. Because, as he says 'the extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.' Look in the right place, Paul is saying!

This also has something to say to us. It's easy to have unrealistic expectations of church leaders and of other members of our congregations. We all know of people who have left various churches because they didn't like the Vicar or someone else in the church. But Paul's message reminds us that the life of our faith comes from the love of God not from a great preacher or an inspiring leader. And we are all 'clay jars', so let's be patient with one another and seek to look past one another's flaws, cracks and weaknesses – or even past a seemingly polished and perfect surface – to appreciate the life and love of God within us and among us. Our life, faith, hope and healing comes from God and not from ourselves.

Paul encourages the Corinthians to look in the right place. He knows that looking to God and God's power, love and healing, can bring hope, confidence and security even in trouble and difficulty, weakness and affliction. 'We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair' he says. Why? Because his hope is not in himself, nor in any other human being, but in the love, power and healing of God. And Paul emphasises just before and just after our passage today, 'so we do not lose heart.' Even in the face of frailty, weakness and death, 'though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day.' We are not dependent on our own gifts and achievements, nor the gifts

and achievements of others, but rather on the life-giving love of God: ‘So we do not lose heart.’

Where is the focus of our Christian lives? It’s very easy to focus on ourselves rather than on God. To focus on our rules and regulations for their own sakes which can make us proud and rigid, like the Pharisees, lacking in compassion for others. It’s also easy for us to focus on the strengths and weaknesses of both ourselves and others which can so often lead to discouragement and disillusionment. Let’s rather remind ourselves that our life and hope comes from God and his life-giving love in Christ.

Of course, this doesn’t mean there is no need for disciplines, structures and moral boundaries in the Christian life, or that we shouldn’t seek to develop good programmes of preaching, teaching, mutual support and community service within and beyond our church. But these things are not ends in themselves, but always to grow from, and to point to, the life-giving love of God. Only God’s love in Christ can bring life and growth.

‘We have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that his extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us...’

So let us not lose heart.