

A Double-Edged Sword¹

Introduction: While the reflections that follow are on the writings of St Paul, the title that I have chosen is in fact from the letter to the Hebrews [4 v12], a letter Paul didn't write. However it seems a most appropriate choice when we are considering one of the greatest evangelisers of the Church who is frequently portrayed in statues and pictures holding what might be taken to be the double-edged sword of God's word which he preached fearlessly, spreading the faith far and wide during his great missionary journeys. St Paul has left us a vast wealth of spiritual advice and guidance in his writings and the following is therefore a very limited selection.

Our sufferings bring patience, and patience brings perseverance, and perseverance brings hope, and this hope is not deceptive, because the love of God has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit. [Romans 5 v 3-5]

It is perhaps understandable if we see in these words a reference to the suffering that results from our experience of ill-health or bereavement. But they can also be taken in a more general sense to refer to other, often difficult, situations that come along in life from time to time. First of all we need to seek God's help and strength because he doesn't leave us alone, he shares the experience with us, and surely the more readily we invite him in the better (ref. 2 Cor 12 on p3 & 4). Secondly, therefore, it doesn't have to be a waste or a loss. We learn more about ourselves and our ability to endure and survive, and hopefully we also learn more about our faith and the certainty that God is with us to turn all things to our good.

Nothing therefore can come between us and the love of Christ, even if we are troubled or worried, or being persecuted, or lacking food or clothes, or being threatened or even attacked...These are the trials through which we triumph, by the power of him who loved us. For I am certain of this: nothing can ever come between us and the love of God made visible in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8 v 35, 38-39]

I cannot understand my own behaviour. I fail to carry out the things I want to do, and I find myself doing the very things I hate. Though the will to do what is good is in me, the performance is not, with the result that instead of doing the good things I want to do, I carry out the sinful things I do not want. [Romans 7 v 15 & 18b-20]

These should be very consoling and encouraging words for us. It could be any one of us saying what St Paul says about his faults and failings - which in itself may not seem a great help. What is a help is the fact that he was, and is, a saint despite his faults and failings and in that we should surely find hope and encouragement as we persevere in our efforts with the help of God's grace.

¹ "The word of God is something alive and active: it cuts more finely than any double-edged sword."

The spirit you received is not the spirit of slaves bringing fear into your lives again; it is the spirit of sons[daughters], and it makes us cry out, 'Abba, Father!' [Romans 8 v 14-15 & Galatians 4 v6]

In the Old Testament, even though God had a special relationship with his Chosen People, so often they seemed to see that relationship in terms of fear and punishment. They were afraid that if they saw his face they would die and they didn't even dare to speak his name but God gave them the rather mysterious description of himself "Yahweh" ("I am who I am") to use instead. In the New Testament, God in the person of Jesus and taught us to call him "Abba" – something that St Paul reminds us of in this verse. The word is a little tricky to translate – not just "Father", but something much more personal and familiar like "Daddy" or even "Poppa" – the sort of informal name a child would use. In Jesus Christ we can look on the face of God and we have gone from the fear of even using his name to now being able to call him "Abba" - "Daddy". That's what Jesus told us we can call him; that's how close we are to him now as his sons and daughters.

The Spirit too comes to help us in our weakness. For when we cannot choose words in order to pray properly, the Spirit himself expresses our plea in a way that could never be put into words, and God who knows everything in our hearts knows perfectly well that he means. [Romans 8 v 26-27a]

From time to time we all experience what we might call a certain "dryness" in our prayer life, often as a result of thinking we have to do all the work and nothing seems to be happening. First of all prayer shouldn't be "work" – it should be conversation with God as our friend, and a dialogue: not just speaking, but also listening. But all too often it is actually a monologue, with us doing all the talking. When, on occasion, we run out of words, we therefore feel our prayer is lacking something. What it is lacking is the aspect of listening, in fact sometimes we just need to spend quiet time with God, allowing our prayer to him to be that which, as Paul says, the Spirit expresses on our behalf: our thoughts, our unspoken prayer, simply time spent *with* God rather than feeling we have to be talking *to* God all the time. It may take a little practice because of the prayer habits we have developed from being children, but it is well worth a try.

Do not model yourselves on the behaviour of the world around you, but let your behaviour change, modelled by your new mind. [Romans 12 v2]
You must live your whole life according to the Christ you have received – Jesus the Lord. [Colossians 2 v 6]

We are reminded of Our Lord's words to the seventy-two (Luke 9 v 62): "Once the hand is laid on the plough, no one who looks back is fit for the kingdom of God" Once we have come to know and appreciate what is promised to us as followers of Christ, why would we choose anything else? Though we are *in* the

world, we are no longer *of* the world precisely because of that choice for Christ. We are reminded also of the mistaken desire of God's Chosen People to have an earthly king "like the other nations" [1 Samuel 8 v1-9] when, in fact, God alone was their king and because of that special relationship they could never be like "the other nations". Such is our unique relationship with God in Christ.

Someone may ask, 'How are dead people raised, and what sort of body do they have when they come back?' ... Whatever you sow in the ground has to die before it is given new life and the thing that you sow is not what is going to come... God gives it the sort of body he has chosen... Our present perishable nature must put on imperishability and this mortal nature must put on immortality. [1Corinthians 15 v 35, 37 & 53]

This is one of the mysteries of life that we find ourselves pondering over: after death what will we look like, will people look the same in heaven as we have known them in life? The simple answer is, of course, that we don't know, though we might assume that they will. Everything we try to imagine is necessarily in human, physical terms because that's all we know. It's impossible for us to imagine what our experience of God and heaven will be like – anything we try to imagine will fall infinitely short of what the reality will be. We can only content ourselves by imagining the best we can. If we simply let God be God (instead of trying to restrict his actions to our human expectations), then what life after death will be like and how we will be able to recognise loved ones should be well within the power and ability of a God who can change water into wine, raise Lazarus (and Jesus) from the dead, and walk on water, not to mention creating out of nothing everything that exists! We don't have all the answers, but God does - all will be revealed.

We are only the earthenware vessels that hold this treasure, to make it clear that such an overwhelming power comes from God and not from us. [2Corinthians 4 v 7-8]

It's a great image of humility that St Paul places before us, that of an earthenware vessel, at the time a common enough object used for all sorts of purposes and yet so easily broken. The treasure to which Paul refers is the work of spreading the gospel [v6]. We are only too aware of our humanness, our limitations, our sometimes brokenness, in carrying out that life-long mission given to us at baptism and of just how much we need to rely on God for the grace and strength and courage to carry it out. We are to trust in the skill of the potter rather than doubting the strength of the vessel he has made; God will never ask or expect anything of us that we are incapable of doing with his help.

God has said, 'My grace is enough for you: my power is at its best in weakness'. I am most happy, then, to be proud of my weaknesses, in order to feel the protection of Christ's power over me...for when I am weak, then I am strong. [2Corinthians 12 v 9-10]

All too often we try to cope with problems and difficulties by ourselves and from our own resources and as long as we do so we exclude God. He can only enter in when we invite him by admitting our need of his grace and help. As the saying has it: we have to let go and let God.

Before faith came, we were allowed no freedom by the Law; we were being looked after till faith was revealed. The Law was to be our guardian until the Christ came and we could be justified by faith. Now that that time has come we are no longer under that guardian. [Galatians 3 v 23-25]

God gave the Law to his Chosen People because, human nature being what it is, without those guidelines they would wander and sin (which they did anyway). Jesus didn't come to abolish that Law, but to free us from a situation in which we had no option – the Law was the Law – and to now offer us freedom of choice. Our fidelity to God isn't a matter of blind obedience to a Law telling us what to do (though it does) but, hopefully, results from freely and maturely choosing - out of our love for God - what we know to be right.

Whatever your work is, put your heart into it as if it were for the Lord and not for men...It is Christ the Lord that you are serving... And those of you who are employers remember they and you have the same Master in heaven. [from Colossians 3 v 22 - 4 v 1 & Ephesians 6 v 5-9]

This is encouraging advice for anyone who finds themselves in a difficult work situation: a way, perhaps, of injecting some value and purpose into what might otherwise be a dull or laborious job. In the full text there is also a suggestion that, if we are going to try to bring Christ into our work in this way, we should ensure it is a situation worthy of his presence and also that we give a fair and honest day's work for the pay we receive.

And as a final reflection, the following is one of the most beautiful and most popular passages from St Paul's letters and which really doesn't need any further explanation:

If I have all the eloquence of men or of angels, but speak without love, I am simply a gong booming or a cymbal clashing... Love is always patient and kind; it is never jealous; love is never boastful or conceited; it is never rude or selfish; it does not take offence, and is not resentful. Love takes no pleasure in other people's sins but delights in the truth; it is always ready to excuse, to trust, to hope, and to endure whatever comes. There are three things that last: faith, hope and love; and the greatest of these is love. [1Corinthians 13]

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