

Sunday 5 July 2009, 9.30am Sermon – Revd Martin Booth

When I am weak – then I am strong.

I wonder if any of us can relate to this – from past or even present experience? A feeling of helplessness, dismay, inability to cope – and yet, out of it grows something positive, powerful even? Lose the battle win the war. But not through violent, aggressive or assertive means. Win by losing; through losing.

We sort of understand it, don't we? But then, just when we think we've got a grip on it, it slips away. Like a star in the night sky – we catch a glimpse of it out of the corner of our eye – yet when we turn to focus on it – it's gone.

When we are weak then we are strong.

The apostle Paul's phrase is a glimpse of God, of Christ, of the Holy Spirit out of the corner of the mind's eye.

It has something to do with Truth. In any given situation in life, there are perhaps two truths working. God's truth and the world's truth. God's truth has strength, yet it can appear weak in the face of the world's truth.

Weak, yet time and time again it can overpower worldly truth - not in spite of, but because of, its seeming weakness.

A few years ago my grandmother, by then in her eighties, decided to send me an antique – a precious porcelain tea cup.

In the post.

When the parcel reached me, I shook it and it jingled. I opened it up and like a magic trick gone wrong, the cup was in a hundred fragments.

Now I don't know quite what happened, but I suspect it was something along the following lines.

My grandmother carefully wrapped the cup in tissue, placed it in the box and wrapped the whole in brown paper. Lovingly labelling it, she took it down to the post office. There the lady behind the counter carefully took it from her, placed the correct postage on the parcel and placed it gingerly in the postman's sack. The postman or woman came, took the sack and put it in his or her van. He (or she) drove it to the sorting office. It was distributed, and arrived the next morning, by another van at my local sorting office. Here the parcel was carefully lifted out from all the other packages, the address checked and then it was placed in the relevant pigeon-hole for my street.

However, the parcel was too large. So the sorting officer carefully took it back. Laid it carefully on the floor, then stamped on it... until the box was just the right size to fit the pigeon hole.

So there I was with a precious antique porcelain teacup, lovingly sent to me by my grandmother – now in a hundred fragments. I didn't know what to do. Thank her for her kindness, recognising what an important gesture it was to have sent me something so precious to her - and keep quiet about the smithereens, to avoid hurting her feelings? Or tell her and risk upsetting her?

I decided to ring her and tell her what had happened.

“Oh,” she said, “I’m so glad you told me. It was part of a 30 piece tea set and I was about to send you the rest like that, one by one”.

Two truths - One: it is good and right to avoid unnecessary pain, and Two: risk something that appears to be the harder, unkind option; an option that was actually a greater truth and one which ultimately proved to be the better course of action.

We can often find ourselves broken like the cup; damaged, powerless at the mercy of the world.. But that brokenness, if seen in the light of a greater truth – God’s truth, can often prove to be the doorway into extraordinary and more valuable truths.

I am not saying that suffering, pain and brokenness is a better or more desirable way of being. We must always resist and resent suffering when we encounter it; and work to overcome it in all its forms. However, often, hidden within the confusion and dismay brought on by encounters with this fallen world are the green shoots of a new insight; a new and different strength, a new understanding of, and relationship with God. Jesus said: consider the mustard seed. How weak – yet how strong. It can push through baked, parched earth against all the odds to grow into a full, flourishing and hardy bush.

Consider the green shoots of God’s truth in history, for example: Rosa Parks, in Montgomery Alabama, a normal, unassuming young woman just trying to get to work. In the American South’s version of apartheid, she simply refused one day to give up her seat on the bus for a white passenger. Through this one simple act she became both a catalyst and

an inspiration for the whole American Civil Rights Movement. We can think of many other such incidents. People who appear weak and powerless before the so-called truths of the world just as Jesus stood in front of Pilate.

Brokenness, weakness, powerlessness; in the midst of which grows God's truth, in direct opposition to worldly power, worldly truth.

This church; the Church generally – at times seemingly weak at the mercy of the world and its powers... and yet strong. Two thousand years strong and still here. The light is in the world but the world does not comprehend it.

I went to my grandmother to collect the rest of the tea set. Instead of a 30 piece set, I have a hundred and 29 piece set. I have been told that, actually, the cup, with painstaking professional care can be passably restored. A 30 piece antique tea set, complete, as it were, being, according to some, more valuable.

But I think I'll stick with the fragments. The brokenness. To remind me of that greater value: God's truth. When we are weak, then we are strong.

Amen.