

## Sermon, St George's, SUN.7.7.24. 2Cor12.2-10

*May we have grace to think and speak and listen in the Name of the God who is love, one Lord, Creator, Saviour and Inspirer. Amen.*

Where are you in spirit this morning?

St Paul gives us three options in his second letter to the Corinthians:

Mystical experiences of Heaven are often intensely private, which it does not feel appropriate to talk much about publicly; we might be nervous of being thought “odd”; we might struggle to find the right words to describe spiritual experiences; or some things just seem too holy, too special, too numinous, too other-worldly, for “bandying about”. Such experiences can deeply disconcert us, but also inspire great awe and reverence. They are not given to us to boast about – they are not our own achievement – but they seem to be a gift or grace of God, given for our need, for our stilling, for our centring, for our grounding in that strange other place where our citizenship truly is. These experiences have been documented from the earliest Church, but with the frequent sense that there are limits to what we can perceive, describe or understand; limits to what is good for us to see or know at this point. God is divine mystery, and the beauty of that unfolding revelation is a wondrous gift... and those of us who have never experienced any such thing should know no guilt or worry on that count: we are all different, we need different diet on our spiritual journeys home from very different places, by very different routes; and not having a moment's mysticism should not make anyone feel inadequate at all – it's about what God knows is good for each of us at each stage.

So, what about thorns in the flesh, then? St Paul's second option might strike a chord with more of us. These might be physical, mental or spiritual pains – “the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to”; or attributes of our character with which we will be wrestling till our dying day; or they might be some aspect of modern life, or even some individual very unlike us – or all too similar! – who just *grates* on us continually. A priest in the East End of London during the Blitz wrote that “crosses hurt – or they are not crosses”. We all seem to get tested in ways that are most challenging for each of us. I get frustrated and impatient sometimes, but God keeps giving me more opportunities to get better at suffering fools gladly! But again, as with more positive, mystical experiences, the point seems to be what spiritual benefit or fruit each of us can derive from such constantly digging-in thorns; as St Paul suggests, they can teach us a bit of humility, compassion for others or, as Kipling writes, “a high heart in distress”. Psalm 84 says “Blessed are they whose strength is in God... Who, going through the vale of misery, use it for a well”. May we use our thorns, our crosses, to build better character; to deepen and develop ourselves in soul, in spirit, in steadfastness.

St Paul's third option may be the best for the greatest number of us: "My strength is sufficient for you; My power is made perfect in weakness". I find this theology of the Cross to be perhaps one of the great "unique selling points" of Christianity – our Saviour "has no form or majesty, that we might desire Him"; He wears a crown of thorns and carries a broken reed for a sceptre; in every millennium Christianity has fruited best as the faith of the poor, the downtrodden, the servants, those who are not "successful" in this world's terms: one of the proudest moments of my life was in the altar line at church in Abu Dhabi, among humble, poor people "from every nation under heaven"; and I had a glimpse then of how the fullness of God's Kingdom may well look when all the cleaners, the maids, the labourers, the tired and harassed, will be clad in robes of dazzling whiteness – and I want to be in that number, when the saints go marching in! Other faiths have much that is good to say, but I find our faith best in realistically holding, cradling human imperfection, in lifting up failure and frailty; in an excluded Saviour, with a Roman criminal record; and to be reminded, year in, year out; this is who God is; this is what God is like: the worst paid will judge the world.

*I had not intended to mention the election, but perhaps Paul's letter is particularly pertinent for each of us, and our country this morning?*

Whether you are in the heights or the depths; in mystic joy of Communion with God, or prodded by the continual jabbing of thorns; our weakness, powerlessness, helplessness, faults and failings are transfigured, transformed, loved and lifted up by the God who made us, died for us and breathes His Spirit into us: I love when God uses my failings (such as my verbosity) as well as my strengths; when my imperfections are not suppressed, but sublimated, channelled into something better; when I find God at work with my weakness: "The eternal God is thy refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms". "Yea, through life, death, through sorrow and through sinning; He shall suffice me, for He hath sufficed".

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. **Amen.**

*"In Thy deep floods drown all my faults and fears"*

(from the poem "A Litany", now the hymn "Drop, drop, slow tears")  
by Rev. Phineas Fletcher (1582-1650), Rector of Hilgay, Norfolk