

Sunday 3rd June

Preacher: Jennifer Potter

HYMNS: **32** **“Meet and right it is to sing”**
 691 **“What shall our greeting be?”**
 608 **“All praise to our redeeming Lord”**
 465 **“Guide me, O thou great Jehovah”**

READINGS: **2 Corinthians 4:5-12**
 Mark 2:23-3:6

“We have this treasure in clay jars”

At either side of the door of my house are two green conifer trees. They are not the same height, they are not even the same species as they should be outside a symmetrical Georgian House, like mine. Significantly both trees are in earthenware flower pots – flower pots that have been knocked over by the wind and human activity and are cracked. If you were to look closely at these pots are not a pretty sight. One is held together with tape, the other with ugly, overflowing glue. I am not taking them with me – they would not survive the move intact. But the trees are green and beautiful.

Paul had such an earthenware or clay pots in mind when he wrote to the Corinthians ‘ But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.’

What is this treasure? It is the Gospel of Jesus Christ or to use Paul’s own words, ‘the light of the knowledge of the glory of God.’ What is this treasure? It is the gift of faith, the gift of the relationship with God offered to us, ours to accept or reject.

And what are the clay pots? It is Paul’s way of describing himself, all apostles and all ambassadors for Christ. We are clay pots – fragile, weak, easily broken and with a short life.

Paul, the first missionary across the Mediterranean world had plenty of reason to speak like this. He had had more than his fair share of difficulties in the communities to which he had gone. The very Corinthians to whom he was writing were challenging his leadership, challenging his very credentials as an apostle.

When Paul wrote, ‘ we are afflicted in every way but not crushed, perplexed, but not driven to despair, persecuted, but not forsaken, struck down but not destroyed’ – these were not just words, they were a description of how Paul and his fellow apostles felt. He knew what it was to be discouraged and completely down-hearted. In the face of attacks and criticism Paul was at pains to point out to the early Christian communities that he was not proclaiming himself but Jesus. “For we do not

proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake.' That is quite something, Paul as a slave to the Corinthians for Christ's sake.

So Paul uses a powerful image, 'we have this treasure in clay jars.' Clay jars were a familiar item to Paul and his listeners. They were used as lamp bases and may well be in Paul's mind as he mentions God saying that the light should shine in the darkness. Clay jars were also used for storage. Coins were stored in such jars and were buried for safe-keeping. Scriptural scrolls were stored in them. The Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered in the 20th century still in their clay jars. Archaeological digs have found many, many thousands of pieces of broken pottery. Pottery vessels are useful for a while but have a limited working life. Clay pots fail, crack, break and, in the end, dissolve. Clay jars are functional but expendable, what they contain determines their value.

We may have an image of Paul as a strong person, saying strong and convincing words to the church communities he established but here, in his Second Letter to the Corinthians we see another Paul – the real, vulnerable, human Paul. He wants to make it clear to his friends in Corinth that he firmly believes that the source of his ability to preach and live out the gospel is not found in himself. The credit belongs to God and to God alone. Paul is speaking as a preacher but the point he makes is a universal one. We are all clay jars.

Indeed we say this in different ways throughout our Christian lives. Each year on Ash Wednesday we hear these words 'remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.' And when our term of life on this earth is ended we are returned to the earth from which we came, 'earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.'

Admitting our frailty and mortality, acknowledging our weakness and fragility go against the grain of our culture. Fulfilment of our potential, making the most of our abilities is what we are encouraged to do these days. The idea of being clay jars or vessels for God is a difficult one for us. We want to express ourselves, use our skills and abilities to achieve things in our lives. But we forget that all we are – our skills and talents – are not just a matter of our DNA but the gift of our creator. As St. Augustine said, 'you created us for yourself, O God and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.' Our greatest fulfilment is living life for God and others.

Earthen vessels – clay pots – that is what we are, no matter what our gifts and abilities. We are limited in our knowledge to our time and place in history. We are all subject to selfish impulses, riddled with personal quirks and easily misled by delusions our egos invest. Some of us think too much of ourselves, others far too little. One definition of a saint supplies a good corrective to our thinking. 'A saint is someone whose life has not been sufficiently researched.' There is not one single human being who is in such great shape that they do not need the grace of God.

We may find it difficult to think of ourselves as clay jars yet this whole passage is actually one of the most encouraging in the whole Bible. "The God who said, 'let light shine out of darkness' is the same God who has shone his light into our hearts – to give us the light of the glory of God." Just imagine that – the exact same power that brought light to the whole world at the beginning of time is now offering light to illumine you and me – in fact shining through us as sunlight streams through a window. How amazing is that!

So, throughout the history of the Christian faith we are aware of people – not clever, not powerful, not rich – ordinary people – clay jars – used by God to be carriers of his treasure. The disciples, the 12 chosen by Jesus were ordinary fishermen and farmers – often slow to understand, fearful and weak. Yet they were the first evangelists empowered by the spirit at Pentecost.

Then there is Paul himself and his co-workers, Barnabas, Timothy and others. They spread God's word to Gentiles despite harsh criticism of their leadership.

We have just commemorated the heart-warming experience of John and Charles Wesley. If you read their journals you will see just what fragile people they were until God convinced them that they were part of his plan and would be empowered for it.

We have Americans here today – Francis Asbury went from Staffordshire to North America at the age of 26 years. He had been an apprentice blacksmith and yet God used him to spread the gospel across that huge continent.

And so with a whole host of missionaries – to Africa, Asia and the Pacific. Many came from poor backgrounds with little education. They made mistakes true enough, in the places to which they were sent but they also translated the Scriptures into local languages, set up schools and medical facilities and established communities of Christians.

All of these people, like Paul, recognised that they were indeed clay jars – proclaiming not their own message but God's and empowered by God by God to do so. This morning as we partake of bread and wine we recall the life and death of Jesus – a failure by the standards of this world until God raised him from the dead.

The clay pots by my door may not last much longer – though I hope that the trees can be repotted. Each of us is mortal – we too will pass – though hopefully our fruits will remain. But while we are granted life and breath let us rejoice that we have treasure in clay jars and never cease from sharing that treasure with others.

The secretary of the Conference of the British Methodist Church, Gareth Powell, has just written one of his regular letters to ministers. In it he speaks, among other things, of ministers who have died recently and especially of Colin Morris, one time Superintendent here, who died on Pentecost Sunday.

Powell then quotes 2 verses of a Charles Wesley hymn –a rather unfamiliar one and I end with these two verses.

The Spirit send me from above
Spirit of meek long-suffering love,
of all-sufficient grace;
Endue me with Thy constant mind,
So good, so obstinately kind
To our rebellious race.

Be this my whole employ below,
Before Thy little flock to go
And in Thy steps to tread;
Shepherd of souls, I fain would be
Their faithful pastor under Thee,
And feed as I am fed. Amen