

A great treasure in fragile hands.

HC Service April 5th 2011

2 Corinthians 4:1—12

We have a glorious ministry

Paul starts chapter 4 of his letter to the Corinthian church by referring to the Ministry he had described in the earlier chapters. The kind of ministry that he had been talking about was a glorious ministry that brings life, salvation, and righteousness. A ministry that is able to transform lives.

Paul was a remarkable person with many gifts and abilities which inspires me and I'm sure many people.

Shipwrecks, beatings, imprisonment, false accusations, the disagreements with fellow disciples and travellers notwithstanding his positive attitude towards this “Glorious Ministry” and the circumstances in which he found himself comes streaming through in this wonderful letter.

This positive attitude had some very practical consequences in his life.

Firstly - It kept Paul from quitting - In this letter, he confessed to the Corinthians, to his trial in Asia had almost brought into despair and in spite of his great gifts and his experience Paul the man was subject to human frailties. But with a calling from God and God's enabling he believed that God would see it through.

Secondly - It kept Paul from being a deceiver - Paul had nothing to hide either in his personal life or in the way he preached the gospel. Everything was open and honest was no deception or distortion. This was no easy thing to do and it often left him open to criticism and attack. But once again, his faith in the God who had equipped him was supreme.

Thirdly - it kept Paul from being a self promoter - the fact that Paul had received his ministry direct from Christ is an understandable reason why he wasn't a quitter or a deceiver, but it also kept him from being prideful and self promoting. Paul practised genuine humility. He didn't trust in himself or commend himself or preach about himself. He sought only to lead people to Jesus Christ.

It would have been easy for him to start the Paul Fan club, taking in weak and vulnerable people who just wanted to be associated

with someone important. But this was not Paul's driving ambition. He knew that when he shared Christ, truthfully, honestly that people's lives were changed. Not because of his preaching, but because of Christ.

We have a valuable treasure

Yet this glorious ministry, this great treasure, that shines light in the darkest of places, is held in a very humble vessel. Paul compares himself and us to a clay jar.

And like a vessel of clay we are prone to crack under stress and sometimes shatter completely.

Often our spirits long to soar like an eagle, but we also find our bodies tired, weak and sometimes broken as we grow older.

But remember the true nature of the treasure in us. It is not our gifting, or our good nature, or our intellect, our orderly personality or church affiliation - it is a heavenly treasure!

So why does Paul seem so excited that we see ourselves as humble, fragile, clay vessels when the treasure we hold is so great?

Well let's take a look at what condition a clay vessels should be in so it can be used?

First of all the vessel in question must be empty. - When you cook you first empty out what is inside that pot before you use it. It is the same with our Christian life. We need to empty our lives out of things that are going to stop us using the vessel. You cannot cook anything or make any food in a vessel that is full of something else. So often today Christians are swept away with the frantic pace this world tries to demand of us, and as a result we are too full to be used.

In the second place, a vessel to be used needs to be clean.

You can't go and use a dirty cup and expect some one to drink from it, they will see the dirt in it. Have you ever made bottles of jam and marmalade? I bet that you boiled the bottles in water and made sure that they are absolutely clean because any dirtiness will spoil that jam. And it is the same with the vessel of our lives, they must be empty of anything that can hinder us or stain the message we are proclaiming. The most common charge levelled against Christians is hypocrisy, and far too often it's a valid charge.

Thirdly, the vessel also needs to be reachable. Recently my wife and I moved into a new house and Lynette is not as tall as I am. This house is blessed with simply oodles of storage space,

unfortunately much of it consists of high, deep cupboards which are of no use to my wife because they are simply out of reach. So it is with us unless we have a lowly spirit God can't use us. We need to be humble so that God will use His power and resources in and through us.

The last condition for the vessel to be used is that it must be available. This might sound a bit strange because if you are empty, if you are clean, if you might be humble in your spirit, surely you are available.

But this unfortunately is where the metaphor of the clay vessel loses some traction. Unlike clay vessels we have free will. We can, to a large degree, control how we are used and what we do. So because our God is such a gracious God, we need to consciously choose to make ourselves available to Him, in order to have the "glorious ministry" that Paul describes operating in our lives.

This type of ministry is a gift, a gift received from God. It's given to us because of God's great mercy towards us. Not because of anything we have, or are, or will be, or able to do without him.

Because God is so great the cracks, and chips and faded bits we have accumulated along the way make us perfect for his "glorious ministry provided that we are humble, empty and available to him.

Let us pray

May God help us to take the vessel of our life, to clean it, to empty it and to make it available to God so that the light of Jesus might shine through us into the world in which we live.

AMEN