

HOPE in 2 Corinthians 4: 1-18

General Synod Bible Study

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The Revd Canon Dr John Dunnill, Diocese of Perth

Where do you find *hope* in a situation of darkness? Where specifically do you find hope, as a responsible Christian, in a situation where truth and authority are contested?

For Paul, in 2 Corinthians 4, the *hope* that he needs and finds is not a speculative gazing into the future but something present, *a real experienced knowledge of an enduring source of life and truth*. In pursuing this, Paul uses many resources: stunning metaphors, as well as key scripture quotations, fresh-minted names for God, and an intimate appeal to his personal knowledge of Jesus – all showing how and why it is that, despite this external struggle, ‘we do not lose heart’.

The two Corinthian letters we possess show how difficult it was for Paul to instruct and tame the young Christian community in that city. Those early problems mutated, in 2 Corinthians, into difficulties defending his own apostolic authority against outsiders who had come in, trying to establish their rival authority over the still unformed members. But in our chapter the focus is less on these outward disagreements than on Paul’s inner spiritual struggle, as he tries to justify his ministry before them and before God.

1

He begins strongly enough in v. 1: This ministry is given ‘by God’s mercy, so we do not lose heart’. But the congregational turbulence infects the tone of his writing, which is dark and troubled, especially at the start (vv. 1-4), dominated by words like shameful, cunning, false, perishing, blind. And yet this dark surface is pierced by shafts of light, ‘the glory of Christ’, ‘light shining out of darkness’.

Paul’s conviction (explored in chapter 3) is that underneath the turbulence of this world, manifested in confusion and malice and blindness, there is *glory*, the transcendent unapproachable wonder of the living God. Yet now this glory is

knowable, at least to believers, who see and are transformed by what he calls (in 4:4) 'the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God'. And this image takes us to the heart of things because the one who shines in Christ is none other than 'the God who said "Let light shine out of darkness" ' (v.6).

But where does God say this? The words 'Let light shine' sound like an echo of Genesis 1: 3, the first words of the creator: 'Let there be light.' This is a mistranslation found in most versions – not only NRSV but also NIV, where it is helpfully accompanied by a marginal reference to the verse which Paul does not in fact quote. For an accurate translation we have to go to versions often derided as 'paraphrases'. What Paul writes is that God says: 'Out of darkness light *shall* shine' (REB, GNB), using the future tense.

The words are found, not in Genesis but in the prophecy of Isaiah 9: 2. In NRSV this reads: 'The people who walk *in darkness* ... on them *light has shined*' (9: 2), but in the ancient Greek translation called the Septuagint (LXX), the version regularly quoted by Paul, this appears with a slight twist, using that future tense, as, 'The people who walk *in darkness* ... on them *light will shine*' (9: 1 LXX).

The meaning does not perhaps seem much different, but the choice of scriptural source shifts the focus from *what is* to *what is coming to be*, from *creation* to *redemption*, and explicitly *messianic* redemption. Isaiah 9 is part of the great cycle of messianic proclamations which runs from Isaiah chapters 7 – 11 (and which we often hear read at Christmas). It is 'good news of great joy'. Paul says God's promise of light coming into darkness has been found to be true in the Messiah, in Jesus Christ, who came into the world in flesh and remained in some way present, *shining* in the hearts of believers.

A fifth century writer (Theodoret of Cyrrhus) says about this verse, 'Since the divine nature is invisible and always remains so, it is seen for what it is in the *humanity* of Jesus Christ which shines with divine light and sends out its rays.'

2

It is because Paul is thinking about the coming of God's light in *fleshly* form, in the human life of Jesus, that he turns suddenly, in verse 7, from images of light to

more tangible, physical, even visceral images, beginning with an assertion about being like 'clay jars', earthen vessels. In our humanity, is this all we have, even if we carry the name 'apostle', in which to hold this sublime treasure of knowing Christ?

It is often said that the reference to clay jars is about 'ordinariness', but Paul's emphasis here is different. Clay jars were of many kinds: some were common, other were highly valued. In Paul's world, pottery was the most useful and adaptable material for all purposes, just as wrought-iron was for the railway age of the 19th century, and as plastic is for us. But ugly practical kitchen pots share one feature with finely crafted urns, with elegant handles and beautiful decoration – they all smash when you drop them.

So for Paul, weakness in ministry does not mean some ordinary tendency to doubt or idleness or lack of strategic thinking. What concerns him is the smashableness of the human frame, especially his own, and Jesus'.

In this letter Paul gives no less than five lists of his apostolic sufferings, including verses 8-9 here: 'afflicted but not crushed, perplexed but not driven to despair, persecuted but not forsaken, struck down but not destroyed'. [See also 1: 8-9; 6: 4-10; 11: 23-33; 12: 7-10.] This is what it means to be God's servant. And yet paradoxically it is a privilege to endure all this because it means 'always carrying in the body the *dying* of Jesus' (v.10).

Note that our translation has 'the death' of Jesus (v. 10) but here Paul doesn't use his usual word *thanatos*, but the stronger, more intense word *nekrosis*. The only other time he uses this word is in Romans 4: 19, describing the barrenness, the non-lifegiving quality of Sarah's womb. What he carries is not the *fact* that Jesus died, but the *process of his dying*. You could almost say it is the *killing* of Jesus that Paul, as Jesus' servant, has experienced in his own body, the blow by blow hammering of nails that he has endured over the years – his afflictions and perplexities dramatized most vividly in chapter 11, in the long tale of his imprisonments, floggings and shipwrecks. But just here in chapter 4 his focus is less on the outward forms of pain than on the inner struggle it generates (v.8) – 'afflicted but not crushed, perplexed but not driven to despair' – and on the inner

relationship with Jesus which this experience has built, both in his death and in his life.

Notice how often he refers simply to 'Jesus' without any title at all (no 'Christ', no 'Lord'): six times in this chapter (at the end of v. 5, v.10, v.11 twice, v.14, and only nine times elsewhere in the whole of his letters). There is a special union and intimacy with Jesus in his dying and his rising which Paul feels here and communicates to us. In his body (meaning his flesh, and his whole mind and heart shaped by the fragility of flesh) Paul knows what it is like to die the death that Jesus died; and knowing this he knows also, springing up within him, the risen life that Jesus lives now in those who have found their life in him.

3

And then, in v. 13, there is another shift. Using a second scriptural quotation, he aligns his 'spirit of faith' with the word of scripture, 'I believed and so I spoke'. As a quotation it seems unspectacular, and it's not clear why it is even relevant here, unless we complete the sentence, as Paul surely expects us to do. It comes from Ps 116: 10, which in NRSV reads: 'I kept my faith even when I said, "*I am greatly afflicted*".' *Affliction*: that's the link.

In the LXX Psalm 116 is renumbered and divided in two. The first part is a great confession of praise arising out of trial, spoken by one who sees himself as having been brought back from the edge of the grave in answer to prayer, 'You have delivered my soul from death'. The second part, of which Paul is quoting the surely recognizable first words, are a rededication to a life of service (in affirmations like 'I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord', Ps 116: 13).

That implied but unspoken reference to *affliction*, together with the word *faith*, sums up the dynamic of the whole psalm, or sequence of psalms, and shows why it strikes a deep chord in Paul. I think Paul is finding in the psalmist's experience of near-death and new life an echo of his own experience of multiple afflictions. In particular, in chapter 1: 8-9 he describes how once, in the Province of Asia, he felt 'utterly, unbearably crushed;' it felt like 'a sentence of death', but it taught him, he says, to rely on 'the God who raises the dead'. Such experiences have

bound him inseparably into the pattern of the dying and rising of Christ. And now (v.14), because he knows what God can do, he can trust that this God 'will raise us also with Jesus' (4: 14). And, he says, all this happens 'for your sake'. This is what ministry means.

Jumping back to verse 6, we saw that Paul found in scripture a fresh *name and character* for God as 'the-God-who-said, "Out-of-darkness-light-shall-shine"' (and that was proved true in the incarnation); now (in v. 14) God is renamed again as 'the-one-who-raised-the-Lord-Jesus'. This name and character reveals God as the God who *shines*, the God who *raised the Lord Jesus*, the God who in ch.1 was called *the God who raises the dead*. This God is found in scripture (Isaiah 9: 2, Ps 116) and in the Christian gospel, and replicated in Paul's own experience.

So what Paul expresses here, in his scriptural reasoning, in his theological imaging, in examining his own experience, is not only a belief structure, or something we might call 'faith', but concrete knowledge. It's what I have called *hope*: 'a real experienced knowledge of an enduring source of life and truth'. It is a present knowledge which points beyond the present, and beyond the see to the unseen.

This yields in the closing verses an awareness of the daily renewing of what he calls his 'inner nature'(v.16). For Paul, in the midst of many troubles and a difficult path of service, that awareness of ongoing divine help and transformation is where his hope lies.