

Experiences in their place

¹ I must go on boasting. Though there is nothing to be gained by it, I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. ² I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. ³ And I know that this man was caught up into paradise—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows— ⁴ and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter. ⁵ On behalf of this man I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses. ⁶ Though if I should wish to boast, I would not be a fool, for I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think more of me than he sees in me or hears from me. ⁷ So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. ⁸ Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. ⁹ But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. ¹⁰ For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Cor 12:1-10 ESV)

Our second reading today is the final section of Paul’s ‘fool’s speech’ to the congregation that probably vexed him the most – yes, it’s the Corinthians – that group of proud folk given to preening their spiritual plumage when they could – setting up divisions among themselves – making judgements as to who was the most spiritual or who was attached to the better apostle or teacher – even turning fellowship meals and Holy Communion into a display of drinking and gluttony for some while others went hungry – who now have challenged Paul’s ministry to them – and Paul personally – by claiming that he is weak and unimpressive in comparison to those who have followed him – turned up afterwards impressive, taking their money, and boasting of their deeds and experiences in and for the Lord. So what are you Paul? And what is your God and gospel all about?

So Paul plays the fool – with large chunks of sarcasm and liberal garnishes of irony – he boasts in the previous chapter of his sufferings in the ministry and warns that these ‘super apostles’ are dangerous – as selfish, self promoting people are dangerous who use people. Our second reading is a change of attack in the speech where Paul now mentions supernatural experiences – about a man 14 years ago – he talks about him in the third person – I believe Paul is taking about himself – and third heavens and Paradise and an inability to describe it in detail – whether it is in or out of the body he’s not sure – doesn’t matter really for God knows and he’s what counts. I can’t prove it but my view is that this is the first time Paul has told the Corinthians about his supernatural experience. In fact he goes further – and this is the cutting point – he’s challenging the experience trap into which the Corinthians have fallen – by saying that if he stayed with this experience as formative and determinative then he would be so full of himself that even if he spoke God’s name, Jesus, and the gospel – and I’m not saying the Holy Spirit wouldn’t still be working – but Paul would be trying to get in the way of his own message and say ‘look at me’ – ‘notice me’ – even ‘follow me’ ... all in Jesus’ name of course!

As Paul looks back to that event 14 years ago he can also see something else. We don’t know the details, dates, diagnosis – it’s a thorn in the flesh – a messenger from Satan – given to him – he doesn’t say up front but in Greek this is called a divine passive – which is his way of saying that God is also behind it but he doesn’t like it – he wanted gone – and for good reason as it hampered, in his view, his ministry for the Lord. Now as he looks back to the supernatural event he can’t get past the thorn – it’s still there and he now sees it – and whatever it is it’s still unpleasant, painful and hindering his work in his view – but he has

learnt to live with ... you're expecting me to say 'it' aren't you? – I don't know that he has – no, he has learnt to live with God just as he is. He has learnt that God is central and important not God's gifts because it's too easy to want and desire God's gifts and ignore or push aside the Giver. Paul has learnt not to ignore or devalue his experiences – they are what they are – but to place his experiences – whatever they are into a context – a landscape – a frame of reference – all of which are under the cross.

When we live under the cross – each day's experiences are over shadowed by the truth that Jesus on the cross demonstrates two things that are foolish to our senses and experiences – that God is wise and that God is powerful. The cross sends mixed messages to our senses – our eyes tell us 'run away – this is what will happen when God gets his hands on sinners' – our ears tell us 'come closer for God has finished your rescue – paid the ransom for your sins – performed the sacrifices required'. Which do we trust? Paul reminded the Corinthians earlier in the letter that we live by faith and not by sight (2 Cor 5:7) and to the Church in Rome Paul wrote that faith comes from hearing the Word of God (Rom 10: 17). Thus our ears lead our other senses – water on skin becomes a holy washing, a rebirth with God's Word all about Jesus and the cross as a new creation occurs. We taste bread and wine – maybe most days – but every 7th day when we hear Jesus' instructions and declarations – take and eat, take and drink, this is my body, this is my blood, given for you, for forgiveness – then Jesus meets us physically, personally as we are and continues his working on us as he heals bodies, strengthens faith and forgives sins.

At Confirmation or no doubt at times of sin and shame or in moments of reflection that like Paul the good we want to do we don't and the bad we don't want to do we do(!) we are aware that those forces that are God's enemies – sometimes called the unholy three – are the devil, the world, and ... our sinful self. The first two are outside of us – enemies to be spotted – but the third is behind our eyeballs so to speak. Our sinful self is the traitor within – that perspective of our living in the body which is strongly experiential and so easily determinative of life and behaviour. I want – I get. I feel like it – I do it. Pain is bad – pleasure is good. Part of growing up in this world is working out that such is not always the case and that acting on experiences and impulses is not a recipe for good living and social harmony and if the world needs to put borders around our experiences and resulting behaviours, then we shouldn't be surprised that, as Christians we, too, can easily fall into the trap of making experiences the foundation of our behaviour and attitudes.

We wonder at God's logic when our experiences are painful. Surely the world would flock to Jesus if all Jesus' followers had amazing lives of success, miraculous healings, ecstatic experiences – no misery at all – then surely the world would take notice and want to know and thus meet Jesus? It is a powerful experiential argument which we'd all like to be true – it resonates deep in us that this should be the way God works – but when we stop enjoying the feeling within – a pleasure akin to that anticipated winning lottery ticket before the reality crashes in – and look out there we see it again, that cross. We even have our churches and often devotional spaces and maybe jewellery adorned with it. The cross comes crashing back into our experience – it is always a jolt even when we know it's there – for it is God's message on sin and grace – judgement and unconditional love towards sinners personified in Jesus who died and who lives.

When it is our experiences that claim centre stage from or in front of the cross, then Paul on reflection highlights his weaknesses – not because he is a masochist but simply because this gives us the best view of the cross.

To live is to experience. However our experience is not all of life or reality. That's what the cross of Jesus proclaims. Which shall we trust? Who shall we follow?