

**Homily, St. Andrew's
Proper 14B, July 5, 2015
2 Corinthians 12:2-10**

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be ever more acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

In her book *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith*, Anne Lamott writes: “When God is going to do something wonderful, [God] always starts with a hardship; when God is going to do something amazing, God starts with an impossibility.” Lamott writes that for the first seven years of her son’s life, it seemed impossible that she could write the opening sentence of the chapter: “We have recently returned from another holiday with Sam’s dad.” (33) The chapter goes on to tell the story of her son Sam meeting his father for the first time, and of the relationship that now exists between the three of them. Lamott’s strength as a writer who reflects on living Christian spirituality is her openness and humour about her weaknesses. In this case, it has to do with the circumstances of Sam’s conception and her challenges in letting go of her hurt and her anger at Sam’s dad. But the strength of her love for her son won, so that when he expressed his desire to find his dad, she was able to set aside enough of her own feelings and take some steps in beginning a search.

Today we also hear about strength and weakness from the apostle Paul in his second letter to the church in Corinth. The passage includes an example from each side of the coin, beginning with a story of strength, or blessing or favour, followed by a story of hardship and weakness. Paul first tells of a “a person in Christ” who was once “caught up to the third heaven,” Paradise, where he “heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat.” Such a visit to heaven - where in body or out of body - is a pretty spectacular story of divine experience. Indeed, one could hardly hope for more or better divine favour!

The story is written in the third person, as though it’s about someone else, but many scholars believe it is likely a personal story of Paul himself. One commentator describes how Paul “uses the heavenly transport story to secure a comfort zone on boasting. The third-heaven man allows Paul to continue his own boast in his weakness... and to add to it his boasting ‘on behalf of such a one’.” In taking an indirect approach to his own story, Paul “can have it both ways. By telling the story, he indirectly vaunts himself; [and] by not boasting about it [directly] ... he subtly renounces power and authority built on claims of visions.” (NIB, 163) This perspective opens up all kinds of questions about authenticity, about what ‘strength’ or more pointedly what ‘weakness’ means, and perhaps most importantly, about where real power lies and how it is actually used.

Next comes a story of the opposite, as Paul confesses that: “a thorn was given to me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me... Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me...” We don’t know what the nature of this “thorn in the flesh” was, which likely means that his original audience already knew to what he was referring. It could have been almost anything, from some kind of physical illness or disability to spiritual temptation to the religious opponents he faced. Whatever it was, what matters is that the thorn in Paul’s flesh acted as an impediment that Paul had to overcome rather than as a moral flaw in his character. The

thorn showed that “he [was] so properly dedicated to the work of the Gospel that nothing [could] distract him.” (NIB, 166)

In this difficult experience of weakness and hardship, Paul prays for the thorn to be leave him but God’s response is: “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” Paul then goes on to make his point of focussing on finding strength in weakness with God even more strongly as he concludes: “So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.”

When we end there, as the lectionary determines, Paul sounds so very brave and pious and an example of forbearance of suffering that we should indeed strive to follow. And those things are true. But does anyone really believe he was weak? Everything about Paul’s words seems to point to strength and audacity and singularity of purpose. And yet Paul also suffered imprisonment, shipwreck and various other trials and troubles in his quest to spread the Gospel. More, when we put this passage in the context of what comes before and after, the picture shifts and expands in ways that qualify the initial impression and create even more problems. The verse immediately following where we left off, for instance, reads: “I have been a fool! You forced me to it. Indeed you should have been the ones commending me, for I am not at all inferior to these super-apostles, even though I am nothing.” All of sudden pious Paul sounds more like a self-righteous tyrant blaming his followers for his problems because they weren’t commending - praising - him enough. Paul may be “content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions and calamities for the sake of Christ,” as he just wrote, but he’s also just as good as the rivals he calls “the super-apostles”... who are apparently causing havoc in the Corinthian community, and for Paul himself, given that he is clearly so very troubled. And he’s nothing... the contradictions come so fast and furious it’s hard to keep up!

It’s not hard to realize why the powers that be in the ecumenical and international body who developed the lectionary stopped at verse 10... “whenever I am weak, then I am strong” is a much more palatable concluding message for the Christian church than Paul’s outburst of indignation. But the great thing about such stark contradictions, and why we shouldn’t shy away from them in scripture, is that they trouble our simple piety and challenge our easy categories of good and evil; righteous and unrighteous; strength and weakness. Paul was a great missionary, who began churches in several different places, and whose work is largely the reason faith in Jesus as the Christ moved beyond the Jewish community in Jerusalem to spread across the Gentile and Roman world. He did amazing things and he suffered greatly and he struggled to develop theology in response to all the extraordinary events and experiences. He also wasn’t shy about using his rather significant power as an educated Pharisee and a Roman citizen, to influence as many as he could. The skillful rhetoric of his letters points to this power and strength, along with his fearlessness or pure audacity to use all that he had, the fullness of his strength and power, to fulfill his mission.

The reality is, most of us are a similar mixed bag of piety and back-sliding; of righteousness and wickedness; and of weakness and strength. We are all a mixed bag of saint and sinner. What matters the most, it seems to me, is to use whatever we have... whatever cultural, social, political and economic power we have, to work not to increase our own glory but rather

for the glory of God by serving others. What Paul had in spades, for better and for worse, was total commitment to the mission God gave him. And so he would tweak a story to make it support the point he wanted to drive home; he would travel relentlessly; he would defend against what he believed to be heresy or the rivals who preached a different gospel. It wasn't always pretty and if we follow Paul's example of faith, we too won't always get it right and we will have bad days. But true strength is being able to face up to our mistakes and our mis-steps and to admit to our faults and our frailties enough to see God's grace working.

It is this strength that comes through admitting and facing the tough and ugly stuff in our lives that Anne Lamott managed to find. Having come through much struggle, like Paul, she put her love into action despite her rather significant trepidation, and prayed for the miracle that her son could know his father. In the end, she writes: "Things are not perfect, because life is not TV and we are real people with scarred, worried hearts. But it's amazing a lot of the time. Where there was darkness, silence and blame, there's now a family, and that means there's mess and misunderstanding, hurt feelings and sighs. But it is a family: Sam and his father love and like each other. Can you imagine how impossible a dream this was for Sam?" (40)

May we find strength in God to be as committed as Paul and Anne to our mission as agents of God's love in the world. May we be willing to live into our weakness as limited human beings, our failings as sinners, in such a way that our calling as saints of God may be fulfilled. And may we grab hold of God's grace and power with such determination that we see impossible dreams of peace and reconciliation come true in our lives and in our world.