

God works most powerfully in our weaknesses, not our strengths

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Advent 4 C: Mic 5 2-5a Magnificat, Lk 1 46-55, Heb 10 5-10, Lk 1 39-45

The message that's come to me time and time again this Advent is that *God works most powerfully in our weaknesses, not our strengths*. I guess we've all heard that before, but we never really seem to believe it. It's hardly encouraged, even in Christian communities. In just such communities, so often I hear people being told to focus on their strengths if they *really* wanted to succeed – and I doubt that I'm the only one hearing this. Yet it's a core teaching of the Church that God chooses to work through our weaknesses, not our strengths.

And it's actually true. Particularly in ministry, I find the great moments come when I get out of God's way – when I put aside the notion that *my* gifts or *my* insights are the best measure of what God wants to get done – and simply open up to God's leading. Trust; just let go. Let go, and watch God get on with it.

In the context of parish life, for me it means that I try to avoid being controlling or managerial, because I think that squashes spontaneity and confines the parish's ministry within the horizons of my vision. Instead, I want to encourage a culture of openness to God's values where we risk God's leading. So we study Scripture together to find out how God works. That helps us become people who recognise and respond to God's promptings; promptings that might come to any of us – not just those with designated positions.

The Scriptures show us that God works through weakness and not strength. A central symbol of our faith is our crucified Saviour. We see this *God-is-most-present-in-our-weakness* theme most obviously in the story of Jesus's life – even from before his birth. And that's what we see in today's readings.

Today we met two first-time mums-to-be: Mary and Elizabeth. I have a friend, Katrina, who is a counsellor to new mums. With her neo-natal counselling hat on, Katrina tells me that such women aren't necessarily all that realistic about how they're going to manage life with a new baby. Often the point at which these mums first ring her for some good counsel is a day or two after they've returned home from hospital – once they've tried to be super-woman; resume normal life *and* care for their baby – and after two sleepless nights, things aren't quite going to plan.

If God were in the life-coaching business, I'm pretty sure consideration would have been given to choosing experienced mums for today's two babies, John and Jesus. There'd have been a worldwide search for mums with a proven track-record of raising MENSA-type gifted and talented children; supermums fit to raise tomorrow's little leaders. But that's not how God operates. Elizabeth and Mary had no prior experience of raising their own children. Mary, utterly irresponsibly, rushed off on a four-day journey to be with Elizabeth. I look at them, I think about the *God's-strength-in-our-weakness* thing again, and I get it. In Mary, God picked a woman who knew she couldn't go it alone; she looked for connection with someone else; she found strength by being with someone else in the same boat.

So lesson one for today: this *God's-strength-in-our-weakness* thing reveals its true meaning when we're in community. Lone-ranger spirituality is an oxymoron; our full humanity is only found in relationship; in community. The quality of our life is not measured in our personal accomplishments, but rather in our belonging.

That's a message it's almost impossible for people in our developed-world societies to hear – at least until someone close dies or goes away. We live in a society that tells us home and family are just a launching pad from which we rocket off into a stellar career, armed with all the competitive edges we need to carve out status for ourselves.

That's exactly the wrong focus. The real goal of being human is actually found in family – like here – among the people who know our weaknesses best. Mary set off to face her predicament together with someone who'd know it from the inside.

So Mary went to Elizabeth's home. And when Elizabeth heard Mary's voice, her baby leapt in her womb. Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and said, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.'

Mary responded by saying, 'My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.' They were clear it was *God* who'd done something wonderful; not *them*. God had done something wonderful in looking 'with favour on the lowliness of this servant.' God chose to work this wonder through these *ordinary*, very vulnerable women.

But while it's an honour for Mary to be chosen as the mother of the Lord, it's not going to be easy. ^(Barclay, 8) 'That very blessedness was to be a sword to pierce her heart ... God does not choose a person for ease and comfort and selfish joy, but for a great task that will take all that head and heart and hand can bring to it'. The woman who'll cradle her newborn in a feeding trough will also see that child of hers die on a cross.

And that's the other lesson about this *God's-strength-in-our-weakness* thing. Letting go and letting God might sound easy, but it's not. Accepting God's calling doesn't stop the death of our loved ones; it doesn't give us the power to stop a

world system where the strong seem to crush the weak; where the tongues of the proud and mighty prate as though the Earth is theirs, and for a time it seems they are right. And harder still, because we've responded to God and taken to heart God's way of vulnerability to these evils, it hurts us more than it would if we'd just ignored God, kept our heads down and plugged away in our part of the rat-race.

But the Gospel also opens us to the Advent hope – the expectation that Jesus, who swallowed up the power of this evil once and for all in his death – that the same Jesus, who rose from the dead, will return and bring forth in us the resurrection life he has nurtured and cherished in our hearts – bring it forth throughout Earth – and our hearts will leap for joy too on the day of his coming.

So we approach the close of the Advent season in the knowledge that we are waiting; we are keeping watch; we are staying awake, so we are always careful to be ready to meet him on the day of his coming.

And today's lesson from Mary and Elizabeth and God is that none of us is too old, too young, too weak, too silly, too untalented or too inexperienced to be called by God to change Earth. When God calls us, we simply need to be ready to say yes. Then we'll have used this Advent season well. Amen