

Power is made perfect in weakness

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Grant us the first and best of all your gifts, the Spirit who makes us your children – we ask this through...Jesus...your Son

A little child needs protection. Their vulnerability can unleash an absolute avalanche of attention, energy, love and care. It's a paradox, isn't it; the baby's weakness unleashes a powerful tidal wave of care. Our New Testament scriptures today show us that this is a pretty good picture of the way God responds to us.

We just heard part of Paul's second letter to a Christian community in the Greek city of Corinth. In his letter, we might be surprised to find Paul feeling pretty vulnerable; after all, this was a church that Paul had founded. But there were problems in the community, and in their relationship with Paul. What was wrong?

Paul's mission involved lots of travel. He'd planted or strengthened new Christian communities in many places. When he moved on, he left pretty raw new leaders in charge of these very new communities. But Paul worked as a team-player. He kept in touch with a network of fellow church-planters, and with the mother church in Jerusalem. They were very careful to stay in touch with each other, and this communication worked as a pastoral care network, and worked to keep everyone's message true to the teachings of Jesus. (There were no Gospels written yet).

Through this network, Paul was able to exchange letters with the churches he'd started. He'd get letters from them asking

him to answer questions they had, or to adjudicate in their disputes. We've just heard one of his replies.

We know from his letters and from the book of Acts that apart from Paul and the original network, there were some loose cannons out there too; people preaching their own versions of the Gospel for their own benefit – out to make money and win prestige. There are still people like that around today.

After Paul had left Corinth, people like this arrived there and set themselves up over against Paul. They rubbished his teaching and instead proclaimed sensational messages of their own – claiming special, esoteric knowledge and great spiritual experience. This is what we heard Paul confronting today. And he sounded at the start as if he were going to refute their grand claims with more spectacular claims of his own. *Caught up to the third heaven...caught up into paradise and [hearing] things that are not to be not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat.*

But then he changes tack; he doesn't go down the road of prestige. He pointedly turns from the temptation to beat those con artists at their own game and instead tells them that he's got something wrong with him. He tells them he'd once believed he could be a much more effective apostle if he had that fixed; that he'd prayed three times that God might fix it, but that God refused.

Why is he telling the Corinthians that? He could have wiped the floor with those charlatans who were challenging him. But he refuses to beat them at their own game. It's tempting, but it's wrong. Instead, he explains that God has answered his prayer not by healing him, but by teaching him that it's in Paul's brokenness, Paul's weakness, that God's power is unleashed full strength – undiluted. 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.'

Remember? *A little child needs protection. Their vulnerability*

has the power to unleash an absolute avalanche of attention, energy, love and care. It's a paradox, isn't it; the baby's weakness unleashes a powerful tidal wave of care. 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.' It's quite mysterious really, but it's the truth that Paul saw shining through the life of Jesus.

It's what we've been learning from Mark's gospel this year. Remember those times Jesus has acted with great power, healing people, casting out demons, raising the dead and then telling people to keep quiet about it. Mark wants it known that Jesus is far more than just a faith healer. But no-one will ever realise that – no-one will ever know who Jesus really is – until they see him on the cross. Jesus came as a helpless baby; he died a helpless victim. And yet we realise that in those moments of his greatest weakness, the power of God for the world was unleashed with its most tremendous force.

God told Paul, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.' And Paul remembered that: remembered that he followed Jesus whose power was made perfect in weakness. The Jesus Paul proclaimed was the Jesus of the Cross. And on the Cross, in helpless vulnerability, the power of God's love for you and for me, for the Earth – is most perfectly revealed.

Our task is to live this way too; not to count on people's respect or good opinion, but only on God's grace, because for some reason, our vulnerability unleashes an avalanche of God's love and power for us and for those we're sent to serve. Amen.