

## **A Sermon for Sexagesima, February 11, 2007**

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In the epistle today (2 Corinthians 11:19f.), St. Paul is defending himself against adversaries in Corinth. Paul had established the church in Corinth on one of his missionary journeys (Acts 18). After he left Corinth, other ministers of some sort came to Corinth and tried to undermine Paul's ministry. These were the fools that St. Paul says they were suffering gladly.

The main accusation seems to be that Paul's appearance and preaching were not impressive. His physical presence did not match his letter writing skills. The adversaries said, "Paul's letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak and his speech of no account" (2 Corinthians 10:10). The implication is that the adversaries gave a better sermon.

St Paul's defense was, essentially, to agree with the accusation but to maintain that human weakness highlights God's power. He gives a catalogue of the things he had suffered—the things that highlighted his weakness. And he concludes, "If I must boast I will boast of the things which concern my infirmity."

It is in the context of his defense against the competitor apostles that St. Paul talks about his "thorn in the flesh." This was a physical infirmity that God gave Paul to keep him humble because the great revelation God had given him might otherwise make him proud. The Lord explained to Paul. "My strength is made perfect in weakness." Paul concluded, "When I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor. 12:9-10).

In 1 Corinthians, Paul describes the beginning of his ministry in Corinth. He writes, "My speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but in the demonstration of the Spirit and power, that your faith may not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God" (2:4). In other words, Paul's unimpressive preaching showed that the Corinthians were really responding to God and not to him.

Our culture also values those whose physical appearance and speech are impressive. It is always a temptation to equate an impressive appearance and presentation with truth. We are somewhat more vulnerable than the ancient world because the media continual presents us with attractive people delivering crafted messages. When someone less attractive delivers a less crafted message, the tendency is to think that it is less important or significant.

This is one danger inherent in the church's use of media. One critic observed that when the church uses the same techniques and media as the marketers of consumer products, it runs the risk of being evaluated in the same terms. The church becomes a product and one is chosen over the other for the same reasons one drinks Bud rather than Miller.

However, the Bible is clear that what is impressive in the world is not impressive to God. The standards of the world are not the standards of the kingdom. As God said through Isaiah, "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither *are* your ways my ways, saith the LORD." (55:7).

This is easy to forget. We read the story of the birth of Christ in a manger, but then forget that

humble settings in our own lives are still the place where God is revealed. We read that Christ called fishermen, tax collectors and sinners to be disciples, but then discount the work of Christ in our own ordinary lives. We read that St. Paul viewed his physical ailment as a thing that brought him closer to God, but then bewail and bemoan our every sickness and setback, unable to understand that when we are weak, we are strong also.

Human weakness is the avenue to God's strength because human pride is the original sin. Man severed himself from God by proclaiming himself to be his own god, by claiming the creation for his own use. The original sin brought death. All that man is and builds apart from God will eventually perish. We build impressive buildings; we sculpt impressive bodies; we perform medical and scientific marvels. But everything we make will grow old and every human being will die. As St. John says, "The world is passing away...but he who does the will of God abides forever" (1 John 17).

Our weaknesses remind us of our own mortality and our need for God. When we are afflicted, we pray 'Lord have mercy upon us' with new meaning. When we have setbacks in our lives, we turn to God with greater faith and more fervent prayer. But when we succeed and prosper, there is just the slightest tendency to say, "Look at me." As God warned the Israelites:

Beware that you do not forget the LORD your God...Lest when you have eaten and are full, and have built beautiful houses, and dwell in them...and all that you have is multiplied; when your heart is lifted up, and you forget the LORD your God, who brought you forth out of the land of Egypt...And you say in your heart, My power and the might of mine hand has gained me this wealth (Deuteronomy 8:11f.)

Now, God does have our prosperity in mind. God is changing each of us into glorious and eternal beings. It is precisely the recognition of our human weakness that turns us to God and enables him to do his work in us. Humility leads to exaltation. The Son of God humbled himself to become man and is now exalted and given a name above all names (Phil 2). As the Magnificat says, "He hath put down the mighty from their seat and hath exalted the humble and meek" (Luke 1:52).

If we understand this pattern, we can learn to value that which is true and good and faithful over that which is visibly impressive. We can learn to esteem things rightly in the light of the cross. And we can learn to say, with Paul, "When I am weak, then I am strong."