*The LCA provides this sermon edited for lay-reading, with thanks to the original author.*

**Proper 9, Year B**

**2 Corinthians 12:2-10**

**WHAT A BLESSING IS GOD’S GRACE**

*‘Enough about you; let’s talk about me’* was the headline in a newspaper article. In an age of ‘selfies’, humility isn’t a popular virtue. Humility has been defined as ‘*being so interested in others, you don’t think about yourself at all’.* St. Paul had every reason to be proud of his great achievements. He was the most successful missionary in the New Testament church. He treasured the Gospel of God’s grace so much that he worked tirelessly to tell others about it. What’s more, he was blessed with an extraordinary vision of heaven, which could have made him very prideful.

Instead, Paul fears his converts to Christianity will think more highly of him than they do of God’s grace. He wants his fellow-Christians to focus their attention on all that our Lord Jesus has done for them, rather than on him and his missionary activities. We find those who constantly brag about the wonderful things they’ve done to be off-putting. We feel closer and more able to relate to those who admit their flaws and imperfections. Our Lord prefers to work with humble men and women who are keener to put themselves out for the sake of others than those who put their own needs first.

Often these people recognise they have a flaw of one kind or another which makes them more sympathetic to other people who too are imperfect. You see, as far as God is concerned, we are all of equal worth with each other in our weaknesses. It is our weaknesses that make us alike; it is our strengths that make us different. Acknowledging our weaknesses links us to others in ways that are compassionate and caring.

The grace of Christ our Saviour has enabled many of His people to do great things for Him despite their weaknesses:

* William Wilberforce‘s physical frailty didn’t stop him from working successfully for the abolition of slavery.
* Charles Spurgeon was one of London’s most powerful and effective preachers ever. He did his best work while an invalid.
* George Matheson wrote his famous, comforting and consoling hymn *‘O Love that will not let me go”* after experiencing a broken heart and suffering from his own “thorn in the flesh” which was blindness.

If you read the biographies of famous Christians, you learn of how they persisted in prayer despite not having some of their most passionate requests granted. They testify to the fact that regular prayer brings endless blessings, which only makes the question of unanswered prayer all the more acute. Many of their other requests were answered in astonishing ways, for which they were forever grateful.

Unanswered prayer only becomes a burning issue when one’s whole life depends on it. **“The greatest tragedy of life is not unanswered prayer, but unoffered prayer (J.B. Meyer).”** Any prayer is better than no prayer at all. The psalms teach us the importance of frankness in prayer. Prayers that are expressions of anger and disappointment at least show that we have taken God seriously and hold nothing back from Him. A major failure regarding prayer is to stop praying too soon for something. Instead, many have discovered how their disappointments and failures have led them to pray with deeper passion and greater blessings.

Lack of persistence in prayer inhibits growth in prayer, especially prayers for others. Jesus doesn’t explain unanswered prayer. He Himself experienced it in the garden of Gethsemane when His threefold request to not have to suffer and die was unanswered. Instead, an angel came to strengthen Jesus for the terrible time ahead. But from that unanswered prayer, we have received the salvation Jesus has won for us at such a great cost.

The point of prayer is, after all, maintaining our relationship with God rather than the things we get from that relationship. If answers to our prayers came too easily we would probably give up praying every day. Delays in answering our requests may be God’s way of directing us to pray for people we had never thought of praying for before. We can probably all think of selfish prayer requests that, in hindsight, we are glad went unanswered. To rise from prayer with a renewed and strengthened faith in our Lord Jesus is to have the best result from prayer imaginable. To pray **“Your will be done”** is a cry of commitment to our God whose will is infinitely wiser than our own. Prayer can involve asking to be changed by God in ways pleasing to Him, wonderful ways that we never thought of.

In order that St. Paul didn’t think too highly of his own visions and accomplishments, he was given a “thorn in the flesh”. It’s good that we don’t know for sure what it was, so that we can identify with Paul, having also our own “thorn in the flesh”, whatever it may be. Some Bible scholars believe that Paul’s “thorn” was most likely those people in the church in Corinth who were impossible to please. Paul could never “rest on his laurels” and contemplate a trouble-free church. There was always pastoral repair work to be done. Furthermore, Paul wants us to see that any vision of heaven he was given meant less to him than Christ and the life-changing power of His grace.

Paul suffered many hardships and tough times in his ministry. Only one thing got Paul down. He felt the “thorn” he was given undermined the effectiveness of his ministry. He begged Jesus to remove this humiliating burden. Our Lord’s reply to Paul has been an unending source of comfort to us Christians ever since. The centre of Jesus’ reply is all about the power of His grace. Jesus says, **“My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness (v9).”** Behind the success of any servant of God is the powerful grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus is, in effect, saying to Paul, *“I’ll do something better than remove your thorn. I will give you the grace to bear it creatively and be all the more effective because of My grace at work in you.”*

Paul now comes to terms with his nagging “thorn” because of the wonderful way it enables him to experience the transforming power of Christ’s grace. He realises that apart from the grace of Christ protecting him, he too could be capable of terrible sins. In a down-to-earth way, he admits to us **“For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from the body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! (Romans 7:22-25)”**

That Paul is ‘wearing his heart on his sleeve’ and telling us that he too experiences weaknesses with us, is of such great help to us. The grace of Christ can minister to us and help us in even the most trying circumstances of daily life. Your thorn and my thorn won’t be the same as St. Paul’s, but God’s grace can make them just as fruitful in our work for Him. Paul concludes, **“Therefore I will boast all the most gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”**

You see, Jesus lets some weaknesses remain in us so that we never stop depending on Him for help. Our Lord meets us in our defeats and failures, and not just in our successes. Handed over to Jesus, our weaknesses can be blessings in disguise, as we know our Lord is with us in our weaknesses to help us handle them creatively. Our thorns are given to us to keep us humble and as a result, fruitful in the service of our Lord. He enables us to live productive Christian lives despite our imperfections. Faith involves learning how to live with our imperfections.

**“God did not promise to rescue me from life’s struggles. He did promise to keep me whole and safe amid them. He does not shield me from the pains of my many wounds. He does enable me to bear them. Thus, I must live daily within the crucible of conflict. I must learn how to live effectively amid struggle, how to turn my many failures into occasional successes, how to develop and mature amid the throes of battle. Conflict is necessary in the life of God’s servant. It purges and prepares him for productive service. It is on the battlefield of life that he can minister to the wounded and fallen about him. God has no way of touching suffering humanity save through His servants who are immersed in humanity’s conflicts.” (Leslie F. Brandt: *Great God, Here I Am).***

Our Saviour Jesus is most active in imperfect Christians who cannot live a day without him and the companionship that’s ours through prayer. What a priceless and indispensable blessing this grace is. As long as you live, treasure Jesus’ words to you: **“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power has its most perfect manifestation in your weakness.”**

Amen.

*And may the peace of God, which surpasses all human understanding, guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.*