



Jars of Clay

2 Corinthians 4:7-12

Occasionally as I'm walking along the Front, I see people with metal detectors on the beach, particularly after a busy Sunday. What are they after? Buried treasure but not something left behind by Long John Silver. They're after any valuable items – mostly money – that people have dropped. I don't think they make much out of it but more dedicated metal detector people have found valuable items, although archaeological people don't like people hunting for buried treasure as the location of a find is important in them being able to find out something about the people who it once belonged to.

We have this treasure in clay pots – jars of clay. We are vessels carrying treasure. That's how Paul described himself and by implication all of us who know Jesus. But what's the treasure? The last verse we looked at this morning gives us the probable context. "Let light shine out of darkness" God made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ." So the treasure is the light of the knowledge of the glory of God – in effect, the Good News, the Gospel. And that treasure is embodied in us – God's people.

As I said in a previous week, we all get a glimpse of God's glory at some point in our lives. Usually moments that make an impression on us. This morning I challenged us to ask God for those moments because that make a difference to others as the light that Jesus brings illuminates us, lightens us up. As we see Him, in His glory, that's what makes the difference. That's what transforms us out of a humdrum existence and makes us want to tell others – because we have seen the glory of God – we have seen the potential that brings, the life transforming power that brings and we become desperate that others should have it. We are then that light, that embodiment of the Gospel.

Paul was a desperate man. He was desperate that others knew Christ– and the light of Christ shone from him. In the passage this evening he uses this picture of jars of clay to contrast who he is to the light he brings through the gospel.

As I've said on a previous occasion, Paul was being accused of being false because he didn't make money and that trouble followed him around. He didn't vaunt himself as his critics did. He gives us this picture of jars of clay – clay pots to describe what he brought. He brought treasure to people but he was the clay pot it was delivered to them in.

I occasionally watch Time Team. Rather than the treasure hunters who just look for gold and coins, the archaeologists look for anything that tells them how people lived in times past and clay pots tell them just as much about people as rich things. Clay pots were the ordinary things people stored stuff in. Rich or poor everybody had them to store the hunky-dorys of life.

I'm told by some commentators that when Roman armies conquered places they brought the treasures back to Rome and paraded them before Caesar in clay jars. It demonstrated to the world that the power of Rome was supreme and that those treasures were Rome's and they had no glory in themselves any more.

The treasure we bring to people is not our treasure, but God's – we are just the ordinary people that it's contained in. *Verse 7 ...we who have this spiritual treasure are like common clay pots, in order to show that the supreme power belongs to God, not to us.*

It's in clay pots – the ordinary jars people use – significance – so the power is God's not ours – the glory is too. Sharing the gospel is never about us, but about bringing the presence and power of Jesus to people, that they may glimpse His power and enter into a living relationship with Him.

The problem with ordinary clay jars or pots is that they have a bit of a life. The nice ornamental pieces, vases, china, glass and whatever we have get put in a display cabinet doesn't it. We bring it out on special occasions or for special visitors. The normal china, the mugs, the pyrex dishes, the tupperware boxes, the old biscuit tins we use to store stuff in – they end up in the bottom cupboard in the kitchen, out of sight until they're needed. They have a hard life. They get constantly battered in the dishwasher. Once they're broken, chipped or just grubby, we bin them and get some more. We sometimes have the special mug or special container don't we? They're for valuables we don't want to use – our spare change and the like. Cheap containers to store expensive bits.

This is the jars of clay picture Paul gives us. The contents may be valuable but the containers are just ordinary. And they receive the battering that ordinary containers usually get.

So because we're jars of clay, we are still battered by life. In fact if we are filled with treasure rather than junk, then we can expect to get rough usage. It comes with the territory. There has always been a line of Christian thinking that with trusting Jesus comes life, joy peace. In fact there is a whole area of prosperity ministry that says that when we truly follow Christ They would say that God's intention for our life is joy and happiness. If we find our life a mess, full of trouble and distress, then either we are living in sin and need to confess it, or we are short on faith and need to renew it. It's ideas like this that lead us into "cloud cuckoo land". If we end up believing that we should be free from worry, distress, trouble, suffering, bad times..... then we have to pretend we are living the victory life when all about us is crashing down.

For Paul it was quite the reverse. With the Christian life aggravation comes with the territory: here's what is listed in these verses.

- troubles
- doubts
- have enemies
- injury
- risk of death.

I guess that doesn't make good PR when we're explaining the Good News to people, but promising prosperity takes us into untruth. How would prosperity ministers have viewed Jesus? Could Jesus be seen as a success? He certainly didn't make any money from His ministry. At the end of his earthly life he only had his mum, a few women disciples and one male disciple at the cross – all the rest of His followers had ditched Him. Success? Not in earthly terms, but three days later we find that out of death comes victory and life.

We know that was also the reality for Paul and has been the reality of countless of God's people down the ages. *10 We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. 11 For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body.*

What's more important, the container or the treasure? We can look at death in these verses in two possible ways. Firstly Paul literally risked death to bring Good News to people. What a challenge in itself! He risked His life whilst most believers won't even risk their embarrassment to tell someone of Jesus. Secondly, Paul was someone who had given his life over for Jesus' sake. He was prepared to die to whatever in order that others may have life.

But before you think that the Christian life is all gloom and doom, look back at verses 8-10 *We are often troubled, but not crushed; sometimes in doubt, but never in despair; 9 there are many enemies, but we are never without a friend; and though badly hurt at times, we are not destroyed. 10 At all times we carry in our mortal bodies the death of Jesus, so that his life also may be seen in our bodies.*

Actually, everyone comes into these experiences in life – troubled, doubting, having enemies, injured – emotionally, spiritually. But look at this; in each case the greater disaster never befalls us. The world is full of

people who are crushed, despairing, friendless, wounded, suffering from life. Problems come with the territory, but greater disaster should never befall us. Satan can try to put bags over our heads, try to lie to us that we are done for, try to question our faith, try to wound us with his fiery darts – but what happened to Jesus. He died but could never be destroyed and out of His death came resurrection, life, hope.

Never let Satan put a paper bag over our heads. Never see problems and issues as a negative thing, particularly when we know that sin has been dealt with and that by faith we are children of God. As we seek to follow Jesus, the risk of death and the problems that often beset us shows that His life is in us. For Paul it meant that even all the dangers, threats and pitfalls of being Christ's servants speak death in the world's terms, they bring life to others like the Corinthians.

Because Paul understood what God's glory was about, he was prepared to take the risk. Why? Because he'd glimpsed God's glory in the face of Jesus Christ and he was determined that others should know Christ too. That glimpse of God's glory was enough to drive him to want to take the risks he did. And us? It's just our embarrassment.

For Paul, the risks were there but the mission was more important even if it meant death – which is exactly what happened to him. Here's his take on the risks: 14 We know that God, who raised the Lord Jesus to life, will also raise us up with Jesus and take us, together with you, into his presence. 15 All this is for your sake; and as God's grace reaches more and more people, they will offer to the glory of God more prayers of thanksgiving.

If he died he knew he would be raised up again because that's the promise of God. By taking the risk, he knew others would too.

Challenge: as we consider the ministry and mission of our church - as we experience more of the glory of God, we'll want to share the treasure we have more and more and be light to those who are in darkness.

*Preached by Mark Reid
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