

2 Corinthians 4:5-12

For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. ⁶ For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness,"^(a) made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ.

⁷ But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. ⁸ We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; ⁹ persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. 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 also be revealed in our mortal body. ¹² So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.

Clay Jars

"For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord." Here's Paul being either defensively humble, or very polemical, or both. He's saying don't look at me — put your focus back in its right place — which is Jesus Christ. He is trying to get out of the way, so that the Corinthian Christians stop looking at Paul, the short, bearded, baldy guy with the kind eyes — but look at the saviour of the world. He's also being critical — you guys keep looking at the wrong thing! You call yourselves Christians, but here you are, making judgements on everything and everyone — do you think *you* are Lord?

This characterises much of both of Paul's letters to the church in Corinth — they are eager to be faithful but their egos get in the way, along with their fashion conscious, judgemental, cosmopolitan worldliness. If they could just drop all that they could be on fire for Christ! But they won't! If they truly turned to Christ the light would truly shine out of their lives — shine for all to see. This would be a light far greater, far more beautiful than all the art and poetry and rhetoric that they thought they loved. It would be sincere, and truth-telling and disarming.

Paul goes on — we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God, not from us.

What does he mean here? Picture a simple clay oil lamp — a bowl to hold the oil, and a lip for the wick to run up. The cheapest, easiest technology of the time, but quite adequate to hold a flame and light your room by. Clay pottery was the plastic of the time — cheap, abundant, and entirely useless once broken. It could not be repaired like metal, or melted down like glass, it was merely thrown away.

This is what Paul is getting at — we are the jars of clay, cheap, fragile and inelegant, but we get to hold the treasure. It is not the lamp we value, but the light. Not the pot we value, but the contents, be it food, or gold or the water of life. Get over yourselves! Says Paul. Again, to reiterate, the Corinthian Christians were ever so invested (if we run with this image) in what the pot looked like. They thought Apollos was a better apostle than Paul, because he spoke better. Paul — perhaps not the greatest of orators — just keeps wanting to be clear that the content is what matters. The content is Godly. The content is filled with the Holy Spirit. It really doesn't matter what we look like, or if we have a good voice for oratory — if we are filled with the Holy Spirit, and our lives are great examples. Is the flame burning brightly? Good. that's what you need.

The irony is all the greater when you think about whom Paul is preaching. Jesus dressed like a normal guy. He was born in a stable. He died on a cross, a deliberately humiliating death. Jesus exemplified humility. Physically he was a fragile clay jar — but the contents of that 'clay

jar' was God incarnate: divine goodness in thought, word and action, and the brightest of lights.

So the Corinthian church wants all the benefit of the light of Christ, and the love of Christ crucified, but not quite the cost. They are struggling to give up their worldliness and the values that their city has instilled in them.

Thinking about the fragility of these clay jars, I am struck again by God's trust in us.

If *we* wanted a container for great treasure we might want a steel strongbox. If we wanted something to bear a great and precious light, we might want an ornate silver lamp to hold the light and reflect it into the world. Paul is right about the humbleness of the clay jars that we are, but God trusts us to bear the light and share it. There is no plan B — when Jesus ascended the sharing of the good news was really entrusted to the small collection of early believers. But they were empowered by that trust, and the gospel spread rapidly. Do we appreciate the trust that God puts in us? The high regard that he holds us in, clay jars though we are?

There is a boldness in Paul's humility that was exemplary. He wanted the Corinthians (and us) to imitate his good example — not out of pride, but out of a sense that he knew he spent his time in service, glorifying God and sharing the gospel. He knew that leaders led by example, just as Jesus Christ was his perfect leader and example.

You, too, are enormously shaped by the Spirit of Christ, and by the example of major figures in your life. Some of this is a passive process — hang around good people, pray regularly, and your life will reflect that. But some is a deliberate process. Whom do you choose to be? Whose example will you fix your eyes on? Of the vast diversity of culture and influence that comes into our lives through friendships and neighbours, and through various media, what will we focus on? What will we pay attention to? On what will we allow our thoughts to dwell?

Are we, in the end, focused on the content, or the vessel? The light, or the lamp?

Amen.

SDG.