

## 2 Corinthians 5: 6-10 and 14-17

Those who have been baptised – Logan Brown is being baptised shortly – must put to death the ways of the world.

So said the fourth century preacher and bishop, Severian of Gabala, in present-day Syria.

Now, that's a tall order for Logan and indeed for any of us.

So, we will see how we get on!

Over the next five or so weeks, we have an extended focus on Paul's second letter to the Corinthians. Or particular extracts of it.

I don't know how familiar you are with Paul's second letter to the church in Corinth. If you don't know it, there are some classic verses in it.

But if we go beyond the edited highlights – the bits we tend to swoon over – and think about the context in which Paul was writing what we find is that Paul is having a spot of bother with the young church in Corinth.

And though I downplay it, it was quite a big deal.

Basically, there were people questioning Paul's authority and his legitimacy.

And it evidently got quite personal with people saying Paul was unimpressive to look at and not a very good orator to boot!

And what we get in 2 Corinthians is Paul going back and forth between appearing to sort things out and then the trouble all flaring up again.

Not easy when you can't just jump on a plane or pick up the phone. And Paul kind of loses his rag.

So what people say about 2 Corinthians is that it rather reflects this back and forth – i.e. the problems seemingly overcome and then evidently not.

So, some parts of 2 Corinthians are quite placid while others are not – in fact they are very angry.

Scholars say it is not a single letter. Rather, it's at least two letters cobbled together, reflecting different points in the saga.

Chapters 10-13, for instance, are really angry. What we have today – around chapters 4-6 – is calmer.

But as one commentator notes: 'A sense of injury permeates the whole letter.'

How interesting! And full marks to the compilers of the biblical canon for including Paul's ranting!

But we might legitimately ask 'where is God in the ranting?' – our ranting even.

If we suffer setback, hurt, injury, if our hopes are dashed, especially if it gets personal as it did for Paul, it is clearly not pleasant. In fact, it can be horrible. It can send us into a pit of despair and gloom. We wouldn't wish it on anyone.

But, if we can, it is worth asking ourselves how God might speak to us through such times. Because it's my experience that God speaks to us very powerfully in and through such times.

So how is this? How can this be?

When we suffer upset, it can shake us, often quite severely.

We can end up asking big question about our life and who we think we are.

We can perhaps start to see ourselves in new ways...

May be see things about ourselves which deep down we know – things we need to work on, perhaps – but which we put to the back of our minds, may be suppressed.

None of this is easy.

In fact, facing up to those things about ourselves that we are less than proud of, is hard. It's very tiring work.

But if we can learn something from it, it's not a bad thing to happen from time to time.

Who am I?

Not 'what do I want?'. But rather 'what is God calling me to?'

So, what is going on here, which is so important in a life of faith?

What is going on here, is that the self – always clamouring for attention, always seduced by the ways of the world – is being unsettled, de-centred.

And thus we can start to see ourselves a little more clearly, a little more truthfully. With all our fragilities. Our vulnerabilities. Our compulsions.

And there is redemption in this.

Last week, we had a talk – a rather wonderful talk – as part of the Cathedral's *undivided* series on remembrance, memory and forgetting.

The talk was on dementia asking questions about the essential nature of our humanity – what it is to be human – made in the image of God – when we lose capacity. In this case through dementia.

So much of our thinking about personhood is bound up with the idea of capacity – the ability to do certain things.

And yet we know that a friend or a loved one who has dementia is no less a child of God, no less human, just because they can no longer remember us, or know whether it is night or day.

We know this but it brings us up short. 'Wherein lies our essential humanity?', we ask.

And in a world fixated on success, attainment and cognitive ability, we find it a difficult question to answer.

One of the tentative answers we got on Tuesday drew on work by the theologian David Ford. And this is what he said:

Our humanity, Ford says, lies in "my allowing someone else to be there for me." "Only on that basis," Ford continues, "can I be there for someone else." And lastly, "I am human in that I let someone else be there for me."

Isn't this wonderful?

Here we have an insight about our essential humanity drawn from reflecting on human beings at their most vulnerable, at the mercy of this cruel disease we call dementia.

And to make the connection with what I was saying earlier about what happens when we suffer injury or hurt, and the self is de-centred...

What these two examples have in common is we are again talking about fragility and vulnerability.

It is here that we learn something important about what it is to be human.

Allowing someone else to be there for me. Fragility and vulnerability...

Far from being a bad thing, it's our destiny.

I think we are on holy ground here.

And it is through such insights – when we inhabit a place of vulnerability – hard though it is – that we allow God to come in.

“...always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies.” (1 Cor 4: 10)

Die to self. Die to the ways of the world – our baptismal calling. It is the only way.

And you know what?

What's the most remarkable thing about all this?

What's remarkable is that it is precisely at this point – this point of fragility and vulnerability – that God can use us.

“All this is from God,” Paul says.

God “who has reconciled us to himself through Christ...has given us the ministry of reconciliation.”

Fragile, vulnerable, fallen us

Not impressive. Poor orators!

God has given us the ministry of reconciliation.

We cannot do this ministry, which the world so badly needs, unless we do it from that place of fragility and vulnerability.

Always carrying in us the death of Jesus so His life may be made visible.

And the paradox?

What's the paradox?

The paradox is this: Facing up to our fragility, our brokenness, we are healed. And broken but healed...we can bring healing to the world.

Amen