

2 Corinthians 4:3-12

Clay Pots

Self Assessment – Humility and reality

No, as the saying goes “self assessment doesn’t have to be taxing.” This has nothing to do with tax or HMRC – anyway that deadline has passed. This is a far more human and dare I say, spiritual exercise and frankly, it won’t cost you a penny! Over the years I confess to have been seriously upset with some Christians who make out that everything about their faith is superb and ultra rosy. Perhaps they don’t mean to draw attention to themselves, but it does sometimes smack of “see what a good boy (or girl) am I.” You know the kind of thing I mean – they bang the drum about how close they are to God, how much time they spend in prayer, in Bible study, how their lives are filled with blessing and how everything is going so well for them. Perhaps it’s not their intention but you are made to feel small and insignificant, a spiritual “nothing” but it can come across like that. Don’t get me wrong – there is absolutely nothing wrong with speaking about our faith and how God is at work in our midst. But there is a way of doing it. There needs to be an air of humility and reality. Almost certainly we need to be more alert to what God is doing in our midst and more ready to speak about that and be actively involved in it – but we need to give HIM the praise. HE is the one who is working out his purposes of love – to hear some people you would think that WE had the lead role and if God is lucky he will get a walk-on part as an after-thought. A measure of humility wouldn’t go amiss – by all means, a quiet word of encouragement to a friend telling of an answered prayer, or an sign of God’s blessing but without needing to “bang the drum” and make out that our faith or the way we live out the Christian life is the greatest thing since sliced bread. Humility. But reality is important too. Life, and the Christian life in particular, is NOT all plain sailing or to mix metaphors, a bed of roses. And Jesus nowhere said it would be. Indeed, he was refreshingly honest with his disciples and the crowds who came to listen to him. He told them in no uncertain terms that following him would be tough, would lead to discrimination even persecution. Being a Christian, even in this country today, can be hard and certainly won’t be a breeze, though of course, ultimately it will lead to great blessing, and we have the unshakeable promise of Christ’s abiding presence as we live out our lives for him. BUT to make out that everything is always rosy and that you “just need to have greater faith” is unreal, untrue and spiritually harmful. Jesus earthed his life and his teaching in the real world. He came to be with us and show his love among real people, with real needs, amid the struggles of everyday life. The Christian faith is not for ivory towers or spiritual isolation units – it is for the shop floor, the High Street, folks’ front rooms and back gardens, for sports clubs and bowling greens, and common rooms and buses. It is for ordinary people with all the ups and downs of everyday life. Whatever else it is, the Christian faith, if it is the Christian faith and not an idealised fabrication, is real and has to be if the living Christ is to touch us where we are. Humility and reality. Two important elements of true Christianity. (I’m not suggesting that those who bang the drum and profess a super-spirituality intend to blow their own trumpet. Sometimes it is well

intended and prompted by enthusiasm in their newfound faith and an excitement in seeing God at work in their midst. But it is sometimes coupled with a relative immaturity in the faith and without the benefit of the experience of God sustaining us through trial and tribulation and holding faith with us when things are particularly tough. In many instances, such people need to be nurtured and encouraged. And, without putting too fine a point on it, they need to be alerted to the dangers (to themselves as well as others) of being super-spiritual – humility and reality are very much part of an authentic Christian faith. I have no wish to quash youthful enthusiasm or crush an excitement about God’s dealings but equally I want them and those they encounter to be able to come through the challenges of faith and life that inevitably come the way of us all, and which are just as much part of God’s plan as the occasional spiritual “highs.” Self assessment in Christian terms means having a proper view of ourselves and of our faith – neither too high an opinion of our gifts, abilities, qualities and faith NOR too low but having a realistic appreciation of who and what we are (in God’s eyes) and the humility to recognise that any good we are able for is God’s doing and HE deserves the praise.

Clay pots

I remember the lady in the china shop telling us that our Doulton dinner set was made to be used. The congregation (and others) were particularly generous with their wedding gifts and it all looked tremendous – almost too good to be used. But apparently it was designed not to sit in a cupboard but to be out and in use. Well, while it hasn’t been out every day (and I don’t think I’ve ever had mince and tatties on it) it has had a good deal of use over the years and lasted very well. Paul, in writing to the Corinthian Christians, wanted to encourage them to be realistic about their faith. I suspect lack of humility wasn’t their problem – quite the contrary – they appear to have a very low opinion of themselves and in common with a lot of people in North East Scotland a sense that they could hardly be fit for doing anything significant for God. They didn’t have a lot going for them. Corinth was hardly renowned for spiritual vitality. Few of them were educated, or experienced, largely speaking they were poor and without influence. What could they possibly do for God and his kingdom? I won’t rub it in, but I’ve been a minister long enough to know that there are many more of our congregations who have a poor view of their spiritual position and their potential for achieving anything for the kingdom of God than there are those who bang the drum. To a degree, that is no bad thing, but even spiritual humility can be overdone if it fails to take account of what GOD can do in us.

We are, as Paul puts it, spiritual treasure in clay pots. While, humanly speaking, we may feel that we don’t have a lot going for us we are all people made in God’s image, a sister or brother to the Saviour of the World, and the temple of the Holy Spirit. We may feel spiritually weak, we, as well as the 1st century Christians, may be hard pressed, buffeted on every side, but we are not in despair, we are not abandoned, for Jesus is with us and the power that raised him from the dead is at work in us. Like our wedding china we are designed for a practical purpose, we are to be put to good use. It does sound rather grand, but we are to live “so that HIS life may be revealed in our mortal body.” We are not “just clay pots” – I mean we are not SOLELY functional

(God goes way beyond the basic necessities) but as Christians we do have a highly important function in living out and telling out the gospel of Jesus Christ and of sharing in the furtherance of God's reign of love. That is a marvellous privilege and a high calling. We are not to blow our own trumpet. "We do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as servants for Jesus' sake." Each of us as followers of the Lord Jesus have a part to play – an important part – and we mustn't under-rate that or imagine that we are useless or superfluous but taking a realistic and hopefully humble view of our own giftings and qualities we are to make full use of God's provision and give our all in the furtherance of the gospel. And if others benefit from our feeble efforts and sometimes in spite of our flaws and failings then we can rejoice that the glory will be God's.

One thing we must remember though – is that we are not museum pieces, nor are we idealised pieces for the manufacturer's showroom – we are not just for show, we're not there to be admired, we are working models – we are here to do a job – to share in God's work, to make his Son known and to encourage others to love and serve him.

In summary, take care not to make out that Christian faith is idyllic, without any problems. Try not to get upset if you come across others who seem to advocate that or suggest that their spiritual experience is perfect. Instead, be both humble and realistic about the person that God has made you and what he has (and will) fit you for. Don't run yourself down and don't put yourself on a pedestal. Don't blow your own trumpet but never forget what God can do with you and through you (and others). You and I may be clay pots, but we are crafted by the maker of heaven and earth and by his Spirit at work in our midst we can do great things for the kingdom. The precise form of our service and the scope of work will vary from person to person but who is to say what God can do if we are open to his lead?

We are called to be servants of Jesus Christ. Go and serve in his strength for his glory! May the Lord bless you! Amen.