

2 Corinthians 4:1-15

### **Feet in two camps?**

The experience of the Christian is one which is lived out with one foot placed in “now” and the other stepping on towards “eternity”. With the eyes of faith looking towards Scripture’s promises we find that our own frailties can never be the entire story. Yes, we might suffer exactly the same aches and pains as anyone else. We might be laid low with illness just like our neighbours. And we will probably find ourselves needing hospital treatment or social care of one sort or another as the years go by. Yet, our human state is in no way a reason for dismay, for we find our hope rooted in God who was and is and always will be the Rock of Ages, spanning all of time ... and beyond. The message of the Christian faith down across the ages is one of divine love being made visible – made real – in the lives of the faithful. Just as Christ was made Incarnate through his human birth in Bethlehem, so too God works through his Church and its all-too-human members in our own day. And so, generation by generation, the Church of Christ moves ever onward. As self-effacing Presbyterians, we might not warm to the idea of God working with us (who, us???) in the divine mission to change the world. But here is the reality of our calling, as found in the words of Paul to the Church in Corinth: “... since it is by God’s mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart.” God’s guiding of our lives makes it possible – indeed, necessary – for us to play our part in God’s work. Imagine what this means both for us and for those around us, whether near or far. In the company of God, our lives can become heavenly beacons of hope in a world which so often seems to find itself mired in shadow. As Christ-followers, it is our role to wait for the Holy Spirit to show us how we should live, where we should go, how we should step out in the light of the Gospel of love. “Hang on,” you might say. “Just hang on just a minute. I have all the same limitations and failings as the next person. So how could it possibly be that the God of all time and eternity could use me in big, inspiring, world-changing ways? I’m so insignificant!” Now perhaps that is sounding altogether more like the Presbyterian mindset with which we are so deeply familiar. We are just not up to the job. Or that is how we so often feel.

### **Hope amidst the frailties**

Let’s go back to our reading and to its writer, the apostle Paul. He has seen a lot of life and has suffered in many ways throughout his energetic and often dramatic ministry. Opposition and oppression, arrest and punishment, illness and shipwreck – Paul has seen it all. He knows better than most that human beings have human frailties, and he acknowledges what it means to live our lives in full view of our stark, unavoidable limitations. He speaks about “treasure in clay pots”, pointing to the fact that the Good News of Christ is carried in the life and in the living of each believer. Like a clay pot, each one of us is anything but durable, and we know that we are all too likely to crumple on impact. Still, into our brittle, fragile beings God places the gift not only of life but of new life in Christ. Surely God could have found a bearer of faith more fit for purpose, more resilient to knocks and bumps. Of course he could! But God chooses us to be the ones who will carry Christ’s love across our neighbourhood and far round the globe. Not them ... but us. With a lifespan of no more than a few score years at most, each one of us

will come and go in next to no time, but while we are here and while we have life within us, we can live that life – as we should live that life – appreciating the treasure that has been lovingly bestowed, more glittering than gold, more sparkling than diamond: God’s gracious presence in us. Seen in that light, the relationship between God and the Church’s members takes on a remarkable new appearance. Not through our feeble abilities, but through the eternal grace of God, great things can happen. As if to keep the real message firmly in mind, Paul himself tells those Christians of Corinth: “... this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.” If, then, God’s Spirit brings new-found strength to our perishable “clay pots”, should we not seek to pass on that same strength to others? Should we not encourage resilience-building in those who are weighed down in their own lives, equipping those who are struggling with strength to meet each day?

### The HIV Programme

This is very much on the mind of the Church of Scotland HIV Programme as it works with partner denominations all around the world. One of the biggest challenges in this whole field has been identified as the need to equip young people with the health education that they simply must have if they are to understand how the HIV virus works and if they are to overcome the dangers which it can pose. Tragically, many young people contract HIV because they cannot grasp the risks that may be surrounding them in their everyday living. But money from Church of Scotland members is making a difference all round the world:

- Caribbean: The “Campaign for Life Project” in Cuba is working to build a space where people living with HIV will feel welcomed. Workshops on HIV topics will be on offer, along with a variety of health related resources.
- Middle East: A project in Egypt is aimed at awareness-raising on Hepatitis C and HIV. Organisers plan to reach out to the community to educate people in the reality of blood-transmitted diseases and to change negative attitudes and stigma within the community.
- Africa: Nine denominations spread across all ten provinces of Zambia are working ecumenically as they plan to empower women and children through capacity development, sustainable care, support and prevention. In addition, educational opportunities will be made available through the scheme.
- Asia: The Church of Christ in Thailand operates an emergency shelter providing holistic care for those who are temporarily homeless or who need to be near medical services. It also provides respite care and training for income-generation projects.

We are only clay pots, but within us is a power that is not our own. Through God working in and through his Church, Good News is sent out in the most practical of ways for the building up of those who are downtrodden. The Church of Scotland HIV Programme can point to so many examples of lives being turned around by the committed Christian care of partner projects which gain so much by our support, whether through prayer or donation. This work builds resilience and offers bright hope to so many people. On this Souper Sunday, don’t just spare a thought for those whose lives have been dragged down by the ill health, the private isolation and the public stigma which HIV so often brings. Play your part in bringing new hope and fresh opportunities of faith and life to so many people around the world. As Paul wrote to Christians in the midst of challenge: We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not

driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. May the Lord bless you – and the work of the Programme! Amen.