

Year B

2 Corinthians 12:2-10

There were a good number of commissioners who spoke at this year's General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in Edinburgh. After attending a number of General Assemblies you get used to the pattern and dynamic of debate. For example, you become aware that whenever a former Moderator of the General Assembly speaks in favour of a motion it is very likely that motion will be passed. Former Moderators carry significant clout and the fact that they are invited to every

General Assembly makes them a force to be reckoned with. Also you will frequently witness the same people speaking regularly while the vast majority stay in their seats. So when someone rises to speak who has not been heard before, it is usually because the individual has something to share that has been brewing within them for some time. And that kind of contribution can often bring an honesty to a debate that would otherwise lack soul. This happened at the recent Assembly for me when a minister of long standing rose to share his sense of insecurity, bewilderment and angst over his

perceived expectations of the function of parish ministry. Was he expected to be an executive manager of a charitable trust? Was he expected to dream-up and initiate all sorts of social care programmes that would justify his church's role in the local community? What did it mean to be a minister of Word and Sacrament in all of this; the very thing to which he believed he was originally called to be, but is now not understood or valued? I felt for him as I would imagine did most other ordained ministers in the Assembly Hall and I somehow think that the apostle Paul would

have felt for him too. You see, Paul, in this perplexing little passage was challenging the boasts of the so-called 'super-apostles' who with claim to their extraordinary experiences were suggesting that the Corinthian church should be heeding them and not the imposter, Paul. Paul's call and function and usefulness for the church in Corinth was being called into question. How was he going to be able to bring something new to the table to justify his existence? So he told them that he knew someone who fourteen years ago had an incredible ecstatic experience that revealed supernatural

wonders. He almost lets slip that the individual in question is, in fact, himself! He goes into no real detail about the incredible experience even though in all likelihood he was the one involved.

The story is told of the owner of a small foreign car who had begun to irritate his friends by bragging incessantly about its fuel efficiency. So they decided on a way to get some humour out of his tireless boasting, as well as bring it all to an end. Every day one of them would sneak into the car park where the man kept his car and pour a few gallons of petrol into the tank. Soon the braggart

was recording absolutely phenomenal mileage. He was boasting of getting as much as 90 miles per gallon, and the pranksters took secret delight in his exasperation as he tried to convince people of the truthfulness of his claims. It was even more fun to watch his reaction when they stopped refilling the tank. The poor fellow couldn't figure out what had happened to his car.

We all know people like that and we all know how easy it is to slip into that kind of behaviour because of our insecurities. Paul doesn't want to go into detail about his experience because that would be to descend

to the tactics of his critics. A kind of ‘my house is bigger than your house’ kind of argument. So we are left with questions like, ‘what kind of ecstatic experience is he talking about’ and ‘who is he talking about; himself or someone else we should know?’

Of course, the point he is making is that it is not our experiences that define us but who we are as people that is given meaning and purpose by Jesus Christ. And that applies to the difficult experiences as well. He refers to the thorn in his side. I don’t think there is any greater mystery in all of Paul’s writings than the question over the nature of the

thorn in his side. Was the thorn spiritual, psychological or physical? We don't get an answer and that's the point again! If this trial, whatever it was, becomes the defining characteristic of the person then perspective has been lost.

Roy Campanella was one of the first African Americans to play in the US Baseball major leagues. In a distinguished career he won the Brooklyn Dodgers Most Valued Player award many times, and in 1955 was in the team that won the World Series.

But in January 1958 his career was cut short after a car crash left him a

quadriplegic. After he was injured he spent a lot of time in the Institute of Physical medicine and Rehabilitation in New York City. One day he stopped to read a gold plaque upon one of the walls, and for someone who had been blessed with such athletic gifts it resonated deeply within him:

“I asked God for strength, that I might achieve.

I was made weak, that I might learn to humbly obey...

I asked for health that I might do great things.

I was given infirmity that might do better things...

I asked for riches that I might be happy,

I was given poverty that I might be wise...

I asked for power, that I might have the praise of others.

I was given weakness that I might feel the need of God...

I asked for all things, that I might enjoy life.

I was given life that I might enjoy all things...

I got nothing I asked for, but everything I had hoped for.

Almost despite myself, my unspoken prayers were answered.

I am, among men, most richly blessed!

Isn't it amazing that for Paul, a man blessed by being born in extraordinary times with extraordinary experiences that it was an instrument of evil, this thorn in the flesh, that was transformed by God into the means of grace by which he would throw Paul into the arms of Christ, where in his weakness, God's power would be made manifest. This, in no way, trivialises or glorifies suffering in itself, but instead removes the burden of personal self-justifying from the individual who is now free to rely on God alone.

I suspect that we continue to struggle with these things. We live in a society that prizes the one who asserts himself, who stands up for his rights, who makes his voice heard. All commendable if Christ's power is revealed in weakness. That's the challenge in Christian living. May we know God's help.

Amen.