

Year B

2 Corinthians 4:5-12

In 2009 Diarmaid MacCulloch, Professor of the History of the Church at the University of Oxford, published *A History of Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years*.¹ It is an excellent, general and very readable history that seeks to tell the documented story of Christianity. In 2013 he published *Silence: A Christian History*.² It's a remarkable

¹ McCulloch, Diarmaid 2009 *A History of Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years* London: Allen Lane.

² McCulloch, Diarmaid 2013 *Silence: A Christian History* London: Allen Lane.

alternative history that seeks to tell the story of Christianity through what has not been said. That might seem like an impossibility but he produced a fascinating book. As an example of an intriguing silence, he wrote about the strange case of the name 'Mark'. He wrote; "As an example of a silence which has always fascinated me, from my first historical specialization in the sixteenth century, is the almost total absence of the Christian name Mark in late medieval and Tudor England, when the names of two of his fellow-Evangelists are common, and another, John, is overwhelmingly present. The one

obvious exception which proves the rule, Anne Boleyn's unfortunate musician Mark Smeaton, might explain later Tudor silence by discrediting the name because he was executed for treasonous adultery with the queen, but does not account for what went before." He goes on; "This is one silence, apparently trivial, yet surely significant, for which so far I have found no good explanation. If we were to solve it, we might learn something new about the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries."³

³ McCulloch, Diarmaid 2013 *Silence: A Christian History*
London: Allen Lane. p2

It's a brilliant book and it emphasises to us that there is much that has not been said or recorded that is crucial to a broader understanding. There may be a number of reasons why facts have not been disclosed but in the main, silence is due to human weakness. No-one wants the cupboard door to be flung open and all the skeletons to come tumbling out. There are a good number of skeletons that appear in McCulloch's book.

The apostle Paul in his second letter to the Corinthians desired to remain silent about his recent personal history because he was

aware that a straightforward appeal to his experience would not wash with the sceptical Corinthians. When Paul wrote to the Galatians he felt a great deal of freedom to simply state the chain of events that led him to be a self-proclaimed apostle to the Gentiles. The context was very different and clearly he did not fear a concerted backlash to his efforts. However with the difficult Corinthians it could be very different. He couldn't afford not to be heard because he was perceived as being too pushy. He didn't want these people to be thinking to themselves; 'who does this fellow think he

is?'. He needed to introduce himself in such a way that he made a claim to be heard but did not come over as being arrogant. And you know I think he did a remarkable job!

Once there was an emperor in the Far East who was growing old and knew it was coming time to choose his successor. Instead of choosing one of his assistants or one of his own children, he decided to do something different.

He called all the young people in the kingdom together one day. He said, "It has come time for me to step down and to choose the next emperor. I have decided to choose

one of you.” The kids were shocked! But the emperor continued. “I am going to give each one of you a seed today. One seed. It is a very special seed. I want you to go home, plant the seed, water it and come back here one year from today with what you have grown from this one seed. I will then judge the plants that you bring to me, and the one I choose will be the next emperor of the kingdom!”

There was one boy named Ling who was there that day and he, like the others, received a seed. He went home and excitedly told his mother the whole story. She helped

him get a pot and some planting soil, and he planted the seed and watered it carefully. Every day he would water it and watch to see if it had grown.

After about three weeks, some of the other youths began to talk about their seeds and the plants that were beginning to grow. Ling kept going home and checking his seed, but nothing ever grew. Three weeks, four weeks, five weeks went by. Still nothing.

By now others were talking about their plants but Ling didn't have a plant, and he felt like a failure. Six months went by, still nothing in Ling's pot. He just knew he had

killed his seed. Everyone else had trees and tall plants, but he had nothing. Ling didn't say anything to his friends, however. He just kept waiting for his seed to grow.

A year finally went by and all the youths of the kingdom brought their plants to the emperor for inspection. Ling told his mother that he wasn't going to take an empty pot. But she encouraged him to go, and to take his pot, and to be honest about what happened. Ling felt sick to his stomach, but he knew his mother was right. He took his empty pot to the palace.

When Ling arrived, he was amazed at the variety of plants grown by all the other youths. They were beautiful, in all shapes and sizes. Ling put his empty pot on the floor and many of the other kinds laughed at him. A few felt sorry for him and just said, “Hey nice try.”

When the emperor arrived, he surveyed the room and greeted the young people. Ling just tried to hide in the back. “My, what great plants, trees and flowers you have grown,” said the emperor. “Today, one of you will be appointed the next emperor!”

All of a sudden, the emperor spotted Ling at the back of the room with his empty pot. He ordered his guards to bring him to the front. Ling was terrified. “The emperor knows I’m a failure! Maybe he will have me killed!”

When Ling got to the front, the Emperor asked his name. “My name is Ling,” he replied. All the kids were laughing and making fun of him. The emperor asked everyone to quiet down. He looked at Ling, and then announced to the crowd, “Behold your new emperor! His name is Ling!” Ling couldn’t believe it. Ling couldn’t even grow his seed. How could he be the new emperor?

Then the emperor said, “One year ago today, I gave everyone here a seed. I told you to take the seed, plant it, water it, and bring it back to me today. But I gave you all boiled seeds which would not grow. All of you, except Ling, have brought me trees and plants and flowers. When you found that the seed would not grown, you substituted another seed for the one I gave you. Ling was the only one with the courage and honesty to bring me a pot with my seed in it. Therefore, he is the one who will be the new emperor!”⁴

⁴ More Hot Illustrations for Youth Talks (Zondervan, 1995)

Courage and honesty were at the heart of Paul's appeal to the Corinthians. Like Ling, Paul wrestled with all the doubts and insecurities that come with being given responsibility. The easy way would have been to bluster on and make a case for his credibility. The hard way was to admit his weakness, a mere clay jar, an earthen vessel; something that easily breaks and then to everyone's surprise the treasure is exposed. The challenge for us all is to understand that we do not live faithfully as followers of Christ by justifying ourselves. We do not have to do that because it is in our very weakness that

the way of Christ is demonstrated and the gospel is shared. It is a very hard lesson to learn and we are fortunate that the apostle Paul was able to communicate it to us through the example of his Saviour. May God help us to live in the same manner.

Amen.