**3rd June 2018**

**2 Corinthians 1.1-11; 4.5-12**

A US televangelist has asked his followers to help fund his fourth private jet - because Jesus "wouldn't be riding a donkey".[[1]](#endnote-1)

Jesse Duplantis said God had told him to buy a Falcoln 7X for $54m (£41m).

He added he was hesitant about the purchase at first, but said God had told him: "I didn't ask you to pay for it. I asked you to believe for it."

Although preachers owning private jets is not unusual, this particular appeal has caused controversy.

Twitter users responded to the request with disbelief, with many quoting Bible verses warning against greed and "false prophets", or suggesting that the money could be better used to help the poor.

In a video address posted on his website, 68-year-old Mr Duplantis explained: "You know, I've owned three different jets in my life, and I've used them and just burning them up for the Lord Jesus Christ.

"It's not about possessions, it's about priorities. Jesus had told people to "go into the world and preach the Gospel to every creature, now how we gonna do that? I can't live long enough to travel by car or by ship or by train, but I can do it by an aeroplane".

In 2015, Mr Duplantis appeared in a video with another preacher, Kenneth Copeland, in which Mr Copeland described travelling on commercial airlines as being "in a long tube with a bunch of demons". A thought that may cross many people’s minds when they find out who’s sat next to them on the plane.

Yesterday at the Elders Day we have started to look at where the church is going – finding God’s Vision for us for the next ten years. One of the questions we considered is what would regard as success? I can reassure you that we didn’t consider buying the minister a jet plane.

In this passage Paul is up against critics who don’t believe he was a success because he did not meet the expectations of an accomplished leader. Likewise we can play the game of comparing our lot with others and consider whether we have been ‘successful’. What does it mean to be ‘successful’ as a Christian?

Over the next six weeks we are looking at Paul’s second letter to the church in Corinth and picking up some of the main themes.

A bit of background first:

In the mid-50s AD Paul kept in touch with the Corinthian church he had established. He wrote at least four letters (see 1 Corinthians 5.9; 2 Corinthians 2.3-4; 7.8-12; 10.9-11), and several seem to be collected together in 2 Corinthians. People travelled with letters, information and questions (1 Corinthians 1.11; 7.1; 2 Corinthians 1.23–2.4; 7.5-11). Timothy revisited Corinth (1 Corinthians 4.17-21; 16.10-11), and his report prompted Paul to a second ‘painful visit’ (2 Corinthians 2.1-11; 7.12). Later Titus (2 Corinthians 8.16-24; 12.14-18) took a letter that achieved a positive response (7.5-16).

Our readings will reveal Paul’s distress about a challenge to his authority by those he characterizes as ‘false apostles’ (11.1-6, 12-15,21-23). Paul doesn’t simply insist he is a true apostle and order the Corinthians to obey. They must work things out for themselves, no longer seeing things ‘from a human point of view’ but being instead ‘in Christ’ (5.16-17), for example by responding to poor Jerusalem Christians in the light of ‘the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ’ (8.9). And Paul urges them to have the mind of Christ about his apostleship and also about their discipleship and what they do with their lives, their money, their time.

Corinth was a vibrant buzzing city in ancient Greece. Very cosmopolitan place, many religions and gods and anything goes attitude. The people of Corinth prized physical strength in its Isthmian Games, rewarded the polished rhetoric of worldly wisdom, and commemorated the proud patronage of the wealthy on whom the less fortunate desperately depended. Paul’s illnesses and punishments did not meet the expectations of an accomplished leader, and his frankness about his feelings and frustrations did not fit the ideal of an effective teacher (10.10). But those who ‘live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them’ (5.15) can see that Paul’s sufferings and frankness, even about coming close to death (1.8-9), confirm rather than challenge his call.

Paul wants his readers to be aware that he has indeed been ‘utterly, unbearably crushed’, under ‘the sentence of death’, becoming totally reliant on the ‘God who raises the dead’ (1.8-9). Yes, he has been treated as no more than a slave – but this is integral to his proclaiming Jesus, the Lord who fulfilled God’s creative purpose by his obedience to death on a cross. His point is that if you are truly following Jesus you may end up going where Jesus went – through suffering and self-denial.

Paul uses the image of clay pots to describe our own fragile lives but how God can still put his treasure within them. Clay jars that protect their treasured contents from damp and dispersal can be easily smashed, but that doesn’t reduce their importance or invalidate their purpose. So Paul sees his being ‘struck down’ not as questioning his apostleship but as central to it. It is relying not on self but on God that enables Jesus’ light to shine and his life to be at work.

Here’s three thoughts about this image of treasure in clay pots:

**You could say ‘Don’t judge a book by its cover’**. In Corinth some were prone to do this by comparing Paul with the ‘super’ apostles or teachers (Peter, James, and Apollos, a gifted speaker). In 1 Corinthians, Paul writes of factions declaring loyalty to particular leaders. All this caused him great heartache. For Paul, it is the treasure within that matters. The same is true today, but our society tends to focus on status and charisma. There can be the cult of celebrity in the church as it was in Corinth, with the consequence that ‘the ordinary’ was and is easily overlooked. Celebrity culture is all around us – in sport, in fashion, in popular music and sometimes, it seems, even among politicians. This celebrity culture can tend to get in the way of care for all people?

I know a recent survey of girls at school asked them what their ambition was and the most popular responses was to be a celebrity or marry a Premier league footballer so they could live the celebrity lifestyle. I want to be famous! The Christian faith always challenges that the way to success is through service. Those who serve among you are the greatest said Jesus. The question is: How can we be counter-cultural, in order to ensure that the genuine treasure of Christ is seen in ordinary Christians? What changes in our attitudes and behaviour might be required to make this happen in our context?

The majority in Corinth lived at or below subsistence, subject to exploitation and violence in a brutally competitive city, where the elite regarded the poor as dregs and filth to quote Cicero the ancient writer and commentator. Perhaps part of Paul’s being ‘unbearably crushed’ was that if he were too ill to labour, he would depend on the patronage from rich Christians expecting loyalty to their opinions. Today’s victims are also blamed: the poor as feckless, the sick as making wrong choices, the abused as ‘asking for it’. Job’s comforters prevail: those who suffer deserve it, but can learn from it how to do better. But Paul refuses to see his sufferings as either deserved or improving, attributing them to human malice or Satanic influence. Paul is no masochist, but his experience is that suffering brings him closer to Christ, seeing himself as already dead to a merciless world and alive with hope for those who despair.

**Ordinary clay pots are fragile, and when cracked or broken are discarded**. **Yet our brokenness can bring blessing to ourselves and to others.**

But an ancient tradition in Japan – kintsugi – beautifully repairs broken ceramics that may not have any intrinsic or aesthetic value. Kintsugi sees the damage as an episode in the life of the object. The cracks are not concealed to render the joins invisible, but are highlighted by using a lacquer mixed with powdered gold or silver. The repaired vessels are highly valued even if they no longer have a functional use. Through these cracks light often shines, enhanced by the repair. Human beings are often cracked or damaged by the stresses and vicissitudes of life. The light of the gospel can shine through damaged lives.

Paul says in chapter 1 v3*:* *Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort,****4****who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God*.

The most inspiring people I know are not the ones who have got it together but the ones who continue to hold on to faith, hope and love even though their lives are difficult and damaged. I hear myself saying ‘I don’t know how you do it, I don’t know how you keep going’ . I don’t want to name names but as I look at you so many of you inspire me and I can see the treasure of faith in the fragility of your lives.

Paul is clear that with suffering comes comfort, and perhaps it is in our attitude to our own problems and those of others that we imitate Christ. So, Paul teaches that when one person in the fellowship of the church suffers, he expects the Christians in Corinth to act to relieve their needs compassionately and generously. In the face of our own hardships we are called to give thanks to God for they are spurs that lead us on in caring for others in need and being sensitive to others in their need, here and around the world

On the elders day people shared about the siginifcant moments in their time at the Tab and it was often the small things that mattered: getting a card; someone talking to you when you were new and a stranger; offering you a meal, especially if you were going through a difficult time; giving you a rest from parenting by taking your children off you for an evening; all treasured memories.

Sometimes we can focus on what we haven’t got instead of being thankful for what we have got.

**A simple clay pot is not a work of art but how can it reveal the treasure within?** You wouldn’t display it in your china cabinet (unless, perhaps, it was made by a family member). It is ordinary, everyday, functional and useful – but unremarkable. There are hundreds of thousands just like it. In the ancient world clay pots were the containers of choice. They could be large ‘amphorae’ typically used to ship wine, oil or grain, or smaller pots used for cooking, eating and many other everyday uses. Plain pots were also used to hide precious things, to confuse thieves. If we are like clay pots, what are we being used for? What might we be hiding? How can we reveal the treasure that is hidden within?

The treasure which Mamoudou Gassama, the Malian asylum seeker in Paris had was the ability to climb quickly and fearlessly up the outside of a block of flats to rescue a child! Most of us will not have quite such an offering. But surely we all have abilities which we can offer in the cause of the gospel of love. We can all befriend people. We can all open our hearts to those in need. We can all become channels of the extraordinary power which comes from God (2 Corinthians 4.7-9), and make the life of Jesus visible in our lives (2 Corinthians 4.11).[[2]](#endnote-2)

We have such treasure here in the church, the hope we have in Christ, the power and work of the Holy Spirit but we often hide our light under a bush, to use Jesus’ turn of phrase in the Sermon of the Mount. How can we let people know in our deeply skeptical and secular society about the treasure we have in Christ? Because people are still seeking for something. People still need to find a purpose to live, a meaning for their lives.

I know some of you have been wondering how to respond to interest from your friends in a Astrologist come Psychic who has been offering to read your Selfie picture. Post an image of yourself and she will connect to your loved ones and pass on their guidance for you. She may be able to pick up on past present and future predictions for you and answer some questions you are wanting to know or need clarity on.

People are attracted to this stuff because it seems to be the offer of helping people find direction when they feel lost in life and also reassurance. But this is stuff that God does awesomely well and we need to get that message across. Instead of connecting to your spirit guide, which can be very dangerous – because you have no assurance where that spirit is coming from – we have the assurance of connecting with the Holy Spirit. God’s good and loving purposes for our lives. We have people trained in prayer and discernment available every Sunday or at other convenient times to pray and ask God’s comfort and help and healing for you. Amazing things have happened in this place, some of which you hear testimony to in worship. So come on have confidence in the treasure we have and know and direct people to God’s light and not some vague and potentially dangerous spiritual source.

According to Paul our treasure is ‘the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ’ (2 Corinthians 4.6). Going back to that extraordinary sermon preached by Bishop Michael Curry: ‘Imagine this tired, old world where love is the way’ and hunger and poverty become history and justice and peace prevail. Is this the treasure we are keeping hidden behind the closed doors of our churches and our homes? Bishop Michael’s preaching style may not be ours; but surely his message needs to be more clearly heard from everyday pulpits.

We preach the gospel in a society that no longer knows the gospel. They say that we are the only Bible some people may read. We can learn from Paul how to tell with our own lives that we ‘rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead’. May god speak through our vulnerable humanity, our clay pots, and point to the treasure of Christ shining within .

Prayer

A prayer based on the reading from 2 Corinthians.

Father, help us always to proclaim Christ Jesus as Lord,

and to make his life visible in our everyday lives,

as we reveal the light which has shone in our hearts,

the light of the knowledge of your glory in the face of Jesus Christ.

Amen.

1. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-44305873> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2018/95-may-june-2018-b/proper-4/postscript> Dudley Coates is a Local Preacher in the Yeovil and Blackmore Vale Methodist Circuit and a former Vice President of the Methodist Conference. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)