

**Introduction**

Balloon illustration: I have here a floppy, shapeless piece of rubber that in its present state is useless, fit for nothing. But if I fill it with air it is transformed (ask someone to do this) It becomes useful and beautiful and perfect for its purpose. Often we can feel as if we are floppy shapeless bits of rubber useful for nothing but filled with God's power we are transformed into something that is beautiful and useful. God's power transforms our weakness and is all we need. This is what Paul found and what he is describing to the Christians at Corinth in our first reading.

"My grace is all you need, for my power is greatest when you are weak" These words of Jesus' to Paul have been for me a great source of help and comfort over the past forty years, and are, I think a truth at the very heart of the Christian message, rooted in the cross itself. There are times when we are more aware than usual of our own weakness and frailty and these are times when, if we allow it, we can meet with God at a depth and intensity that is unique.

This is something I have had to learn over the past 40 years as I've come to terms with the chronic illness CFS (Chronic fatigue syndrome) or ME (Myalgic encephalomyelitis) as it used to be known

I first got ill in 1981 when I contracted glandular fever and then soon afterwards a viral infection of the heart. I am lucky because for most of the time I am reasonably well, though I do have to pace myself and beware of getting too tired. Every few years, usually when I have had an infection or gone through a

prolonged period of tiredness I suffer a relapse, which happily hasn't happened to me for a few years now.

The apostle Paul was no stranger to weakness and infirmity and like me he found it added a new dimension to his relationship with God and a new power to his ministry.

In this letter to the Corinthians Paul is defending himself against accusations that he is not a real apostle.

There have been, in Corinth, people who claim to have a deeper revelation of God and have undermined Paul's teaching. The Corinthian Christians had developed an idea, a picture of what a true apostle should be like and how he should behave. Amongst these was the ability to have visions and revelations. And there is no doubt that closeness to God can mean meeting with him in visions and deep spiritual experiences. But for Paul, the only valid and visible sign of his apostleship was the amount of

weakness the apostle was willing to accept so that the power of Christ might shine through him.

There is a huge contrast between these false apostles and Paul. They appear to have worked at building up an image, at showing themselves to be deeply spiritual, to be learned and wise. But Paul has the opposite objective. He does not want people to have too high an opinion of him. V6 *"But I will not boast, because I do not want anyone to have a higher opinion of me than he has as a result of what he has seen me do and heard me say"*. If people think highly of him it will take

attention away from Jesus Christ and his power. Paul realises that his most effective witness to Jesus is his own weakness and suffering that Jesus can transform and use to his glory.

These verses have been for me, not only a source of strength and comfort when I am feeling weak and worthless, but as a Christian, they have been deeply liberating. And hold a message to be treasured by every newly ordained priest. Our culture and our society do not allow weakness. Weakness is not something that is British to show, it is best ignored and it is certainly not something to be gloried in. We are brought up, mostly, to be self-sufficient ~ and if possible to succeed in life. As Christians this need to succeed can be intensified. Christian teaching and Christian standards set us an example that stretches us to the full and seems to expect a great deal of us. God's standards are so far removed from our weakness and human frailty that in trying to achieve them we may as well be reaching for the stars.

My father was a fighter pilot and I was brought up on the Air Force motto *"Per ardua ad astra"* Which means "Through work (or hardship) to the stars" Despite the gospel and Jesus' example to us I think that this is the motto that many of us, as Christians, take as our watchword. It is certainly something I have lived by and have struggled to leave behind me. We can try by our own efforts to live up to some impossible standard of spirituality and perfection and when we don't achieve it we feel total failures. We spend our time concealing our weaknesses and struggling to use our strengths to the best of our ability. In doing this we

miss the whole point of the gospel and deprive ourselves of a deep experience of God's love and power.

There was a textile mill where a large sign read, "When your thread becomes tangled, call the foreman." A young woman was new on the job. Her thread became tangled and she thought, "I'll just straighten this out myself." She tried, but the situation only worsened. Finally she called the foreman. "I did the best I could," she said. "No you didn't. To do the best,

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you should have called me." In order to succeed we need God's power in our lives.

Jesus said to Paul, "*My grace is sufficient for you*" **My grace is sufficient.** God's free gift of love for us through Jesus is all we need. All Jesus asks of us is for us to rest in him and accept all he wants to give us.

Through grace we have the assurance of God's love for us – and his acceptance of us **as we are** – not as we strive to be. This doesn't mean, of course, that God wants us to continue in sin and failure, but that if we give ourselves into God's hands he will change us and heal us. So often people say to me; "I'm not good enough to ask God for help" "I've failed so I can't expect him to help me". The fact that we have failed is the whole point. God knows that we are not good enough, he knows that we are weak and foolish, he knows that we struggle with pain and failure and confusion. He longs to meet us in our weakness, to transform our pain and to strengthen us with his power and love.

Tell story of Josh. I once worked as a nanny to a boy I had cared for from the time he was born. When he was two and a half he developed a brain tumour that resulted in him going completely blind. He compensated for this and it took a while for us to realise what had happened. For various reasons his parents were unable to cope with his illness and blindness and asked me to speak to him and explain to him what had happened. He found it an enormous relief that I knew and because praying for him had helped his tantrums and distress I told him I had a friend called Jesus who would stop him feeling afraid and when he was he could ask Jesus to help. One day we were in the sitting room in their home when Josh stopped what he was doing and said, " I have a new friend called Jeez who will stop me being afraid. " I responded by asking him "Are you afraid?" His father, James, immediately said, "No , of course he isn't afraid." James couldn't allow himself to admit his fear, his weakness or to let Josh do the same, which was a tragedy. He was denying himself the source of help and more than that he was denying it to Josh as well.

Once we admit our weakness and failure we have access to all the power God has to give us. For most of us it takes a lot to show us how weak we are. For me, I had to be knocked completely off my legs by illness before I was able to ask God for help and amazingly I found that when, in my weakness I simply allowed God to work through me, he used me much more effectively than I could have managed in my own strength and using my own gifts and talents. The times God has used me most have been the times I have felt at my weakest and most vulnerable.

## 2 Cor 12:2-10

## Mark 6:1-13

These days when I feel myself getting unwell I am no longer afraid. I don't panic about the things I won't be able to do, or the people I might let down, because I know that God has the power to use me even when I have no strength myself. I also know that God has his own purposes and plans and if we are rushing about in our own strength we can ignore them and simply do what seems best to us rather than looking to God for direction and strength to do the things he wants us to do. We waste so much energy struggling alone when we could let God fill us with his power and make us into the beautiful effective people he has made us to be.

When I am unwell my energy comes in parcels instead of on tap as it does for most of us. So when my energy has run out there is nothing I can do I simply have to rest until a new parcel of energy arrives. *Let balloon down*. But the wonderful thing for us as Christians is that when our energy has run out, when we are hurting and depressed we can simply turn to God and ask him to fill us up again with the power of his holy Spirit – to get us through the bad patch, but much more than simply doing that to use us in it.

You've probably heard of Joni Earikson Tada. She is about my age but when she was in her teens she was left paralysed by a diving accident. The first year or so after her accident was a very difficult time. She was a Christian but she felt that her life was over, that there was nothing left for her. She couldn't see any use or purpose in her life and she was very hurt and angry. Gradually God spoke to her and made her see that despite the fact that her

body was all but useless she was his precious child and he had work for her to do. She has written many books, has learnt to paint with her toes, has married and over the past Forty years has been an inspiration to thousands of people.

If we are strong and talented God can use us but if we are weak and broken his power working through us is far, far more effective. I'm a formula one racing fan and I remember in the early nineties when Nigel Mansell was world champion, driving for the Williams team he said that the car was so good that a puppet driving it would win a race. What was something special was when a driver in a lesser car could beat him.

Over the past forty years many, many people have prayed for me to be healed from my illness. I no longer do. What I pray now is that God will use me in my weakness and that his power would flow through me. Paul gloried in his weakness which might sound strange but for us in the dark times, in the weak times, when we are most aware of our vulnerability and pain, if we let him we can meet deeply with Jesus and know his

**2 Cor 12:2-10****Mark 6:1-13**

power to comfort and heal us. With Paul we too can hear Jesus speaking to us; "My power is greatest when you are weak my grace is all you need.

It is not only when we are suffering from a particular weakness. What is important for all of us as Christians and for those who are leaders in God's church is that we accomplish most when we rely on God to lead us and fill us rather than proceeding on our own way.