

*every member is passionate for God, passionate for one another, passionate for others, passionate to grow in the faith, and passionate to serve Jesus'. Indeed, we need value statements: 'In our life together we seek to reflect the following aspects of a genuine Jesus community: warm and welcoming, risk-taking and God-trusting; excited and enthusiastic; sacrificing and resourcing; transforming lives and changing culture'.*

For those outside the church, however, we need an attractive strap-line, such as: *'Central Baptist Church – a place to belong'*.

## Treasure in Clay Pots

### Paul Beasley-Murray

*This sermon was preached at Central Baptist Church, Chelmsford, in July 2011 at a service of infant dedication.*

Geoff and Amanda, I wonder, what kind of parties your Zachary will be into in future years? Our children liked pirate parties.

The first pirate party was years ago when our eldest son, Jonathan, could not have been much older than five or six. We had to confiscate all the swords as the guests arrived – their weapons were lethal! That must have been a formative party for Jonathan, for one of his academic interest is pirates. Indeed, we had a pirate party for him last year when he turned 40, but this time without swords! Needless to say, it was particularly enjoyed by his nephews and nieces who turned up for the occasion.

This year we have constructed a pirate galleon in our garden, although for some strange reason one visitor thought it was Noah's ark – I have never seen a Noah's ark with a skull and cross bones! So, with the pirate galleon newly installed, our eldest grand-daughter asked for a pirate party to celebrate her 7th birthday. What's more she has asked for a treasure hunt, because you can't be a pirate without hunting for treasure.

All this came to mind when I was considering my text for this morning **"We who have this spiritual treasure are like**

**common clay pots, in order to show that the supreme power belongs to God, and not to us” (2 Cor 4.7).**

Paul likens the good news of Jesus to ‘treasure’. Paul, of course, was no pirate. He wasn’t in the business of pinching other people’s treasure. He was in the business of offering treasure. What was true of the Apostle Paul is true of any Christian preacher. We are in the business of giving away treasure to those who would receive it – and the treasure is Jesus. Compared to what Jesus has to offer, nothing else is of value. So this leads me to my first point:

### **1. Here Is Amazingly Valuable Treasure!**

Jesus is the world’s greatest treasure. Winning the lottery, becoming the top-dog at work, making a name for oneself – you name it, compared to Jesus, it is as nothing. Indeed, when writing to the church at Philippi, Paul said that everything else in life was as ‘garbage’, ‘refuse’ (GNB) – fit only for the bin (Phil 3.8).

Jesus said something similar in two of his parables (Matt 13.44-45). He spoke of the man who found treasure hidden in a field, then covering it up again and selling everything he had to buy that field. He spoke, too, of a dealer in precious stones, who spent his life traveling across land and sea to enrich his collection. One day in a market he suddenly came across the most perfect pearl. To buy that one priceless jewel, he sold everything he had. “The Kingdom of heaven”, said Jesus, “is like this”. Compared to what God offers us in Jesus, nothing is of worth or significance.

In what way is that so?

1. ***God in Christ has dealt with our past.*** Jesus, by dying on the Cross, is able to offer us forgiveness for all our wrong-doing. It doesn’t matter what we have done, the good news is that in Jesus we can start again. So many people are haunted by the past, they are shackled by the past, but in Jesus we are set free.
2. ***God in Christ can deal with our future.*** For God raised his Son from the dead, and, as a result death no longer need be a ‘dead-end’. For those who put their faith in Jesus, death is but a gateway to a new and better world. That really is Good News.
3. ***God in Christ enables us to deal with the challenges of the present.*** As we shall see, Paul goes on to say, life may

be tough, but for the Christian it is never impossibly tough. There may be times when we are knocked down, but we are never knocked out. By his Spirit Jesus is present in our lives, and he makes all the difference.

When it comes to the things that really count, we find that they are found in Christ alone. No wonder Paul later in this letter speaks of Jesus as God's "priceless gift" (2 Cor 9.15). Jesus is the world's greatest treasure. It was this conviction that made Paul a preacher of the Gospel. It was because of Jesus that Paul was prepared to travel all over the known world tell people about "the infinite riches of Christ" (Eph 3.8).

What was true of Paul, must surely be true of all of us. We have treasure to share – the treasure of God's love for us in Jesus. When I say 'we', I don't mean just professional preachers, but all of us who have discovered the difference Jesus has made to life.

What is true of all of us, is true of you, Geoff and Amanda, not least with regard to your task of sharing with Zachary how precious Jesus is. Remember, religious education begins in the home, not in the church.

## **2. Here Are Very Ordinary People**

**"We who have this treasure are like common clay pots"**

The "common clay pots" Paul had in mind were the small pottery oil lamps to be found in any home of that time. The metaphor Paul uses has a double-focus:

- The cheapness of these clay lamps represents the very ordinariness of those to whom the message of the Gospel has been entrusted. Treasure in common clay pots – what a contrast.
- The fragility of these clay lamps represents the frailty and weakness of those to whom the message of the Gospel has been entrusted. The message of God's power is entrusted to fallible people – what a contrast.

God has entrusted the amazing good news of Jesus to very ordinary and, at times very fragile people. What an amazing thought.

Although today we now regard the Apostle Paul as a giant of a man, he knew that he had feet of clay – indeed, not just feet. He was very conscious of his short-comings.

Some of his critics were not slow to point out his failings. To quote the words of one critic found in 2 Cor 10.10: “Paul’s letters are severe and strong, but when he is with us in person, he is weak and his words are nothing”. Physically Paul appears not to have been an impressive character. He wasn’t a guy to lead a rugby pack.

Paul knew he had other short-comings too. He could never forget he had once persecuted the church of God. He wrote to Timothy: “This is a true saying, to be completely accepted and believed: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. And I am the worst of them” (1 Tim 1.15). When he compared himself to a common clay pot, Paul was not exhibiting false modesty – I believe he was sincere in recognizing his own weakness and fallibility.

What was true of Paul is true of us all. All of us are weak and fallible people. From the outside some of us may appear to be strong characters, but in fact we are essentially fragile creatures. Let me elaborate on this point a little more. Christians can be weak and fallible people. Christians do not pretend that they are better than others. No Christian this side of heaven has attained perfection.

Would that people outside the church realized this. I feel like putting a sign up outside this church: *‘This church is for sinners only’*. The only difference between people in this church and the people out shopping in the High Street is that we know that in God’s sight we are a bunch of failures. Would that people inside the church realized this! Some Christians have unrealistic expectations of their fellow Christians, with the result that they get easily disillusioned when all of a sudden they discover that not every church member is not exactly a paragon of virtue. To use the pirate metaphor, the church has always been a motley crew.

Incidentally, one day Zachary will wake up to the fact that his parents aren’t perfect either. And yet, God willing, he will realize that in spite of their failing, there was something special about them – and that something special was the presence of Jesus in their lives.

### 3. Here Is Extraordinary Power

**“The supreme power belongs to God, not to us”**

Life can be tough, and not least when we are seeking to be followers of the Lord Jesus. This was certainly true for Paul. In the very next two verses he wrote: “We are often troubled, but not crushed; sometimes in doubt, but never in despair; there are many enemies, but we are never without a friend; and though badly hurt at times, we are not destroyed” (vv.8-9). Paul knew what it was like to be under pressure. Listen to Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase: “We’ve been surrounded and battered by troubles, but we’re not demoralized; we’re not sure what to do, but we know that God knows what to do; we’ve been spiritually terrorized, but God hasn’t left our side; we’ve been thrown down, but we haven’t been broken”

Time and again, Paul had found himself in some amazingly hopeless situations, but none was able to produce the killer blow. Like a cork in the water, he always came up to the surface. Often ‘knocked down’, he had never been ‘knocked out’ (W. Barclay).

In the course of fulfilling his God-given calling, he ran into all sorts of trouble. Later in this letter he wrote: “Five times I was given the 39 lashes by the Jews; three times I was whipped by the Romans; and once I was stoned. I have been in three shipwrecks, and once I spent 24 hours in the water. In my many travels I have been in danger from floods and from robbers, in danger from fellow-Jews and from Gentiles; there have been dangers in the cities, dangers in the wilds, dangers on the high seas, and dangers from false friends. There has been work and toil; often I have gone without sleep; I have been hungry and thirsty; I have often been without enough food, shelter, or clothing” (2 Cor 7).

At this point it is tempting to switch off. Paul’s experience of life was so different from ours. And yet there are two underlying principles which are of relevance to us:

1. God does not promise his servants a trouble-free life. Life can be tough, indeed it can be down-right unfair – even for those who love God and seek to serve him. If a spiritual giant like Paul was not spared trouble, neither will we be.

The fact is that we live in a fallen world, where sin has well and truly messed up and distorted the life God intended for us.

2. God does not leave us to our own resources. When trouble hits, we do not have to simply grin and bear it. Rather God gives us the inner strength to cope.

Listen to Paul “We who have this spiritual treasure are like common clay pots, to show that the supreme power belongs to God, not to us”. The power in question was the power with which God had raised Jesus from the dead.

For Paul the resurrection of Jesus was not simply a doctrine to be believed, but a power to experience. We see this right at the beginning of this letter, where he mentioned that at one stage he never thought he would survive the trouble he was in: “We felt that the death sentence had been passed on us. But this happened, so that we should rely, not on ourselves, but only on God, who raises the dead” (2 Cor 1.9). Here in 2 Cor 4.10, Paul describes his sufferings as almost ‘killing him’ (*nekrosis* – the process of being put to death), – yet in the midst of the ‘dying’ he experienced the resurrection ‘life of Jesus’.

The good news is that Paul’s experience is not unique. The God who empowered Paul in his weakness is able to empower us in our weakness. God through his Spirit is at work in the lives of his people today. God does not leave us to our own resources. Our moments of weakness are opportunities for us to experience God’s power at work in our lives.

Amanda and Geoffrey, I have no idea what the future holds for you. I certainly have no idea what the future holds for Zachary. But if your lives are like the lives of many of us, there may well be times when life is marked by stress, suffering, and sorrow. At those times remember that those who have put their trust in Jesus are not on their own.

In conclusion: Jesus makes all the difference to life. In the words of the Apostle Paul: “we who have this spiritual treasure are like common clay pots, in order to show that the supreme power belongs to God, and not to us”.