**Treasure in Jars of Clay**

**Sermon for Cashmere Presbyterian Church**

**Sunday 2nd June 2024**

**Very Rev Hamish Galloway**

**Text:**

2 Corinthians 4: 5-12

Mark 2: 23 – 3: 16

**Introduction**

This week’s sermon follows on well from last week’s “Testimonies of Change”. There we looked at the experience of Nicodemus, who came out of the darkness of the night to talk wit Jesus. The conversation turned very quickly to the need for spiritual experience, not just head knowledge of God - something Nicodemus had in spades as a Pharisee, member of the Sanhedrin and teacher of the Jews - but a regenerative spiritual experience of God. In the words of John 3, the need to be ‘born again’ of ‘water and spirit’. The commentator Leslie Newbigin placed Nicodemus in the twilight zone between the darkness of dry, rule bound, pharisaic religion and the light of spiritual regeneration in Christ.

This theme re-emerges today in our 2 Corinthians reading. Last week we examined the testimony and story of Nicodemus and Isaiah. This week it is the testimony of St Paul.

1. **The Testimony of St Paul**

There is a fascinating quotation in our reading, directly attributed to God by Paul: *“Let light shine out of darkness.”*

Paul goes on to say that this same God made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God’s glory displayed in the face of Christ.

Paul here is referring to his dramatic conversion experience on the Damascus Road (Acts 9). On his way to persecute the local Christians he is blinded by a bright light and hears the voice of Jesus! Here in 2 Corinthians he refers to that in these terms:

1. The God who in the beginning said out of the darkness “Let there be light” brought that same light to shine on me.
2. In that light 3 things happened for me:
   1. My heart lit up with he presence of God.
   2. I saw the glory of God
   3. I saw it displayed in the face of Christ!

This resulted in a dramatic change in this man’s life, from Saul to Paul, Pharisee to Christian, Christian hater to Christian lover.

In terms of the image of darkness and light, he moved from the murky depths of dry, legalistic, pharisaic religion to the enlightened freedom of a life of the Spirit!

Our first passage today helps to show just how ensnared the Pharisees had become in rule bound religion. From the life-giving commandment around respecting the Sabbath, the Scribes and Pharisees had developed a huge tangled web of rules and regulations about the Sabbath that moved it away from its life-giving nature towards a life-robbing burden! So that healing couldn’t take place!

For example, from the huge list of prohibited work

1. A fracture could not be attended to
2. Cold water could not be poured on a sprained ankle
3. A cut finger could be bandaged, but not with ointment.

It is so interesting how rules, regulations and traditions grow up in religion and take on sacred qualities not warranted! For example, we Presbyterians very reverently cover the Communion elements with beautiful white linen, to be unveiled at the point of consecration. This has become a revered and deeply embedded practice. But why? Where did it come from? Research suggests it comes from ages past when the big parish churches had a problem with pigeons roosting in the rafters!

Paul’s dramatic conversion moved him immediately from the dark arts of rule-bound traditions to the light of Christ. And he explains this in a lovely way.

1. **Treasures in Jars of Clay**

Following on from the previous sentence about light in our hearts, I think of a light lit up inside a humble jar of clay.

Paul was aware of his physical limitations and struggles. In another place he refers to the human body as an ‘earthly tent’. And Paul himself acknowledges his physical frailties. He talks about a thorn in his side, which was probably blindness and in 2 Corinthians 10:10 he quotes others saying of him *“His letters are weighty and forceful, but in person he is unimpressive and his speaking amounts to nothing.”*

A second century apocryphal Acts of Paul is even more derogatory! *“He was a bald-headed, bowlegged, short man with a big nose and unbroken eyebrows that lay across his head like a dead caterpillar.”*

The point is, we are like humble jars of clay. We all are slowly dying! Yet when we have the Spirit of Christ in our hearts, there is life in the centre of our beings that lights us up in a way that leads us and others to say ‘that must be God at work”, in the words of Paul, ‘that his life may be revealed in our mortal body…life is at work within us.’ (11-12)

1. **Paul’s Testimony, Our Testimony**

Last week and this week we have looked at a variety of testimonies of Spiritual regeneration.

Last week it was Isaiah’s dramatic vision of God in the public space of the temple, dramatic and unasked for! And we also traced the contrasting experience of Nicodemus who found spiritual rebirth through tentative seeking of answers in a quiet private conversation with Jesus.

Today it has been the experience of a child who learns to hear God calling out to him and then Paul’s experience of a dramatic coming into the light of God’s presence that ignites the presence of God in his humble person.

Last week I shared my story of spiritual rebirth.

The thing about this is that there is such a variety of experience – each individual and personal. There is no template! But there are some common threads for us to pay attention to in our seeking of God and God’s presence in our lives and some things we can do.

1. God is longing for a living and personal relationship with each of us – I think of Revelations 3:20 *“Behold I stand at the door and knock.”*
2. He deals with us each personally and individually – sometimes it’s dramatic and sudden, and sometimes more gentle and private.
3. There is a common thread of seeking God and being in a place where God can reach us easily.
   * Nicodemus went to Jesus with his questions
   * Isaiah was in the temple
   * Samuel was living at the home of a prophet as his young protégé
   * I was on a real quest for more spiritual experience and said yes to my friend’s invitation to a Christian meeting in town.
   * You are in church this morning!
4. There are practical things we can add to all this:
5. An openness to God and the experience of God’s Spirit.
6. Being faithful in our spiritual practices – church going, bible reading, prayer times, retreats. These things make our hearts accessible to God’s touch.
7. Requesting prayer and anointing – our healing services are so special in this way!

**Conclusion**

Usually, wonderful and priceless gifts come in extravagant wrapping. What an amazing thing that God has chosen flawed individuals like you and me to wrap around the *glory* of his gracious presence!