

Strength Through Weakness
iii. Captive and Competent
2 Corinthians 2:12 – 3:18

Several years ago the comedy “Twins” starring Arnold Schwarzenegger and Danny De Vito depicted two polar opposites: the one super-sized marvel of humanity, the other short and dumpy, something of a misfit. In comparison to the ‘super-apostles’ of Corinth. Paul was similarly written off as a wimp and ineffective. Moreover, in their eyes he was unreliable. He changed his travel plans at the drop of a hat. Whilst his letters were bold and brash, his person was wishy-washy and non-descript.

Paul's response is not one of exasperation and self-defence. He might be an abandoned lover, but he doesn't lick his wounds in self-pity. Rather he offers a defence of the gospel and his misunderstood character. The challenges facing Paul at Corinth were immense. His refusal to rely on patronage was regarded as suspect, his work as a tentmaker demeaning, hardly deserving respect reserved for orators trained in skilful communication. Moreover, the church had been negatively influenced by the culture and context of the day, upwardly mobile, style trumping substance, new money separating rich from poor. And here was Paul deliberately counter cultural, proclaiming a counter-cultural gospel. So he takes up his pen not to exonerate himself but to persuade his readers the reasons for his actions, that there is no disconnect between the man and his message.

Paul uses the image of a Roman ‘Triumph’ to answer his critics. He depicts a conquering Roman general returning in a massive parade through the streets of Rome, reminiscent of the French soccer team parading the World Cup recently through the streets of Paris. He uses the metaphor of Christ riding in triumph: at the cross “having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross” (Col 2:15). Paul is not simply a captive in the parade, a conquered enemy. He once was an enemy of Christ. But no more. He is a soldier of the cross. So Paul depicts himself as an incense bearer going ahead of Christ, spreading the fragrance of the gospel. He doesn't mix his metaphors as some suggest, referring to the sweet fragrance of the O.T. sacrificial system. Rather the aroma has a two-fold effect: “To the one we are an aroma that brings death; to the other, an aroma that brings life” (v17a). Little wonder he exclaims “Who is equal to such a task?” (v17b) To be entrusted with such an awesome responsibility of preaching the gospel with its attendant eternal consequences is beyond human ability. He contrasts his role with that of a peddler profiting from the gospel for selfish ends. The antidote to such heinous folly is two-fold: sincere dependence on God and the assurance that, unlike the “super apostles’ of Corinth he is sent from God”. (v17b)

Paul's experience and response to adversity has important implications for us viz.

- i. In the midst of pain and difficulty Paul models thanksgiving to God.
- ii. He proclaims the gospel in all places, since all truth is God's truth.
- iii. We can expect like Paul ‘push-back’ from society as its flawed world-views are challenged. How do we respond: winsomely like Paul or aggressively and defensively?
- iv. We can celebrate the victory of Christ, like Paul, not triumphalistically but humbly as we await Christ's return and the consummation history as we know it.

In the final analysis, in the words of Murray Harris, “There can be no higher and more ennobling privilege than to have the Lord of the universe as one's Owner and Master and to be his accredited representative on earth”.

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