

Hitting it with the big dog.

Lent 1

Matt 4.1-11

Rom 5.12-19

I have a fragment of text from Hebrews 11. The writer is talking about the people of faith and what they were like. He says...

who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness

I love the last phrase made strong out of weakness...that would pretty much describe the effect of God on my life. What about you? I left school at 16 with no qualifications and parents who were disappointed in me and fearful for me. I drifted on year after year until when I was 22 God got hold of me. With that love came purpose and the key to that purpose was study. The thing I had consistently run away from. Could God give me strength to stand against the habits of weakness? I remember writing up at my desk at Bible College I can do all things through him who strengthens me and everyday I thought Well, that had better be right or I'm a dead duck. What weaknesses did God flip to make strength in you? What strengths await you if you will let God take hold of your weaknesses?

We have before us a story of temptation and a section of a complex piece of argument.

Here is a story of Jesus walking into the wind that was blowing against him. How strong was the wind that blew? I don't know but must must have been tempting to turn his back to it. Only those who try to walk into the wind know how hard it is blowing. Gale strong, I guess. And it smelled of death. Again the Hebrews author says

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. 16 Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Jesus knows from the inside what it is like to want to give up, to succumb, to take the easy road, get out of the wind. He is like the person in the Robert Frost poem

*I am as one acquainted with the night
I have walked out in rain and back in rain
I have outwalked the furthest city light
I am as one acquainted with the night.*

Isaiah promised that he would be a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. God has form, he has experience of life in this broken world from the inside. It wasn't welcome to him. It wasn't kind to him. The winds blew in his face.

So what winds are blowing in your face?

Well, that's personal and particular but what I can tell you about are winds that blow in everyone's face. They are the assumptions about life that most people share in our culture. There are five of them.

- You don't need to believe in God to live a full life
- It is OK to live as you see fit and do no harm
- You will become yourself when you are true to your deepest dreams
- You don't need a God to have an ethical framework
- There is little or no evidence to compel belief in God or Jesus Christ.

Possibly 90% of people on TV chat shows assume this to be the case. Most people in Waitrose. When asked What motivates you? What if someone from showbiz said The love of God. Imagine the embarrassed shock. This is the wisdom of the world and we Christians are the ones with a contrarian voice. And interestingly much of this would have been thought to be largely true by educated, decent people in Paul's home town of Tarsus. It was a second Athens, an intellectual centre, about 100k people lived there. Of course, it is not that all of this is wrong. A full life is possible without religion. The world is full of decent, ethical people without any faith. I think this makes us timid, uncertain, lacking in confidence.

The truth is that it is not not enough for many people. In the end it is never enough. The widespread unhappiness across Western Europe, the masses of people with subclinical depression and anxiety indicate something is wrong. The experiment to live without objective truths and values is faltering and in its place come darker gods - the love of blood and soil.

So what about Paul? He is saying - when you deconstruct it - there are two worlds. There is a way of thinking that doesn't end so well, a way that tries to do without God. That way may be driven by average aspirations - personal peace and affluence. The desire of most people in Malvern. Or greater aspirations - peace and justice for all. But it largely fails again and again. One of the noblest of the Roman writers, Seneca said, We need a hand let down from heaven to save us. Paul says this is a way of sin and death. It is like to trying to pull yourself up by your shoe laces. It ends badly. The ancient world knew this. They remembered the wisest man of all, Socrates, was killed by the democratic vote of the Athenians for being politically incorrect.

The other world has captivated Paul. It is a world of light and grace and forgiveness and joy. There is another world. The God of the Jewish story has come in Jesus to change the world, He has become omnipresent, love is all around, power to change, power to heal, power to unite heaven and earth. Grace not sin will have the final word. Joy not misery will have final word. Justice not dishonesty will have the final word. Someone else is in change now and the old empire of greed and fear is being subverted.

I think is harder to believe this today. The winds that say we do not need God are blowing gale strong and they are blowing in the church, blowing in our personal lives, blowing through the public square. How shall we stand for the other kingdom of light and grace? How shall we win strength out of weakness?

In 2000 there was an amusing film released called Tin Cup starring Kevin Costner and the wondrous Renee Russo. Costner played a hugely talented but lazy golf pro and Russo a psychologist who falls for him. He teaches her to play and he says this is a putting iron for little distances. For the long shots you must get out the big dog. The big dog is a golf club that looks like it has half a brick on the end. The film ends with him throwing away the US Open because he sees an impossible shot and he just has to go for it. He is leading. In front of him is a lake and all the wise golfers go round the lake. Not Roy. Russo laughs hysterically and says Oh just give him the big dog. He finally hits the ball over the lake for a hole in one after about 6 attempts. He loses the Open by a mile. But Russo says, No one will remember who won this year but they'll remember Roy and his big dog.

When it comes to faith, at this time, in the face of the gale that says we are a mistaken minority, we don't matter anymore, no one is listening to us, we need to throw away timidity and the little putting irons and get out the big dog and take a swing at that ball, brothers and sisters. I am saying this is a time to believe greatly, to have faith in God adventurously, to pray ambitiously. Get a grip of the big picture. This is not a time to tap that ball half heartedly. This is not a time for putting. This is a time to get out the big dog and take a swing of faith and see what happens.

Then it might a memorable Lent.