

# Sermon on Sunday 7 July 2024

## by Rev. Alan Stewart

*Readings: 2 Corinthians 12. 1-10 & Mark 6. 1-6*

### Grace

When I was younger (so much younger than today), I possessed that idealism and self-importance that often comes from the 'certainty of youth'. On returning home to my small village in Ireland, for example, after my first term of art college in the great metropolis of London, I remember lecturing my parents about their politics and their buying habits. My family, I have to say, responded very graciously to this teenage know-it-all.

I guess an important part of growing up is detaching from the culture and ideology of our families in order to create our own value systems. And sometimes, for others, that change is hard to accept, especially for those who have loved us from the beginning.

When Jesus, all grown up, and now a rabbi, goes back to his hometown, he's treated with a mix of amazement and disdain. 'Who does he think he is?' the locals ask. 'Isn't this the carpenter; *Mary's* son?' Now that's a barbed insult, actually. Usually, when speaking of someone in that culture, you would refer to their father; 'son of Dave'. To mention his mother is highlighting Jesus' scandalous birth; his illegitimacy. They're saying, 'Isn't this the boy born out of wedlock?'

And this prejudice has a huge impact on Jesus. It hamstring his ministry; he can't do what he usually miraculously does. And, in response, he says those famous words: 'A prophet is not without honour, except in his home town'. The very people who knew him longest refused to accept who he now was. They refused to move on from their labels of old.

I wonder if you relate to that. Often, it's those within our own family or our oldest friends who find it hardest to let us evolve and become. They want us to stay who we were. Often, it's exactly this that holds many of us back from becoming more of who we were created to be. It's why some people, for instance, seek out a chosen family, rather than a biological one.

I remember when I first tentatively shared with an old friend that I felt strangely and scarily drawn towards ordination, they looked at me quizzically and said, 'I don't see it. That's not you'. If I'd allowed myself to believe those words, my story would have been very different.

We each have a unique calling or vocation. It's not just priests and teachers. We're all being called into our own particular 'life in all its fullness'; to leave the world better than we found it.

Incredibly, the same God who holds a universe, has dreams for every life; for tiny me and tiny you.

Part of Jesus' calling was to be a prophet. Now prophets are

people who sometimes can predict what's going to happen, but more often, they are people who can see what is already happening. They have this insight into what's really going on. It's as if they're on higher shoulders and can see a bigger picture. And often they are called to speak this truth to the powerful and into the culture in which they find themselves. And that can be a lonely and dangerous thing because often it's about speaking against the status quo.

Last Saturday, I attended my very first Pride March in London. It was an extraordinary assault on the senses, a camp carnival of celebration and defiance. There was so much joy on those streets, but there were also some incredibly poignant moments. To watch different groups of people in that parade walk tall and proud who have lived through the criminalization of their love, the stigma and decimation of AIDS, in cultures and religions where they are shunned, brought tears to my eyes. And one of the most moving moments for me was to watch the solitary figure of Peter Tatchell, the human rights campaigner, walk silently among all the carnival noise, still fearlessly campaigning, this time against the evils of conversion therapy; a practice that believes we can pray the gay away.

If you don't know much about him, google him. His methods have been controversial, but he has always spoken up for the marginalised, and against all forms of injustice. And for that, he has suffered intolerably; physical assault, imprisonment, countless homophobic slurs. Peter Tatchell, like the prophets of old, speaks truth to power.

We need more prophets; people who will challenge injustice; people who lean on Christ and hear the heartbeat of God; people who fearlessly speak the compassion and wisdom and challenge of God. People who sacrifice a comfortable life to comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable.

Many centuries ago, the apostle Paul spoke of his own sacrifice for the gospel, where well-meaning, often religious, usually fearful people caused him all kinds of trauma. And in this extract from one of his letters which we heard earlier, he speaks of a mysterious thorn in the flesh or messenger from Satan.

We can only speculate as to what he was talking about. Was this the persecution of a pain-in-the-ass colleague perhaps, hence the cryptic nature? Or was it, as some think, a physical condition, a deterioration of his eyesight maybe? Whatever it was, after repeatedly pleading for its removal, he eventually came to a place of acceptance. And in that moment, he hears the voice of the one he himself had persecuted. 'My grace is sufficient,' said the Lord, 'for my power is made perfect in weakness'.

And this is a revelation and a freedom for Paul; this ex-Pharisee, this ex-religious extremist, who goes on to say the remarkable words, 'Therefore I'll boast even more about my weakness... because when I am weak, then I am strong'.

Do we perhaps live with our own personal thorn in our side, something or someone who constantly hurts us? A weakness

maybe that keeps holding us back from our true calling? A family member or so-called friend who can't let us be who we are? A memory, a trauma from our past? A difficult or painful thing within our present?

And this morning, like Paul, can we hear those words of encouragement and liberation? 'My grace is sufficient; my grace is enough for you'. Grace is this superpower that creates a holding and living space big enough for all that we can and can't carry. Grace lifts us and carries us when all we want to do is sit in our own pain or regret. Grace whispers strength, it covers us with its healing wings. It helps us stand, it helps us forgive, it helps us walk on, one foot after the other. Grace doesn't change the circumstances of our lives, it changes us, and when we change, then we see differently. We too can come to that place where, like Paul, we can say 'when I am weak, I am strong'. When I hold my hands up and say, 'I can't do this', that's exactly the moment when grace slips in. When we can say to God, 'I'm done, I'm weak, I surrender', God steps in and up and gifts us with a compassion and a strength we call amazing grace.

