

2 Corinthians 4:1-10 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

Treasure in Clay Jars

4 Therefore, since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart. ² We have renounced the shameful things that one hides; we refuse to practice cunning or to falsify God's word; but by the open statement of the truth we commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God. ³ And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. ⁴ In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. ⁵ For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake. ⁶ For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

⁷ But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. ⁸ We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; ⁹ persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; ¹⁰ always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies.

Remnant and the Clay Jars

Context

I would like to start this Bible study by putting this passage into context. The second letter to the church in Corinth is known as the letter of tears. It is one of Paul's letters that he reveals his disappointment about some members of this church questioning his authority and his qualification to be an apostle. As he was not the original members of Jesus's disciples, the twelfth, these people did not welcome him. Who gave him the authority to be an apostle? Is he really qualify to be an apostle? These people demanded a letter of recommendation about Paul's claim that he is an apostle. They are not only questioning his apostleship but also the gospel that he proclaimed, which is centred in grace alone. Paul was very clear from the beginning of his ministry that we are saved by faith in Jesus Christ. By faith alone in Jesus Christ that we are saved from the power of sin and death. Quite frankly, that is the reason that Paul risked his life in his missionary work for he believed that everyone can be saved by God's grace. After doing all these missionary works, Paul was very sad that they ignored his labour and effort of bringing the good news of Jesus Christ to them. Paul claims that he became an apostle when Jesus called him on the road to Damascus as it mentions in Acts 9. He was on his way to persecute the Christians in Syria and suddenly a bright light from heaven strikes him. He felt to the ground and he heard a voice, "Saul, Saul! Why do you persecute me? He asked, "Who are you, Lord? The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." And on

verse 15, Jesus speaks about Paul's commission, "Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." This is the incident that Paul always refers as his calling for his apostleship. The word 'apostle' is the English translation of the Greek word, 'apostolos', meaning, 'one who is sending'. Paul is confident of his calling to be an apostle for the Gentiles or the non-Jews. He knew that he is qualified for his calling because Jesus gave him that qualification on the road to Damascus.

In 2 Corinthians chapter 3, which is before chapter 4, Paul is trying to defend his authority as an apostle of Jesus Christ. His response is quite clear that he doesn't need any letter of recommendation or authorization either from him or from them to show that he is qualifying for what he is doing. He claims that they (members of the church) are his qualification (they are the letter that was written by Christ in their hearts) for his apostleship. They are his permission to do what he loves doing, which is to proclaim the gospel to the Gentiles. They reflect on themselves his credential as an apostle of Jesus Christ.

Part of my role as Director of Mission Resourcing is interviewing the candidates who are candidates to minister in the Methodist Church of New Zealand. The Director of the English Ministries and myself are assured that these candidates are qualified to minister in our church. Are they good enough? Do they have the right skill? Are they reliable? Are they honest and transparent? For us to have a proof that they can answer these questions correctly, we give them ten forms and they are forms of reports, which are to do with Police vetting, medical health check, financial report, parish report, synod report, referees reports, personal report where they provide employment history, education history, family history, their theology, and their experience in the Methodist Church of New Zealand. You see, candidates are responsible to do these crucial works for one purpose, to ensure that they are qualified to be entrusted with a responsible role in our church. Now, is anyone among you thinking to be a candidate for ministry in the Methodist Church of New Zealand? Is it easy to prove yourself worthy to be accepted?

On chapter 4, Paul is honest with himself that although he has been called by Jesus Christ to this ministry of apostleship but it is like a treasure in a clay jar. The call and the responsibility that Christ has bestowed upon him is like a treasure in a clay jar. This treasure is so significant and valuable but it is contained in a clay jar. A clay jar is breakable and fragile. How can a treasure be safe in a clay jar? Will it last for a long time? Paul is honestly testified in the presence of the church of Corinth that he is vulnerable and fragile like a clay jar. He is weak and helpless but God still uses him. He is vulnerable and fragile like everyone else but God is his strength. He is just a human person, a vessel in which God uses to reach out with his love to everyone else, include those in this church. Paul demonstrates the essence of our Christian faith, which is God. God is our source of strength, our wisdom, and hope. In his own words, Paul, says, "*We have this treasure from God, but we are like clay jars that hold the treasure. This shows that the great power is from God, not from us. We have troubles all around us, but we are not defeated. We do not know what to do, but we do not give up the hope of living. We are persecuted, but God does not leave us. We are hurt sometimes, but we are not destroyed. We carry the death of Jesus in our own bodies so that the life of Jesus can also be seen in our bodies.*"

As Christians and human: Paul assures these four important aspects:

- 1) We are vulnerable and fragile like clay jars. What do you feel as we come to the end of our Conference? Are you still feeling broken and vulnerable? Surely, whatever your feeling, you are not alone. We are all vulnerable and broken as clay jars. We are weak and powerless like our forebears in the faith who were persecuted. Yet, God is still using us for his mission. Our strength comes from God not from us.
- 2) We have in us the treasures of God's Spirit and gifts for ministry. It is God in his purpose who bestows on us his Spirit for we are the temple of God's Spirit. Through the Holy Spirit, God gives us different gifts for ministry not for competition but for collaboration to build the Body of Christ. These gifts are treasures in the clay jars. Paul talks about those gifts in 1 Corinthians 12.
- 3) We are sending by God to proclaim the good news. We are vulnerable and weak as we are but God entrusted us his mission to proclaim the good news of peace, justice, love, reconciliation, and forgiveness into our world of violence and hostile. Matthew 28 verse 19 is known as the Great Commission, the Risen Christ commissions us like he did to his early followers to go into all nations and make disciples. We are apostles and remnants whom Jesus is sending to go and make disciples.
- 4) We are depending on God for strength, direction, protection and provision. Jesus promised in Matthew 28:20 that he will be with us to the end of the world. We are not alone and that is the consolation of taking part in God's mission. John Wesley words affirm this, "The best of all that God is with us."

What is the connection in what I have been said with the word 'remnant'? Does anything in 2 Corinthians 4 have any connection with the word 'remnant'?

Remnant means, "The left over or the remaining". In Tongan, is '*toenga*', Samoan, '*tōega*', Fijian, '*vo-ni-bula*'. '*Toenga*', can mean two things: The unwanted ones, in the Tongan context is referred to *toenga kai* or *keikeinanga* (food scraps) or the few chosen ones, *tokosi'i lelei taha*. Whether unwanted ones or few chosen ones, they both symbolize powerlessness, weak, vulnerability, and fragility. These words reflect who we are as human being and as young people. We are vulnerable to so many social issues that affect many young people. For instance, drugs, alcohol, peer-pressure, gangs violence, suicide, etc

In the Old Testament context, the word 'remnant' refers to the few survivors who returned from the exile to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem and the Temple (Isaiah 1:9; Isaiah 10:20; Micah 2:12; Joel 2:32). God has chosen these few people to restore the pride of Israel and to renew their covenant relationship with God. It has a same understanding in the New Testament. It refers to them as the 'elect or the chosen ones' (Matthew 24:24; Romans 9:27; Romans 11:5; Revelation 12:17) Although, they were vulnerable and powerless but God used them to inherit their ancestors' legacy and to preserve their tradition and land.

In the contexts of both the Old Testament and New Testament, '*toenga*' means to the few chosen ones whom God uses to build and extent his kingdom on earth. In the context of the

Tauiwi Youth Methodist Conference, young people can be seen as God chosen ones to proclaim his love in Jesus Christ, like Paul claims in 2 Corinthians. We may be weak, vulnerable, and powerless but in the eyes of God, we are the sending ones as apostles like Paul with power from the Holy Spirit to proclaim the good news to all people everywhere.

We are broken humanity and young people like jars of clay. Yet God has chosen you and me as vessels that he uses to fill with his treasures, which are the spiritual gifts to produce, nurture, and utilize for the extension of God's kingdom on earth (1 Cor. 12).

Questions for discussion

What is the treasure (spiritual gift) that God has bestowed on you?

Are you qualified for that treasure (spiritual gift)?

How do you nurture that treasure (spiritual gift)?

How are you going to use and utilize that treasure (spiritual gift)?

Who is going to benefit from your treasure (spiritual gift)?

Conclusion

As remnant, *toenga*, we need to work together in unity so that we can draw strength and wisdom from one another. We cannot afford to work individually for as *toenga* we are so small and powerless. United we stand and divided we fall. God gave treasures to each one of us to use for the common good. Utilize those treasures to multiply so that they become blessings for others. It is my prayer that God will continue to raise young leaders to navigate our church with courage and vision in a sea of many changes.