

**Summer Series Week Five:
Theme – Transformation Through Struggle**

For this service you will need

- *small pieces of paper (A4 cut into 8)*
- *pens/pencils for those who may not have them with them*
- *a cross (a table cross will be fine)*
- *a basket to put at the foot of the cross for people to place prayers in*
- *Olive oil for anointing (easiest way is to place some cotton wool in a small container and soak it with oil, so you can get oil on your thumb to anoint without it dripping).*

Call to Worship: Jesus said: 'Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.

Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me;
for I am gentle and humble in heart,
and you will find rest for your souls.'

Hymn StF 20: Be still for the presence of the Lord

Loving God, in whom all things are made whole,
you sent your Son our Saviour to heal a broken world.
Visit us with your salvation, that we may be blessed
in body, mind and spirit; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Our Lord Jesus Christ said: 'Anyone who comes to me
I will never turn away.'

In the presence of God, let us confess our sins.

Silence

Lord Jesus, you came to reconcile us to God and to one another.
Lord, have mercy.

Lord, have mercy.

Lord Jesus, you heal the wounds of sin and division.
Christ, have mercy.

Christ, have mercy

Lord Jesus, you offer us a new beginning.
Lord, have mercy.

Lord, have mercy.

Silence

God is love. Through Jesus our sins are forgiven.
Let us live in the power of the Spirit. **Amen.**

Holy God, you give life to all; you meet us in our need
and bring hope to those who look to you.
Give peace to our hearts and minds
as we pray to you with confidence;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Hymn StF 565: Only by Grace

Responsive reading StF 810: Psalm 46

Reading: 2 Corinthians 12:1-10

Song StF 41: Blessed be your name

Reflection

Psalm 46: 'Therefore we will not fear, though the earth be moved, and though the mountains tremble in the heart of the sea.' I wonder how many of us can truly say that. I am not sure I can. If there were to be a sudden earthquake here, I have to admit I would be pretty fearful!

'I will boast gladly of my weaknesses, for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.' Could we truly say that? I'm not sure I even want to admit to my weaknesses, never mind boast of them!

So what are we to make of what is said in our readings this morning? What do they have to say to us in a world that is racked by natural disasters which all too frequently strike terrible fear into the hearts of people? What do they have to say to us at a time when admitting weakness and vulnerability can open us to exploitation or injury?

What the Psalmist and Paul have in common, of course, is faith in God who, they believe holds all things in his hand and cares about them and what happens to them. The Psalmist recognises that, whatever happens, even the worst disasters, the presence of God in the situation makes a difference. Paul acknowledges that God is present and can work not just through his strengths, but even in his weaknesses. Indeed, he sees that God uses his weaknesses to ensure that Paul continues to be aware of his dependence on God. What comes through many of Paul's letters is a strong sense of his own rightness, a confidence in his knowledge and insights. I think that, without something to remind him, it would have been quite easy for him to become complacent that he could cope with whatever came his way rather than relying on God's grace.

We do not know what Paul's 'thorn in the flesh' was, though there are various theories. I am pleased, though, that we are not told, because it enables us to identify with Paul, perhaps to recognize our own 'thorns', the vulnerabilities that turn us constantly to God for his reassurance and strength. Perhaps if we knew exactly what Paul's was, we might find it harder to associate our own weaknesses with his.

Having said that, it is never easy to acknowledge our weaknesses. I am sure many of us have had interviews where we have been asked, 'What would you say is your biggest weakness?' It's a bit of a minefield isn't it? What do I admit to? If I am honest, will it put them off me; but if I say I don't have any weaknesses, that wouldn't look too good either! But what they are really looking for is an awareness of where we are weak, because once we are aware of it, we can find ways to compensate for that weakness, looking for support from others with different strengths, seeing ourselves as part of the team, the corporate whole, rather than capable of doing everything ourselves.

Very sadly, British society has had a tendency to discourage acknowledging weakness. For example, people who manage to hold it together and not break down at funerals are described as 'brave'; bereft husbands or wives are told to 'be strong for the sake of the children', when sorrow and tears are the most natural response to grief, and are important to bring release and, eventually, healing.

Struggle and suffering and weakness are, sadly, part of our lives, part of the reality of

our being human in a broken world. Very few of us get through our lives without some experience of major sorrow. At those times we can be overwhelmed with grief and find ourselves struggling to understand where God is in our experience and how he can allow these things to happen. We can feel utterly broken and powerless.

And the truth is that we may never understand. God never says that we will not face struggle and sorrow, and he doesn't directly answer the questions we hurl at him at these times; but what he does promise is that, whenever we face these things, he will not abandon us. He does not say 'you will never go through the valley of the shadow', but he says, 'I will be with you.' We are not called to be strong or brave, or told not to express what we feel, we are just called to hold on, to trust, to believe he is there even if we cannot feel him. And we can tell him exactly how we feel, we can express our anger and our fear to him – he is big enough to take it!

I believe that God never wastes anything, and what he wastes least is our pain, because it is so costly. I believe that, always, as we look to him in our pain, he will, through it, as he did for Paul, give us some kind of gift. It may well be that we do not recognize it, or use it, for a long time, but I am sure that many of us can testify to discovering that, as a result of our most painful experiences, we are able to offer something to others that we were not able to before. That is not in any way to belittle or dismiss our pain, but to be aware that God knows the depths of it, is with us in them, and, out of those depths can, in time, lovingly give birth to new hope and life.

Footprints Poem may be read

One night I dreamed a dream.

As I was walking along the beach with my Lord.

Across the dark sky flashed scenes from my life.

For each scene, I noticed two sets of footprints in the sand,

One belonging to me and one to my Lord.

After the last scene of my life flashed before me,

I looked back at the footprints in the sand.

I noticed that at many times along the path of my life,

especially at the very lowest and saddest times,

there was only one set of footprints.

This really troubled me, so I asked the Lord about it.

"Lord, you said once I decided to follow you,

You'd walk with me all the way.

But I noticed that during the saddest and most troublesome times of my life,

there was only one set of footprints.

I don't understand why, when I needed You the most, You would leave me."

He whispered, "My precious child, I love you and will never leave you

Never, ever, during your trials and testings.

When you saw only one set of footprints,

It was then that I carried you."

Song StF 693: Beauty for Brokenness

Prayers for the healing of the Church and the nations

The cross is the ultimate symbol of God's presence with us in our suffering, as it reminds us of Christ's own suffering and death. The empty cross also reminds us of

the resurrection, when God, through that appalling experience of human suffering, brought from it new life, new hope, new freedom for humankind – God's strength made perfect in weakness. You have been given a piece of paper. You can just hold it as you pray, or you can put something on it – names or initials or images that for you express people or places that are going through experiences of suffering. It may be you want to include something that is happening for you. Pray quietly for them and hold them before God, asking him that his presence and love may be real there. The come forward, is you are able and place your prayers at the foot of the cross, entrusting them to God's grace, that he may work on them to give strength and help.

Then, if you would like to, you can receive anointing with oil. This is a very Biblical symbol of God's love and touch of healing. It doesn't need to be for a specific healing need, but I invite you to receive it as an acknowledgement of your weakness and need of God's grace. Each person will receive a short prayer, the same for everyone.

Before we go into the quiet prayer and anointing, let us pray a blessing over the oil.

The oil for anointing is blessed with these words:

Heavenly Father, giver of life and salvation,
bless this oil for anointing your people.

May all who receive this anointing be made whole
by the power of the Holy Spirit;
through our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Quiet prayer for people to prepare prayers and bring them forward, then receive anointing with oil, each one receiving the sign of the cross on their forehead, with the words:

The grace of Christ bring you wholeness and give you peace. **Amen.**

After the prayer and anointing, we share the peace.
Christ is our peace. He breaks down the walls that divide us.
The peace of the Lord be always with you.

And also with you.

We greet one another with a sign of peace.

Offering

Song StF 645: Will your anchor hold?

The Lord bless you and keep you:
The Lord make his face to shine on you
and be gracious to you;
the Lord look on you with kindness
and give you peace. Amen

Go in peace to rejoice in God's love and to reflect his glory.

Thanks be to God. Amen.