

# **Sermon: Glorious God in Jars of clay**

## **2 Corinthians 4:1-18**

### **Rev Dr Jos Strengholt**

It is Ash Wednesday today; this is the beginning of the period in which we as Christians focus in on the sufferings of our Lord Jesus Christ. And we also spend more time than usual to consider our own mortality.

That is why tonight we will have a Cross of Ash applied to our foreheads - to remind us of our own mortality.

I admit - that does not feel so nice. Is it not much nicer to consider the glory of the Gospel?

#### **1 Glorious Gospel**

The apostle Paul said beautiful things about God's glory that is present in our lives.

Jesus Christ is the image of God. Literally: the icon of God. That means, we who look at Jesus, are looking at God through him.

In the face of Jesus Christ, we see the glory of God.

God is present when we look at Jesus. Now that is good news!

That is why as Christians we can never stop talking about Jesus. He is God's image, and therefore Paul also speaks of the glory of Christ.

It means a lot that Paul uses both expressions: He speaks of:

"the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." And he speaks of "the glory of Christ, who is the image of God."

The glory of Christ is the glory of God, and the glory of God is the glory of Christ.

God and Jesus share the same glorious identity; they share the same divinity.

And the good news is, that "God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts", to give us this knowledge of Jesus Christ.

We have every reason to rejoice. God has come to us; He has revealed himself to us; through Jesus Christ the glorious God is not our Judge but our Savior.

"God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts"

St Chrysostom, a fourth century Church Father, said of this verse that when God wanted light to shine out of darkness, at creation, He spoke just one word: Be. That was enough.

But when God wanted light to shine in our hearts, He himself had to come down. The great Gospel of the glory of God and the glory of Jesus Christ, is very painful

For Him to shine his light in us, it was needed that he denied himself and that he took up his cross. The gospel is the story of a suffering Lord.

And we should not be surprised that our involvement in this Gospel and in following this Lord, should be costly and painful as well.

## **2 Jars of clay**

The apostle Paul writes that he is "always carrying in the body the dying of Jesus". The glorious Gospel is shining in our hearts - but we are jars of clay. Pots of clay.

Corinthian lamps were known throughout the Roman Empire: the more fragile they were, the more light they let through.

The glory of God can be best displayed in jars of clay. God is not looking for superstars, just being a mud pot is enough. As fragile jars, we are best able to show others the value of God and of the gospel that is in our life.

Human weakness is not a barrier for the plans of God. It is the channel He has chosen to use. First in Jesus - who died on a cross, but also in His followers.

God is not there to serve me with outward success, we are here to serve God. Outward success is not a proof of being blessed by God, the proof of his blessing is that we know Jesus and his Gospel and that we have the privilege of living for him.

Outward strength, power, health and wealth are not important. God has chosen to reveal himself through weaklings like us.

We are imperfect; we regularly need repairs; we become sick; death awaits us. We are mortal humans.

The central issue in this letter of Paul is: These hard circumstances are part and parcel of being attached to Jesus Christ. Since our life is bound up with Christ's, there is no way to avoid weakness.

All models of the Christian life or of Christian service that try to avoid weaknesses or minimize its place in our daily experience, must be rejected.

Those who follow Christ and who proclaim the crucified Lord should not expect better treatment by the public than Jesus received. And as part of humankind, we suffer the same sicknesses, infirmities, yes death.

All Christians must face up to this paradox, that weakness is a prerequisite, an essential precondition, for Gods power to be displayed. No ministry to Christ without the suffering of Christ.

Origin of Alexandria, one of our own early Church Fathers here in Egypt, said that God saves us from our afflictions, yes, but not by taking us out of them, but by ensuring that they will not crush us.

### **3 In hope of resurrection**

This faith in the glorious God who is present in our fragile life, that keeps Christians going.

In this letter to the Corinthians, St Paul explains in detail the suffering, the difficulties, the lack of peace of mind that he often experienced. However, he says: "We do not lose heart".

Yes, his ministry was often highly problematic. Nothing seemed to go easy, but he did not lose heart.

The greatest challenge facing us Christians today, is not militant Islam, or atheism, it is plain and simple discouragement. Look at the many troubles we face in our work and our life here in Egypt. It is so easy to be discouraged and to loose heart.

A psychological defense mechanism that I regularly see in people is that they lower their goals or expectations in work and life. If this is what you do, not too much can go wrong.

Paul did not loose heart – not because he had low expectations or low goals, but because he was aware that it was the grace of God that was at work in his ministry. He saw his fragility, he feared death, but he knew the secret - the treasure in his life - Jesus Christ as the always present Lord.

And with Christ as our ever-present Lord, we know that even when our bodies go downhill, our inner self is renewed at the same time, day by day. And we know that even when we die - Christ never leaves us and he will resurrect us on the last day.

There is nothing selfish about the desire for heaven, it helps us to stay true to the faith and to see all misery in life as something transitory. Even what is unbearable becomes bearable with Christ at our side and with Christ at the end of the race.

## **Conclusion**

Our earthly life is important for God and for us. But it is and always will be like a jar of clay. God is eternal; Jesus Christ is glorious; the Holy Spirit fills our life. That makes our life valuable.

But we ourselves are and we will always be fragile. Mortal. That is why we have a cross drawn on our forehead this evening. To remind us - we are jars of clay.

And to be aware that we must focus on the things that last; the things that are eternal.

We present our bodies to Jesus Christ as a fragile sacrifice to Him. He died for us; we die with him. And it is in accepting, yes embracing our weaknesses, that the glory of God become ever more visible in your life.

Amen