

You can sense Paul's struggle with the whole issue of status. Having a certain position, being admired and respected, means that people will listen. Paul had position in Jerusalem – he was wealthy, he was educated, he was respected. Elsewhere, none of that really counted and it wasn't what was important either. All that mattered to Paul was getting across the gospel message. Yet he had to do some reverse boasting with the Corinthians to get them to understand. He emphasised his weaknesses and showed how it was wrong to glory in one's strengths. But perhaps because they expected religious teachers to have had extraordinary visions, in rather oblique language he refers to a very personal experience. At first reading it seems that he is talking about someone else, but actually, those who have really studied the text believe that he is referring to his own religious experience. He doesn't refer to this anywhere else, presumably because it is personal and does not help the furtherance of the gospel message. But here it does, because the Corinthians are not going to listen to him unless he can show that he has the right qualifications. In other words, he is using this to help to get the message across.

It clearly disturbs Paul. He is wrestling with the fact that people will listen to you if they think you are wonderful, but, that whole celebrity thing can get in the way of the message too. So he will only boast in his weakness and has very mixed feelings about what he terms his thorn in the flesh – no-one knows what that was, some have jokingly suggested his mother-in-law, but it was more likely a painful illness. Since he has prayed for its removal three times, it must have been a chronic condition, which now he has accepted for he heard God saying to him that his grace was sufficient, and God's power was made perfect in Paul's weakness. Therefore, he says 'I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong'.

In the gospel passage Jesus is not being feted because he has a similar problem. He is teaching with great power, but instead of being listened to, instead of people being moved, he has caused offence. How? He is accused of getting above himself. 'Is this not the carpenter, the Son of Mary?' And the extraordinary thing is that he couldn't do any deeds of power there. They would have listened to a famous rabbi, someone with the right credentials. So Jesus then went with his disciples in to the villages and he taught the disciples to travel light. They were not to go as flashy preachers, they were to show none of the trappings of the usual travelling healers or orators. No flashing of doctoral degrees or secret recipes. No money either. They were to depend upon other's goodness, risking being hounded out, or, more likely, just ignored and treated as of no more consequence than

beggars, or, alternatively, where people were receptive, being put up in people's homes, given food and the opportunity for conversation.

These two readings capture the whole nature of ministry – it is a two way process.

That is true of teaching, preaching, healing and of pastoral care.

I can deliver a sermon – there it is like your delivery from Tesco or Ocado. Might not be what you ordered or wanted, but there it is. Take it or leave it. They deliver, but it is best if you don't just leave it there and can be bothered to unpack the bags, put it away and use the items.

Or I can deliver it like a letter, to be left behind the clock on the mantelpiece unopened, or read and pondered over.

Or I can deliver it like a baby, something to be brought to life, that will grow and change. The midwife delivers, but the parents nurture and influence the development.

However you think of a sermon, it can only ever be even slightly effective if the recipient accepts it, thinks about it and ideally allows the thoughts to develop and grow. It is a two way process.

Or imagine a pastoral situation.

I can go to visit someone and ring on a doorbell, but they need to let me in. Once in, they can leave the television on, or talk about all sorts of irrelevant things so that we never touch on the things that matter or we can have a meaningful conversation. It is impossible to minister to someone who rejects your ministry.

In many ways it is easy for me – I have the dog collar, the sign that I am allowed to do ministry. But in a church of this size, ministry, day by day, week by week, cannot depend upon the clergy alone. We need to recognise each other's ministry. When someone comes to you when you are ill to bring you communion, it doesn't matter if they wear a dog collar or not, what matters is that they bring the sacrament. If someone comes to visit after a funeral, or before a baptism, or because they have heard you are unwell, allow them to minister to you. Don't think, they are getting a bit above themselves, 'who do they think they are taking on this work?'.

Martin has now left us to take up his ministry in Riverhead. I have been asked many times, when will we get a new curate. The very earliest would be July 2013, but I have been told that there is quite a small chance of this. Even 2014 is by no means certain. This Diocese is looking to lose 30 paid clergy posts in the next 3 years – 10 a year. We need lay ministry. We need each other. We need to recognise the gifts that we have within this congregation and allow each other to share in this call to

ministry. The best way of beginning this is by getting to know each other – joining in, staying for coffee, volunteering to help, and the simplest of all things, noticing when someone hasn't been around for a couple of weeks and ringing up to see if they are OK. To speak about Christ to people, we need relationship.

That is how the church spread as the disciples bravely went from place to place, tending those who were ill, teaching the ways of the kingdom. And that is how we can grow, in faith and hope and love.

Amen.