

(Ezekiel 2:1-5; 2 Corinthians 12:2-10; Mark 6:1-13)

Well, as they say, ‘there’s no place like home’. But evidently, this was not the case for Jesus. On returning to his home town he found that the people who had known him the longest ‘took offence at him’.

It is also said that ‘an Englishman’s home is his castle’. Now our collective home town has at its heart a castle, and as we celebrate the 950th year of its founding we are imagining how Richmond Castle was home to both French and English men and women. Today, the strong sense of community within our town continues to give many of us a deep sense of connectedness, of security, of belonging. For me, it captures that wonderful African concept of *ubuntu*: expressed as ‘I belong, therefore I am’.

‘Home is where the heart is’. Here’s another expression about home, suggesting that in fact any of us can make our home anywhere. And in our second reading today St Paul took that idea to another level. As St Paul describes being ‘caught up to the third heaven’ and ‘into Paradise’ we might have been thinking about our own ‘home in heaven’ – although (of course) this is simply beyond our imagination.

That did not stop the theologian Paula Gooder from taking this particular passage as the basis of her PhD studies. She explored what St Paul had meant when he spoke about these things, although what evidence she was able to use is simply beyond my imagination!

For me, the poignancy of this reading comes later on, when St Paul is referring to his ‘thorn in the flesh’ – the very same Paul who had described being caught up into Paradise! He was told, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness’.

So, it is no less a figure than St Paul who shows us that he is ‘content with weakness’ because by God’s grace he can say, ‘whenever I am weak, then I am strong’. If I could put words into St Paul’s mouth he might develop the definition of *ubuntu* and say, not ‘I belong, therefore I am’, but ‘I belong to Christ, therefore I am’.

As followers of Christ, we can say the same. God’s grace is sufficient for any challenge we may face, even – especially – when we feel weak. It’s counter-intuitive, but try it some time! There are times in our lives when we have no option but to rely on that freely given grace, and it never fails. There are other times when we feel that everything seems to depend on us, on our own strength. But it is at precisely these times when it is perhaps even more important to open ourselves up to God’s grace: we will find that it never fails.

In six days’ time, Paul – curate, not saint! – will be ordained as a priest. The Liturgy of Ordination includes these words:

‘In the name of our Lord we bid you remember the greatness of the trust that is now to

be committed to your charge. Remember always with thanksgiving that the treasure now to be entrusted to you is Christ's own flock, bought by the shedding of his blood on the cross. It is to him that you will render account for your stewardship of his people.

You cannot bear the weight of this calling in your own strength, but only by the grace and power of God. Pray therefore that your heart may daily be enlarged and your understanding of the Scriptures enlightened. Pray earnestly for the gift of the Holy Spirit.'

Ever since my ordination twenty years (and two days!) ago I have done exactly that, every day. Sometimes, in my ministry I have felt stretched to the limit; never has God's grace failed me. I am sure Paul will find as I have that God's grace is sufficient; that 'he who calls is faithful'.

Knowing Paul as we do, there is no doubt that he will indeed 'Remember always with thanksgiving that the treasure entrusted to him is Christ's own flock'. And today, National Thank You Day, we are all saying thank you for and to the people around us, the people with whom we belong; the people who have helped us through the last year and a half of this dreadful pandemic. The organisers of National Thank You Day – who include Bishop Nick as Chair of the Trustees – are seeking to encourage communities to enshrine gratitude and commonality across the country. They suggest that we think here not only of all National Health Service and front-line staff and key workers, but also shopkeepers and teachers, friends and families and next door neighbours, and community groups. They want to make sure everyone feels included and part of the day.

One idea suggested is to find a tree upon which to hang messages of who it is we want to thank. Well, here at St Mary's we have a Prayer Tree in the churchyard, and later you might like to hang upon it a message of thanks. This reminds me of the Prayer Tree we had inside my previous church. People would hang paper leaves on the tree, on which they had written their prayer. Each month the leaves would be 'recycled', to allow space for more. The one leaf that was never recycled bore this simple prayer: 'thank you'.

It was the thirteenth century mystic Meister Eckhart who had said, 'If the only prayer you ever say in your entire life is 'thank you', it will be enough'.

Today, this is amongst the prayers we are saying, and what better place in which to do so than from the heart of this service – the Eucharist – the service whose very name means thanksgiving. How fitting then that our post-Communion prayer will include these words, based on the parable of the Prodigal Son:

Father of all, we give you *thanks* and praise, that when we were still far off you met us in your Son and brought us *home*.

For these and all his gifts may God's holy name be blessed and praised.
Amen.