

Pentecost 6 Year B  
The Secret of “Success”

Readings: 2 Sam. 5: 1 – 5, 9 – 10  
Psalm 48  
2 Cor. 12: 2 – 10  
Mark 6: 1 – 13

“For whenever I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor. 12:10). These words by the Apostle Paul to the Corinthians are profound. Under enormous pressure and as an attempt to defend himself against those who questioned his qualifications as an apostle; those who challenged the validity of message; and those who undermined the effectiveness and success of his work, Paul responds: “for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.”

Perhaps we could add in our own words to reflect our own experiences in life. “Whenever I am afraid, then I am confident.” “Whenever I am depressed, then I am joyful.” “Whenever I fail, then I am successful.”

But could we really say these things about ourselves in the face of challenges? Could we honestly claim such affirmations when the very core of our being as a person, as a family member, a worker, a friend or as a Christian is brought into question? What then is the

basis for our confidence? What is the source for our strength? What is the reason for our joy? What is the foundation for our success?

Perhaps there are all kinds of responses we could make to these questions. We might point to strategies, techniques or programmes that we could apply to improve our situation. But as the church and as people of God, our readings for today remind us that our true success is grounded in God. It is the presence and purpose of God that fundamentally determines our success.

From 2 Samuel we see the fledgling King David unite the tribes of Israel. Once a tribal confederation, now Israel had a monarchy by their acceptance of David as king. They recognised his bravery and skill as a soldier and leader even when Saul was still the king when they said: “It was you who led out Israel and brought it in...It is you who shall be shepherd” (5:2). Remembered as Israel’s greatest king, David ruled for forty years (5:5).

According to verse 10, “David became greater and greater, for the Lord, the God of hosts, was with him.” The scriptures tell us that David was neither a perfect man nor king. He did things that caused him great regret. Yet, he was successful because of God. It was God who chose him and empowered him when anointed at Bethlehem by Samuel (1 Sam. 16:12-13). It’s clear from the text for today that

David's rise as King over all Israel is cannot be explained except from the idea that it was the presence of the living God that accomplished it.

It's easy to forget in our modern world and society that is high-tech and complex in all kinds of ways that one of the simple though central truths of our faith is "God will never forsake you." Despite our science and technology, God can be with you. God is the one who is completely faithful, even we are not; which also means that God is always with us; with you and me. Our Psalm (48) for today puts it this way in the last couple of verses (13-14): "That you may tell the next generation that this is God, our God for ever and ever. He will be our guide forever." Our God is like this forever and will always guide us." (Ps. 48:14). In declaring the greatness of Jerusalem, the psalmist saw the fortress city of as impregnable. As the ramparts of David's city appeared so strong that they would stand forever, the psalmist declared that God's faithful love would also stand forever. Jerusalem's defences may now have vanished, but God's faithfulness and love for the world still stands today.

But the question is whether we will have the faith to entrust our future to such a simple strategy for success. Will we trust the presence and purpose of God for our life even when we don't fully understand it? Or will we be like the people of Nazareth whose

unbelief caused Jesus to be amazed but end up rejecting him? These are people whom Mark describes “took offence” at Jesus (Mk. 6:3). The Greek word used here can also mean “stumbled” which is the same word Mark used to depict those who begin to believe but fall away (Mk. 4:17); those who start walking with him then stumble (Mk. 9:42-48); those who pledge loyalty then become deserters (Mk. 14:27-29).

In Nazareth, it was the unbelief of his own friends and relatives that amazed Jesus (Mk. 6:6)! The difference between them and those who saw Jesus and found new life, restored health, forgiveness of sins, and re-invigorated hope was their acceptance of his presence and purpose with them – even when they couldn’t explain how Jesus had done it.

It’s the difference between the view that nothing will happen unless I can muster enough talent or will-power to make it happen and the view Paul expresses in his “boast” that the power of Christ is made all the more effective by his weaknesses (2 Cor. 12:9). Paul could have responded to his critics by elaborating on all his missionary achievements as a servant of Christ. Yet, he recognised that none of it would have been possible unless God had been part of it. In spite of himself and all of his faults and weaknesses, Paul trusted that God accepted him as he was – God was with him; God loved him and God

helped him. In this, Paul understood the revelation to him of God's grace, of God's undeserved favour: "My grace is sufficient for you" (2 Cor. 12:9). It is God's grace, God's strength, God's purpose that becomes evident in Paul's weakness that he can say: "So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me" (v.9).

This is not an excuse for doing nothing for Christ or for wallowing in self-pity. It's not an excuse for settling for mediocre results and neither are the "thorns" or things that restrict us or find most challenging to be reasons for not trying or aiming for new and different ways of serving Christ.

I will be having a minister review done soon and I have wondered how the effectiveness or success of my ministry will be measured. How are congregations and ministers assessed if not in terms of their power or ability to grow by attracting quantities of people and quantities of money to be bigger and better? This ongoing experience may suggest that the question with which Paul and the Corinthians are struggling in this section of 2 Corinthians is not a question for only one moment in Christian history, but for every moment that includes us today. How will our ministry as a congregation be measured in terms of its success?

First Church is not the same church like fifty or more years ago. A lot has happened and changed since then. Our numbers and activities today are not what they used to be and some may perceive such things as signs of weakness and failure; that, perhaps, God's presence and purpose through the church is no longer relevant for people in this day and age.

I think our lesson this morning encourages us as Christians and as a congregation to remember that we are the "church of Jesus Christ." This means that, in spite of our selves and our weaknesses or our excuses for what we do as Christians, the presence and power of Christ is what ultimately makes the difference; it is the basis of our success. What makes you and I continue to serve God in this community is the confidence that God has not and will not forsake us. God is always with us and grants us the grace we need – even when we do not fully comprehend it or recognise it. And so we trust God in faith. When you and I trust in God's presence and purpose for our life then we can say: "whenever I am weak, then I am strong." "Whenever I am afraid, then I am confident." "Whenever I am depressed, then I am joyful." "Whenever I fail, then I am successful."

That may be hard to put into a strategic plan, but I think trusting in the presence of the life-giving God and trusting in the power of the living Christ is a strategy for true success. Amen.