

## Sermon 7<sup>th</sup> July

“Son of man!”. “Child of humans!”. “Daughter of woman”. “I am sending you to my stubborn people”. In the Hebrew, Son of Man basically means “human” in this passage.

And so Ezekiel is commissioned to his job and calling. Go to stubborn people.

What a job – being sent to the people of God who long ago stopped living as God’s people. And despite the warnings, they have refused to change. They are stubborn – they are a people who **refuse to change attitude or opinion despite the evidence presented**.

Being stubborn can have its rather more positive sides – it reminds me of a class debate we had when I was learning French. It being France, where people still love to smoke despite the evidence, we had a debate – arranged by the teacher – on whether we should smoke outside or inside, in a special room.

Obviously the logic is to smoke outside, but I was placed on the team arguing for smoking to be inside. So, despite the difficulty, I stubbornly kept on arguing in my best (or worst) French! Finally, despite all the arguments against me, I turned to them and cried out “Where do dogs live?”

“Outside” they said, rather baffled.

“And you want to smoke outside! Why do you want to give dogs lung disease?”

It’s fair to say they weren’t expecting *that* argument. But it’s a silly example of stubbornness – refusing to back down, despite the logic. But real stubbornness is incredibly frustrating and destructive. It says you refuse to acknowledge the other person’s insights, or to consider their point of view. And usually that comes from **pride**.

And pride of course leads to one thinking more highly of oneself than one should. Dare I say it, one becomes a bit **conceited**.

And this is what Paul is talking about in his second letter to the Corinthians. “I knew a man who was caught up to the third heaven! That is something I am willing to boast about! But what I will not boast about is my own strong points and glorification.”

This is **shockingly countercultural**. We are trained to parade ourselves and show off how good we are. If you have worked in business, a huge amount of effort goes into brand reputation, preserving your image, promoting your expertise, and asserting yourself as the best on the market, in order to win more clients.

Indeed, a whole website called LinkedIn is basically one giant advertising platform for people to show off their skills and try to get hired by someone else. They say all social media is like that – as we only ever post the best photos, the most photogenic and ideal shots, all the time conveying the idea that my life is perfect.

**Paul says stop. Let’s change the narrative.** When I boast about how great I am – and Paul says he could do that – when that happens, it only serves to make me look impressive. Think what Paul could have said: “I singlehandedly started churches across Asia Minor and Italy. I

launched a fundraising charity campaign for the church when famine hit. I advised leading Roman military personnel on how to sail and saved many lives from a shipwreck. Jesus personally appeared to me to commission me.”

This guy could really **spin his career** and make himself look great! But no, he says “I’ll only talk about my weaknesses, so that people won’t praise me. I really don’t want to become conceited.”

It’s so easy to be proud, to say “I know best” and to accept the praises of other people. And of course we should thank and build people up. But if you are the object of that praise and building up, always hold to the forefront of your mind **the danger of being conceited**. Of pride.

How many Christian leaders have let that derail them? I worry a little when I see the names of speakers being advertised at Christian events – it raises those people up and can easily start a slippery slope to pride. How many stories from the USA could we mention of Christian leaders being raised up only to find that they weren’t little messiahs, they were very naughty boys!

Paul then rejoices that he has a “thorn in the flesh” to stop him being too conceited. To remind him continually that he is not the aim, the target, the outcome or the goal. **Jesus is the aim, the target, the outcome and the goal.**

God’s power is made more evident in our weaknesses.

So let me practice what I preach. I am Glen, a sinner, someone who thinks bad things and does bad things. I am genetically faulty – I have allergies, eczema and asthma. I might carry the genes for Alzheimer’s, or some other hereditary disease. I’ve been insulted and accused, I’ve made mistakes and covered them up. I’ve lied to people I love, and been stubborn and proud way too often.

Yet through this messy, complicated, sometimes wicked person called Glen, God has worked. But here it becomes dodgy ground...if I mention successes, it really is not me, it is God’s grace at work. I’ve had the privilege of visiting the lonely and isolated. Hearing about and speaking on behalf of people in war zones. Helping missionaries and those doing amazing acts of care.

But I don’t want to go on or give details – I don’t want to be proud or conceited! The point is – I am a mess. Yet God through me has brought good things into this world – but I won’t boast of what “I’ve done”, but **I will rejoice in God’s work.**

And what about us? We could talk of how, through a community of broken people, God is ministering to those lacking homes at Jardin de Montbrillant. How through confused people like us God is working among our children, young people and young adults. How through failures like us there is still community, excellence in music, beauty, care for the dying and suffering, training on building peace, planning our lives...the list goes on. We are all **Work In Progress** – but God is the one building and doing the work through us. **It is Christ’s power in us – so let us boast of our individual weaknesses but raise up His Glory!**

And it was ever thus. When Jesus sent off his disciples in pairs, the 12 went out 2 by 2. Where have we heard that before? The animals went out 2 by 2... just after the ark. Just after this great event when God restarted the world. The disciples are sent out like the animals, fresh into a new world, free to recreate it!

And the message of those disciples is the same as that of Jesus: verse 12: they went out and preached that people should repent. This is the same message as that of Jesus in Mark 1:15.

And it's consistent with our readings from Ezekiel and Corinthians: **proud, stubborn and conceited people – that's us**. But God calls us to humility, and that is an act of self-denial, of dying to self.

Like Jesus said, we love it when people say "you are so generous when you give money to help the poor". But Jesus said if you really want to **check your motivations, give money without anyone else knowing**.

People say "You are so holy, you pray lovely prayers in church and sound so eloquent". Jesus says, if you really want to know your **prayer is heard, then do it in secret at home, where no one can see you**.

Humility is a way of death and self-denial. A way very alien to all of us. But it is a calling that, if I want to please God and live a righteous life, then my good deeds should honour my Father in heaven, not myself.

It's a call to live **counterculturally**, to find rest in God and trust in him; to trust his leading more above our own self-assertion and promotion. To find meaning where we are, and to be disciples who deny ourselves and go out to recreate this world according to God's calling.

So we started with stubbornness, pride and conceit.

And then we finished on how it's not about me, or us, but how we need humility. How we are instead to raise up the work of God in us, rather than us ourselves.

As the BCP service says "Let your light shine before men, so that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven". Amen