



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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A Tale of Two Crowns 2 Corinthians 11:19-33 & St. Luke 8:4-15

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The highest military honour that ancient Rome could bestow was the *corona muralis*, the “walled crown”. It was a crown designed to look like a city or a castle wall. It was awarded for bravery and to earn it you did, indeed, have to be very brave. It was given to the soldier who, during a siege or attack on a city or fortress, was the first to make it over the enemy wall to plant Rome’s standard. You can imagine just how brave a man had to be to earn the *corona muralis*. The usual way to the top of a wall was by ladder and on a ladder a soldier was a sitting duck. The enemy forces could push the ladder over and you’d probably die from the fall. Anyone on a ladder was an easy target for archers and their arrows. They were also easy targets for everything from rocks to boiling oil, pitch, or tar. Lots of men died trying to scale the walls of a city, so to win the *corona muralis* was a great honour—not only were you lucky, but you were very, very brave.

Of course lots of soldiers were happy to claim the honour of being the first one over the wall during the siege, and so the Roman authorities only awarded the crown after a thorough investigation and only after the man to whom it was being awarded made a solemn vow before the gods that he really had been the first one over the wall. You’d better be careful before boasting about having been the brave first man over!

Romans liked to boast. Like most ancient peoples, the Greco-Romans had an honour-based culture. Your place in society was granted mostly by

your birth, but inasmuch as people could move up in the Roman hierarchy, it was through their political and military accomplishments. A young Roman who aspired to be a consul, the highest office in the Republic, had to serve in a series of military and political offices first and that sequence was called the “course of honour”. And so by a time a man made it into the upper ranks he’d have a long list of accomplishments—not just under his belt, as we would say, but that would also be carved on all sorts of monuments and announced at all sorts of events.

The young Church wasn’t immune from this achievement and honour-based way of thinking. In the letters St. Paul wrote to the church in Corinth we see him rebuking and trying to correct them for being taken in by teachers who claimed long lists of achievements and honours. Even in their own ranks, many of the Corinthian Christians had stopped showing honour to each other and had stopped functioning as a healthy body, with all the parts serving each other and working for one goal, and instead were competing with each other. People with certain miraculous gifts were claiming special status just as some Christians today claim that speaking in tongues is *the* sign that one has been baptised in the Holy Spirit. Many of the Corinthians Christians were boasting in themselves and what they had done—just as the people in the world around them did.

But this is *not* the way of grace. As we prepare for the season of Lent our lessons remind us that as Jesus’ people we stand in grace. Last week our Gospel warned us not to think like the men who worked all day for a denarius and who were then upset when others who worked for only an hour also received a denarius. God’s kingdom is about grace and Jesus reminds us that grace, at its very core, is *unmerited* favour. It’s not something we can earn, not if we work an hour or the whole day. In Jesus God has given us his all and in

response and out of gratitude, we give him our all for as long as we are able. Jesus also reminds us that it is he who calls us in the first place, and so we have nothing to boast of ourselves.

Now, today, we’re reminded of grace again. The Corinthians were boasting in good Greco-Roman fashion, but that’s no way to build Jesus’ Church and so, in our Epistle from 2 Corinthians 11, St. Paul responds with his own list of achievements—and he ends with his own *corona muralis*. As we look at Chapter 11 I’ll be reading from a paraphrase, not from our usual translation. It’s hard enough to understand the whole passage when our Epistle is just a snippet of it, but sometimes the formal language of our translations makes it difficult to see what Paul is doing here. I’ll start with verse 18:

Plenty of people are boasting in human terms, after all, so why shouldn’t I boast as well? After all, you put up with fools readily enough, since you are so wise yourselves. You put up with it if someone makes you their slave, or if they eat up your property, or overpower you, or give themselves airs, or slap you in the face. (2 Corinthians 11:18-20 *New Testament for Everyone*)

Here’s what Paul is addressing: Teachers came to Corinth and wowed the church members with their achievements. Not only that, but seeing these achievements the Corinthians let these people walk all over them. Paul knows better, but he can play that game too—so let’s see who plays it best! And he launches into his own list of achievements, his own “course of honour”:

Whatever anyone else dares to boast about (I’m talking nonsense, remember), I’ll boast as well. Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they the seed of Abraham? So am I. Are they servants of the Messiah?—I’m talking like a raving madman—I’m

a better one. (2 Corinthians 11:21b-23a)

Paul starts out much like the others would have. As a Hebrew—a faithful Jew—no one can beat Paul.

Remember, after all, he was a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin. Paul had been at the top. These teachers the Corinthians were bowing to couldn't claim *that* kind of honour. And then he says, "And you want to talk about being servants of the Messiah. I'm the best he's got! Let me tell you about it." And at this point those other teachers would have launched into long list of all the places they'd preached, all the important people they'd baptised, all the miracles they'd performed, all the accolades they'd received from people here and there—just as someone running for office in Rome would have listed all his military and political achievements. But look at how Paul describes being a servant of Jesus:

I've worked harder, been in prison more often, been beaten more times than I can count, and I've often been close to death. Five times I've had the Jewish beating, forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was shipwrecked; I was adrift in the sea for a night and a day. I've been constantly traveling, facing dangers from rivers, dangers from brigands, dangers from my own people, dangers from foreigners, dangers in the town, dangers in the countryside, dangers at sea, dangers from false believers. I've toiled and labored; I've burned the candle at both ends; I've been hungry and thirsty; I've often gone without food altogether; I've been cold and naked. Quite apart from all that, I have this daily pressure on me, my care for all the churches. (2 Corinthians 11:23b-28)

As I read that I can't help thinking of today's prosperity preachers and faith healers who stand before crowds and

whose preaching consists of little more than lists of all the material possessions they have and all the phony miracles they've performed while demanding money from the poor. The Corinthians had been taken in by just those sorts of teachers who were taking advantage of them. In contrast, Paul earned his living making tents so that he could preach the Good News without taking a salary. He laboured for the Gospel and instead of having fancy clothes, a private yacht, or a fleet of purebred camels to show for it he had scars and bruises and broken bones. He had calloused knees from spending so much time in prayer for these very people who gave him no respect. And yet Paul is willing to accept that. He's not out for their respect. He's out for them and that's the problem. The fact that they value achievements the way the Romans did and the fact that they see nothing of value in Paul's ministry highlights that they don't truly understand the nature of *grace*—and that raises a major concern: if you don't understand the nature of grace, how can you understand Jesus himself? If you don't understand grace, how can you understand the Cross? If you don't understand grace, how can you understand the kingdom of God? No. Paul goes on after all this asking, "Who is weak and I am not weak?" (11:29). But that's just it. This is just the point they need to get through their heads. They've allowed the values of the present age—love of money, love of status, love of power, love of things—they've allowed all this to shape their hearts and minds and it's dragging them away from the kingdom, from Jesus, from the Holy Spirit and the transforming work he's done in them. And so he declares:

If I must boast, I will boast of my weaknesses. (2 Corinthians 11:30)

From the standpoint of the world and of the culture that surrounded these people this was crazy talk. No one boasted about his weaknesses. That

was a perfect way to get precisely nowhere in life. But this *is* Paul's boast. And he's not finished. Remember the *corona muralis*—the award for bravery given to the first soldier over the wall. Now *that* was something to boast about and so many men did boast about it without having accomplished it that the authorities would only give out the crown after the claimant swore a solemn oath before the gods that he was telling the truth. This is the background for what Paul tells them here and they certainly would have been thinking about the *corona muralis*, this highest military honour for bravery, as they read what Paul writes here in his letter to them. He says:

If I must boast, I will boast of my weaknesses. The God and father of the Lord Jesus, who is blessed forever, knows that I'm not lying: in Damascus, King Aretas, the local ruler, was guarding the city of Damascus so that he could capture me, but I was let down in a basket through a window and over the wall, and I escaped his clutches. (2 Corinthians 11:30-33)

Paul won his own *corona muralis* and he swears before God, the Father of the Lord Jesus, that this is true. (Act 9 tells this story in detail.) While these other teachers were boasting of the accolades they received for preaching Jesus, Paul explains how, just after his conversion in Damascus, the Jews were so angered by his preaching that they sought to have him killed. They even got the authorities in Damascus to watch the gates for him and so Paul went over the wall—not like a brave soldier storming the castle and planting a flag, but quietly and under cover of night, humiliated and in a basket. Those are Paul's credentials. He preached Jesus Christ with boldness and nobody gave him money or fancy things, no one praised him. No. They tried to kill him and he had to be smuggled out of the city in a basket.

Paul brings to mind Jesus, who was humiliated and marched out of the city walls to be shamefully crucified. In a similar way Paul was lowered over the wall of Damascus, out of the city and ran away. From a worldly standpoint there was nothing to boast of in that, just as there was nothing for Jesus to boast of in dying the humiliating death of a criminal. Other people, Jews and pagans alike, would hear the story of Jesus and of the cross and tried to stay as far away from that “nonsense” as they could. A man who claimed to be the Messiah and was then crucified by the Romans? Worldly wisdom said that the gods were not on his side. Ditto for Paul. The gods were on the side of the preachers in fancy clothes, with lots of money, and getting all the praise. The gods were with the crazy brave man who scaled the ladder and made it first over the wall of the city. But a man who was beaten and scarred and run out of town for his message, the way Paul was—no—that was someone the gods were against and it was best to stay away from him. And yet the Gospel teaches something very different—something the Corinthians were missing, something the prosperity preachers, the faith healers, and the other proud and vain teachers and preachers of our age are missing. It’s about grace. And grace teaches us to boast in our weakness, because as Jesus noted in last week’s Gospel parable, the denarius earned labouring in the fields in the end turned out not to be wages earned, but a gift of grace—the same gift given to the man who worked only an hour and to the man who worked all day under the hot sun. Each of us has gifts to share with others, each of us has a message—a life-changing and world-changing proclamation—to make, but those gifts and that Good News are not ours, we have no claim on them. No, just the opposite in fact. They have claim on us, because whatever is accomplished through our work and our proclamation comes only because of Jesus, who is at the heart of the

message, and by the Holy Spirit who empowers us and who changes the hearts and minds of the people around us.

It’s easy to forget that it’s Jesus that makes all the difference and when we forget we start thinking that we’ve done it on our own. Jesus reminds us of this in the Gospel. The parable of the Sower is the history of Israel in a nutshell. In 8:4-8 Luke write:

And when a great crowd was gathering and people from town after town came to him, he said in a parable, “A sower went out to sow his seed. And as he sowed, some fell along the path and was trampled underfoot, and the birds of the air devoured it. And some fell on the rock, and as it grew up, it withered away, because it had no moisture. And some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up with it and choked it. And some fell into good soil and grew and yielded a hundredfold.” As he said these things, he called out, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.”

And, of course, no one had ears to hear. They heard, alright, but they didn’t understand—not even the disciples. And so Jesus explains:

“Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God. The ones along the path are those who have heard; then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved. And the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear the word, receive it with joy. But these have no root; they believe for a while, and in time of testing fall away. And as for what fell among the thorns, they are those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature. As for that in the good soil, they are those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart,

and bear fruit with patience. (Luke 8:11-15)

It was the prophet Isaiah who likened the Word of God to a seed and God had been sowing that seed in Israel for generation upon generation, but if the devil didn’t snatch it away, either the trials of life or the pursuit of riches and pleasure would choke it out. Isaiah writes in 6:9-10:

**“Go, and say to this people:
“Keep on hearing, but do not understand;
keep on seeing, but do not perceive.’
Make the heart of this people dull,
and their ears heavy,
and blind their eyes;
lest they see with their eyes,
and hear with their ears,
and understand with their hearts,
and turn and be healed.”**

For more than a thousand years the Word was sowed in Israel, but she refused to hear it. He rescued her from Egypt and he gave her his law at Sinai, but it was choked out in the wilderness. He went before her to conquer Canaan, but she lost interest and left the land half-conquered. He dwelt in a temple in her midst, but she found pagan idols more enticing. He sent her into exile and for a time she repented and was restored to the land, but again her zeal died or was captured by other things. And yet a remnant held to the Lord’s Word and hoped. As Isaiah spoke of the Word as seed, so he also spoke of the harvest and banquet to come when that seed finally sprouted and bore fruit. In Isaiah 55 we read:

**“For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven
and do not return there but water the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;**

**it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I
purpose,
and shall succeed in the thing for
which I sent it.”** (Isaiah 55:10-11)

These words were fulfilled in Jesus. In him and as he sent the Holy Spirit to indwell his people the Word finally took root and bore a harvest. In Jesus the Word finally fell on good soil. Without Jesus, without his gift of the Spirit, the Word would never accomplish its purpose. And so we see that it is by grace and grace alone that the seed takes root, it's by grace that the seed grows, and it is by grace that the seed bears fruit. One day the harvest will be fully brought in and all those who are by faith in Christ Jesus will be gathered into his great banquet—into the wedding feast.

Brothers and Sisters, each Sunday we gather for a foretaste of that great banquet. As we come and gather around his Table, as we eat the bread and drink the wine, we are reminded of the life of grace. In the Old Testament the annual Passover meal, the lamb sacrificed in Egypt to redeem the life of the firstborn sons of Israel, was eaten again, year after year as a reminder that they were God's people by grace. And so this New Covenant Passover reminds us that Jesus has given his life to pay the penalty of our sins. We live because he died and we live no longer enslaved to sin because he rose from the grave in victory over sin and death. His Word has taken root in our hearts, not because we are better than anyone else, but because he has poured his transforming Spirit into us. We do not come to his Table because we've earned it or because we deserve it. As we pray in the Prayer of Humble Access, by our sinful nature we are not worth to gather up the crumbs under the Lord's Table, but his property, his character is always to show mercy. Dear friends, we come to the Lord's table because he is gracious. We come because in giving his own body and blood as a sacrifice

for our sins, for our lives, his dearly beloved has made our sinful bodies clean by giving his own body and he has washed our souls by giving his own precious blood. Here we celebrate and give honour to our Lord who won not the *corona muralis*, not the walled crown, but the *corona spinea*, the crown of thorns. Here we honour the one who gave his life in humility for his enemies. If we will come here in grace, our Lord will send us out as ministers of grace—not seeking our own honour, but seeking to honour him and to make him known: by humbling ourselves and showing honour to others, to those who don't deserve it, even showing honour to our enemies, just as our Lord has so graciously done for us.

Let us pray: Gracious Father, in the Collect this morning we prayed that we would never put our trust in the things we do. We ask this again: remind us not to trust in our own effort or works or accomplishments. Remind us that whatever we have done that has value has been done only because of the grace you have poured into us. May we never seek to honour ourselves, but in everything, to give honour to you, to your Son, and to your Spirit, who have redeemed us from sin and given us life. And let us respond to your grace with gratitude, giving our all and our everything to you as you have given your all for us. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.