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Who Wants to be Weak? Reflections on A Personal Pilgrimage

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What a pointless question to ask: why bother to look any further when the answer is obvious – *no-one*. The western pre-occupation with health and fitness, healthy eating, bodily care and staying young as long as possible, shows an almost obsessive resistance to any kind of physical weakness. Power dressing, power healing and power struggles give a much clearer indication as to where individual and social interests lie.

Emotional or mental weakness is no more attractive a proposition, as can readily be seen by the speed at which local opposition is organised to any community care scheme for the mentally ill. R. D. Laing's conclusion that mental illness mirrors the sickness of society has more than a grain of truth about it. On the individual level, too, even visiting a loved one in a psychiatric hospital can open up such pain that the sense of powerlessness which results is almost unbearable:

I hate coming into these places:

You can almost hear the gates clang shut behind you.

I don't know why he's in here with these people

They're all much worse than he is. And anyway

He shouldn't be in hospital, at a hospital like this one.

He ought to be ashamed coming into a place like this.

It's such a disgrace.

It isn't as if there were anything really wrong with him,

Anything that we couldn't have sorted out between ourselves

Privately, And besides

What is he going to tell people when he gets out.¹

In a movingly honest book about her struggle against drug addiction and alcoholism, Rosie Boycott, while drying out in a clinic, wrote of the things she thought she would encounter on going back into the outside world and resuming her normal life: At the top of the list was 'fear of looking weak'.² Advertising, government policy, education, athletic competition and the media treatment of western life point to the importance of wealth, power,

1 Roger Grainger, *A Place Like This*, London, Churchman Publishing 1984, p 11.

2 Rosie Boycott, *A Nice Girl Like Me*, London, Chatto & Windus 1984, p 213.

getting on, winning. Top people may no longer all read *The Times*, but there is no doubt that there are still plenty of actual and aspiring top people intent on staying ahead and above all staying strong.

It is a sad fact that the Christian church is barely different from the secular world in this respect. Most of the books written, the testimonies given and the church programmes planned are concerned with success and victory, with power evangelism, with happy endings and challenges to achieve the same; all of which appears to underline the pointlessness of our original question. It seems as if all those who are trying to do anything in the Christian world are doing their utmost not even to *appear* to be weak, let alone actually to be so.

Two Kinds of Weakness

Yet the most cursory glance at the Beatitudes in Matthew or the blessings and woes in Luke affirm that it is the poor and weak who are blessed, not the rich and strong. The same uncomfortable thought recurs throughout the New Testament. Clarification comes with the realisation that the same word – weakness – is used in two distinctly different ways:

In the first place, it signifies a *weakness to be emulated*.

Christ became weak and those in Christ share the same weakness. 'He was crucified in weakness, yet he lives by God's power. Likewise, we are weak in him, yet by God's power we will live with him to serve you'.¹ 'He is able to deal gently with those who are ignored and are going astray, since he himself is subject to weakness.'² From these verses we learn that weakness is acceptable to God, because 'God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong.'³

Secondly, there is the *weakness that needs to be overcome*.⁴ This may take the form of moral or personality weakness ('We urge you brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak'),⁵ the weakness of sickness (of which there are endless examples of Jesus healing in the Gospels) and, finally, economic weakness: 'I showed that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said 'It is more blessed to give than to receive'.⁶

Most of those who come for counselling are aware that their weakness falls into one or more of these categories and that whatever they try to do about it, it painfully and stubbornly remains. It may be a pattern of behaviour that for all the resolutions, promises, and determined efforts

1 2 Cor. 13:4 (all references are from NIV).

2 Hebrews 5:2.

3 2 Cor. 1:27.

4 The following threefold distinction can be found in Kittel's *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans 1967, Vol. I pp 491-2.

5 1 Thess. 5:14.

6 Acts 20:35.

refuses to be broken, leaving the individual apparently powerless. This quickly results in the counsellor's self-perception that he or she is not like other people but is inferior.

Perhaps the most subtle satisfaction, delusion or false motive of the counsellor at this point is to believe that she has power over others to change their lives for the better, to do good to them, to be in the superior position of strength. So isn't this the perfect solution – the bringing together of the strong and the weak so that the weak can be strengthened, the strong confirmed in their superiority and both can live happily ever after?

This last attitude, I am ashamed to say, was mine for years as a counsellor suffering from the delusion that this could be equated with authentic Christian service. The Kingdom had a great deal to do with success, blessing and power and you measured where God was by looking for those signs. Inevitably change became necessary if I was to be honest in the face of weakness which would not go away. The influences which changed my attitude were many and various. I highlight four as possible pointers for others:

(a) Working for a down-to-earth godly man who was a risk-taking adventurer, a loving 'mountain top or nothing' man. He shared his failures and weaknesses and was prepared to be publicly open about his struggles. Surprisingly, people didn't walk all over him – or at least most of them didn't – and consequently they too shared their weaknesses. We began to see real walks with God that did not hide behind religious clichés. To meet Adrian Plass or read his books is to have a similar encounter.

(b) The opposite experience of meeting people who exercised very 'successful' ministries but whose life style was horrendously unevangelised and unholy. The tele-evangelists of notoriety perhaps highlight this kind of problem. On a much less sensational level there are those who constantly let everyone know just how well they are doing for God, what a profound ministry they are exercising, how many people respond to sermons and so on. In reality this amounts to little more than a hollow and unattractive display of the success-through-strength mentality.

(c) John Wimber, whose name in this country is synonymous with power, made an enormous impression on me not because of the immense activity, the strangeness of that activity or the teaching associated with his ministry but because of his total lack of 'hype' in remaining apparently dependent not on himself but on God taking control during his ministry. A very dangerous risk!

(d) As I began to explore beyond my foundational evangelical basis, I found that the books and speakers whose spirituality seemed to open up new understandings of God and to be talking about where I was in my pilgrimage came increasingly from the Catholic tradition – Dom Helder Camera, Sheila Cassidy, Gerard Hughes, Henri Nouwen. Again it seemed to me that the reality of God is found for them not in the peaks and successes but in the struggles and places of total helplessness.

Theological Reflection

Reflecting upon these experiences, I find myself acknowledging that although none of us may want either to be weak or to enjoy the feeling of weakness, this does seem exactly how we must flourish if we are to become what God calls us to be. 'He (the Lord) said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness".'¹ 'Apart from me you can do nothing'.² 'He who humbles himself will be exalted . . . I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the Kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.'³ 'Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to walk one mile, go with him two miles.'⁴ 'When Jesus first sent out the twelve he sent them in weakness from the world's point of view: "Take nothing for your journey except a staff, no bread, no bag, no money in your belts. Wear sandals but not an extra tunic".'⁵ 'If anyone wants to be first he must be the very last, and the servant of all.'⁶

Paul understood well the completeness of such weakness as his Philipian hymn demonstrates: Jesus' incarnation is a deliberate letting go of power and authority for the sake of a pathologically weak humanity. So Jesus the Lord had a stable-shed birth, a refugee infancy and a peasant upbringing. He chose to spend more time with the riff-raff of society than with the respectable. He chose not to defend himself at his trial, died on the cross naked and helpless and entrusted the news of both his birth and his resurrection to supposedly weak women.

Moreover, if we look at the life of Jesus we see that from beginning to end he not only *taught* the weakness of total dependence on God, but *lived* it: 'I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father do.'⁷

The crux of Jesus' earthly life seems to lie in this statement. And so we find some of the apparent contradictions in his story explained. He tells his mother that his time is not yet come and then instantly turns round and performs the first Johannine sign. Later in the same gospel he firmly says to his brothers that he is not going to Jerusalem for the Feast of Tabernacles and in the next paragraph he secretly goes up. This seeming paradox is explained by the view that between the statement and the action his Father had shown what he himself was going to do, thus setting Jesus free to act. Such a view would also explain Jesus' selectivity in his ministry both in choosing disciples and in performing miracles: he acted only according to what the

1 2 Cor. 12:9.

2 John 15:5.

3 Luke 18:14, 17.

4 Matt. 5:39ff.

5 Mark 6:8f.

6 Mark 9:35.

7 John 5:19.

Father showed him. Hence, too, his struggle in Gethsemane against what the Father had shown. He had no desire to die horribly, in the prime of life, but the only possible way forward was the way of the Father's will.

Counselling

What has all this to do with counselling? Is it that those who know they are weak come to those who appear to be strong in order to gain strength? If so, then once again we are in the position of avoiding weakness by fleeing back into the safe place of strength and control – not needing others but able to get on with life undisturbed. On this account, Scripture is to be ignored for it doesn't mean what it says and British folk religion has got it right: 'God helps those who help themselves'. In the light of the Incarnation this cannot be.

If weakness is a theological as well as an existential fact, however, we find ourselves asking to whom this truth is relevant. At one level, of course, it applies to all who follow Christ. But in the sphere of counselling we need to ask who, more precisely, comes to the counsellor for help. It is possible to identify a number of categories:

- (a) Those who experience a sudden crisis that makes it hard for them to continue as before (eg, failure in final examinations, death of a close relative).
- (b) Those with a behaviour pattern they are unable to break but want to (eg, anorexia nervosa, excessive drinking, agoraphobia).
- (c) Those who are lonely and want to be loved and valued.
- (d) Those who, in response to a sermon, talk, or book have realised that they are not living as they could be.
- (e) Those who are aware of their own growth as individuals and as Christians but who nevertheless recognise the existence of a block to further growth.
- (f) Those who don't like life the way it is and want to change it.
- (g) Those who have come to please someone else. In this last category will be those who expect the impossible: to alter the pattern of behaviour of a spouse who hasn't come; to provide the mystical key that will make life go smoothly. ('Jesus has the answer' may be true, but is no automatic talisman).

Closely akin to these are the people who seek to get their lives under control so that they can avoid the intervention of others. This raises a radical and difficult question: what right have I as a Christian counsellor to enable another to act out a life of pretence that avoids the pain of exploring the roots of the experience which has sent the individual in search of help in the first place? The psychiatrist in the film *Ordinary People* admitted that he was 'not big on control' when a teenager full of depression and guilt asked him to help get his life under control again. Some who seek control will go to the apparently successful individual, the able preacher who can tidily tie up great truths in readily comprehensible packets, the famous names, the potentially famous, the upwardly mobile clergy man or woman. Some

effectively say, 'I want to be like you, tell me how'. We might be able to give some suggested behaviour changes of a religious kind but they are likely to be of only minor importance.

It was a period of long contact with an emotionally and mentally disturbed woman from an otherwise highly successful middle class family which taught me how foolish my counselling had often been. I had been only too happy to share what had worked for me as a cure-all, a sort of 'if I were in your shoes I would do it like this.' However valid that might have been for me, the truth was that I was never in the shoes of those who sought my help. When Janet asked me how to become a deaconess I suddenly realised that this ludicrous suggestion was neither more nor less ludicrous than some of the counselling I had given. It amounted to nothing more than her response to my setting myself up as an authority and inviting others to copy, or at least to dip into, my 'wisdom'. What I had offered was as inappropriate as Janet's fantasy that she might emulate my career.

Of course there are occasions when it is right and proper to give advice, even to tell people what they need to do. But those occasions are far more rare than many would imagine. The more able I am as a counsellor to see how things ought to be done, the less I dare let myself loose on organising others' lives. Once again it would be a question of the strong using their strength to enable another to be similarly strong or to remain dependent, thus making the choice for the wrong sort of weakness: to remain like a child rather than taking the responsibility of moving on to maturity.

Feebleness

This is the feebleness to which J. I. Packer alludes in his latest popular writing on the western Christian scene:

'The hot tub is the perfect symbol of the modern route to religion. The hot tub experience is sensuous, relaxing, laid-back, not in any way demanding, whether intellectually or otherwise . . . when modern Western man turns to religion what he wants is total tickling relaxation, the senses being at once soothed, supported and effortlessly invigorated . . . if there were no more to our Christianity than hot tub factors – if, that is we embraced a self absorbed hedonism of relaxation and happy feelings, while dodging tough talks, unpopular stances and exhausting relationships – we should fall short of biblical God centredness and the cross-bearing life to which Jesus calls us'¹

Each individual thus needs to work out before God how to move on to maturity in Christ. Above all else it means living in the reality of the sort of person that I am, not what I would like to be or feel I ought to be. This will involve admitting that I need help – a humbling experience. It will often mean getting to know again the 'child' of my past who has been put into the background as no longer relevant, an embarrassment to be forgotten.

1 J. I. Packer, *Laid-back Religion*, Leicester, IVP 1989, pp 46-47.

Because that child and the weakness it represents have been forgotten, she often has an inordinate influence on the adult me. Whether I like it or not, all my past is part of me, as is all my present; and since much counselling in the end amounts to an integrating of past and present, it entails a re-introduction of the 'child' of the past to the adult of the present. In practical terms, this may mean reliving the sense of abandonment as a tiny child in hospital, the turbulence of quarrelling parents in the throes of divorce, the physical violence of a drunken parent or the sexual abuse of a lonely single relative. In all of these the child was utterly weak and helpless. In looking again as an adult at what happened, in seeing Jesus through prayer and imagination as present in the ugliness and sin of the past, a right apportioning of guilt and forgiveness can be made. The fearful reactions that have secretly influenced the adult beyond reason can be revealed and self-acceptance can begin.

Such an experience brings weakness to the fore. But if such weakness cannot be looked at but rather has to be denied, there is no way forward. Defensive behaviour in the form of rigidity, aggression or determined self-sufficiency becomes instead all that is kindled: impregnable strength that in reality has no foundation in the liberty and truth won for us by Jesus' openly embraced weakness and vulnerability.

Thus we need to grasp that only by being vulnerable ourselves will others learn to be so with us. Just as important is the fact that in our weakness we will be open to God and more self-integrated. Two passages illustrate this point. The first is by Sheila Cassidy, a doctor in the process of learning through prison in South America and her work in a hospice in South Devon:

'Slowly, as the years go by, I learn about the importance of powerlessness. I experience it in my own life and live with it in my work. The secret is not to be afraid of it – not to run away. The dying know we are not God. They accept that we cannot halt the process of cancer . . . all they ask is that we do not desert them: that we stand our ground at the foot of the cross'.¹

The second comprises a poem by an English Benedictine monk:

Anoint the wounds
of my spirit
with the balm
of forgiveness
Pour the oil
of your calm
Upon the waters
of my heart
Take the squeal
of frustration
from the wheels of my passion

1 Sheila Cassidy, *Sharing the Darkness*, London, DLT 1988, p 32.

that the power
of your tenderness
may smooth
the way I love
That the tedium
of giving
in the risk of surrender
and the reaching
out naked
to a world
that must wound
may be kindled fresh daily
in a blaze of compassion
that the grain may fall gladly
to burst in the ground
and the harvest abound.

If we shrink from accepting such vulnerability both in ourselves and in others we begin to judge the world by the standards of the strong. If, however, we acknowledge the paradoxical relationship of weakness and strength – that weakness can be strength and vice-versa – we stand alongside Paul who by embracing the thorn in his flesh recognised in his vulnerability and weakness a token of the grace which finds its power in the crucified God.

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