

Monday Evening Bible Reading Group: June 27th: 2 Corinthians 11: 21b-33: Some Notes

“I’ll brag about the humiliations that make me like Jesus.” In a way, that one quote says it all. It isn’t unusual for top people to talk about their humble origins and early struggles (if they had any) – not being born with a silver spoon gets you credit from those who might otherwise be more envious than admiring of your current success. Paul’s message is the very different one of on-going hardship and indeed failure as the world would see failure. Paul looks at Jesus the Master naked on the cross of shame, mocked by his enemies, and with few friends visible. So much for the prosperity Gospel! Weakness and Majesty, to quote the hymn...or more or less quote it.

It probably seems odd to us that Paul had to defend his Jewish credentials, but Holy Land Jews were suspicious of Exile Jews. Could the latter speak the current version of proper Hebrew, rather than being Greek speakers? Could they claim pure Jewish parentage? Could they really be “one of us” when not raised within sight of the Temple/sound of Bow Bells?!

Some of the hardship detail bears closer examination to get a grip on the painful reality. Deuteronomy 25: 1-3 stops the flogging just short of 40 lashes, to give an arbitrary barrier to even more deaths by flogging. You were flogged on bare chest and back, and both sides: a long strong leather lash meant to hurt and meant to damage... and not to be done to a Roman citizen such as Paul. Flog first and ask questions later weakened that protection! The rod beating was not a soft option! Roman roads were safer than many roads at that time, but lots of Roman writers bear witness to the common experiences of being attacked, robbed and beaten up. Have you tried sleeping rough with no supper? Acts does not give us all this gory detail, just a sample of it.

Ties sounds like a masochist’s CV... or imagine a travelling preacher job description on these lines. It is also a painful reminder that the God keep me safe prayer sometimes means God give me strength to put up with suffering.

The last bit seems an odd “climax”. Escaping through a wall in a basket isn’t quite as bad as bang flogged nearly to death? Acts 9: 23-25 tells the story. A top Roman award was the Corona Muralis, which was a literal wall-shaped crown for the first soldier up the ladder and over the top into the heavily defended walled city the Romans were besieging. (The Ukraine is giving us a narrative of modern siege warfare.) Paul in his topsy turvy self-defence is awarding himself a humiliating joke crown for the little bald bent man escaping in a basket from the walled city. (Some of these walls were 30 feet thick.) It is a wonderful punch line. His Jewish listeners/readers would remember the spies escaping from Jericho in a slightly less humiliating way after hiding under produce on a prostitute’s roof top. Apparently Paul’s escape place is still shown in Damascus.

Also to think about is the cost of empathy. Paul suffered with those in his churches who were suffering (or failing). Church founders and church pastors are also church carers.

Boasting of weakness is one way of putting it. Maybe another way is the “Daddy sometimes cries too, you know” way of sharing learning. Which might have the edge on “Grown men don’t cry”.