8 July 2018: Choral Eucharist

The Sixth Sunday after Trinity

Psalm 123; Ezekiel 2: 1-5; 2 Corinthians 12: 2-10; Mark 6: 1-13

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‘O mortal, stand up on your feet, and I will speak with you. And when he spoke to me, a spirit entered into me and set me on my feet’ (Ezekiel 2:1)

A video came through on our family WhatsApp group this week. My little niece, Éliza, aged 14 months in the arms of her mother being held up on her feet and coaxed to walk unaided. First she falls flat on her face. Then she gets up and tries again. Her little legs wobble and buckle and nearly give way. And then she strengthens her resolve, looks at her Dad on the other side of the room and takes her first step: one, then another, then another. It was magical to see and she was clearly delighted with herself.

She can now run away from her parents and go and get the toys she wants without having to rely on others.

Learning to walk and move around gives us our first taste of independence. Éliza will become less and less reliant on her parents from this moment on until eventually she will leave home and, as we say ‘stand on her own two feet’.

Independence is something we aspire to but it isn’t the whole story. If I asked you if you prefer to give help or receive help most of you would probably, like me, answer ‘give help’: because it makes us feel good, but also if we are honest we know that by giving we aren’t displaying weakness. And most of us, if we are honest once again, don’t like to be weak. We certainly don’t like to be reliant on others.

A whole self-help industry has sprung up with endless books and podcasts which teach us how to be self-reliant. But the thread which connects all three of our readings this morning is in fact weakness and reliance. It seems that the uncomfortable prerequisites of Christian discipleship is to be both weak and reliant.

In our readings weakness comes in various different forms.
Ezekiel the prophet is literally lying prostrate on the ground having had a vision of God. He is flat on his face – the weakest and most vulnerable posture possible. He is to be sent to proclaim a message to the people to turn from their ways of injustice back to the Lord. And he’s overwhelmed with awe in the presence of God; and no doubt fearful that he is expected to deliver this message.

He is commanded to get up onto his feet ‘mortal, stand up on your feet’, is filled with the Spirit, and instructed to speak the truth whether or not those who hear take any heed or not. (Ezekiel 2:1-5)

This is the weakness we might feel when we know we have to speak up for something we believe in; when we speak truth to power but we don’t know if we will be believed or taken seriously. It is the weakness we feel when we have to stand up for what we know to be right even if we fear we’ll receive abuse for it.

I have been reading Vicky Beeching’s book ‘Undivided’ this week (Beeching, 2018) – a biographical book about her experience as a gay Christian woman who eventually stands up and tells the truth about herself and shines a light on the injustice done to LGBTQ+ people over the years by the Church. It’s a book of great courage and I believe she, amongst others, is a prophetic voice in the Church today. For her this strength to speak up only came when she literally couldn’t continue in a lie anymore and her body collapsed.

St Paul boasts of his weakness (our second reading). He complains of a thorn in his flesh which he’s asked to be taken away three times but which remains. We don’t know what this is but can assume it’s some kind of physical ailment or disability. The word Paul uses for weakness (astheneia), coming undone – ‘sthen’ means holding together and so astheneia is the converse – coming undone, coming apart.

In the KJV of the Bible Isaiah cries out ‘Woe is me, for I am undone’.

It’s hard to describe but we know it when we experience it.

This is the weakness when we realise our own mortality. Or the mortality of our loved ones. The weakness that comes when we fall in love and realise we can’t live without another person in our lives. When it feels we are physically falling apart, unravelling, becoming undone.

Paul says: ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness…for whenever I am weak, then I am strong’.
For Paul this is precisely when he is strong, because it is then that God’s power is most manifest in his life. Why? Perhaps because it’s only then that he has to stop relying on himself and begins to rely on God and on others.

And so to the gospel reading. Jesus finds himself weak and powerless in his hometown. He’s ridiculed – ‘Is this not the carpenter?’

He’s dishonoured.

In Mark’s gospel this is the moment that Jesus’ weakness begins to manifest.

And his reaction? He moves on. And he gathers his followers around him and sends them out telling them to be purposefully weak – ‘take nothing for the journey, no bread, no bag, no money’. They are to go in pairs and rely on the hospitality of others. They are to be utterly dependent.

I used to work for a charity working with homeless young people as a resettlement worker and one of my jobs was to help people move from the streets into permanent accommodation. We used to have to fill out an Independent Living Assessment Form to assess if people were able to live on their own. The charity was based near Trafalgar Square but the flats were on the edge of the City.

There was a young man called Bill who we moved from the streets into a lovely new flat in Haringey. But after 6 months he left and moved back into the hostel. When asked why he told me because he missed the community of those on the streets. He said that there he could help others and he also knew where to go to be helped. In his flat he felt he was independent but utterly alone.

We are not meant to be alone. We are built for community.

To need and be needed.

To know and be known. To love and be loved.

So often it is when we recognise our weakness and brokenness that we begin to realise our need for God, for one another.

Richard Rohr says:

‘Good powerlessness (because there is bad powerlessness – that which is enforced upon another person by coercion and control) allows you to ‘fall into the hands of God’ (Hebrews 10:31). You stop holding yourself up, so you can be held. There, wonderfully, you are not in control and only God needs to be right…..Faith can happen in that very
special threshold space. You don’t really do faith, it happens to you when you give up control’.viii

And conversely it is then that we are strong.

Let’s think back to the image of little Éliza taking her first steps. She steps out in faith knowing that her Daddy will be there to catch her and gather him in his arms.

This is the faith of Ezekiel, St Paul, the disciples of Jesus, Vicky Beeching.

They could endure weakness, speak up and step out with courage because they knew they were not alone. They knew they were being supported, empowered and held by a loving father who gave them strength. And that they had a community alongside them.

Perhaps it is the same for us.

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i Vicky Beeching, Undivided, 2018 (William Collins)
ii 2 Corinthians 12:8
iv Isaiah 6:5
v 2 Corinthians 12:9
vi Mark 6:3
vii Mark 6: 7-10
viii Richard Rohr, Yes, and…, Daily Meditations, 2013