



Treasure in Earthen Vessels

An address for the Cosmic Mass ● 6th July 2008 ● Rev Heather

Another parable he put before them, saying, "The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed which a man took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches." He told them another parable. "The kingdom of heaven is like leaven which a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened."

Matthew 13: 31-33

*For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. **But we have this treasure in earthen vessels**, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us.*

2 Corinthians 4:6-7

The picture we hold within us of the human being affects the way we are and the way we relate to one another. Through the month of June, our Leunig calendar has had a cartoon of two men standing at a bar. One asks the other the fundamental question: *Are humans basically wicked, stupid, hostile and conceited?* To this, the other replies: *I'm not, but I sincerely believe that you are.*

If we see others as wicked, stupid and hostile, that is going to influence the way we relate to them. We will treat them with caution, distrust and even contempt.

If we see ourselves and others as rather like robots, responding to input from external sources, then that means we can put all the blame for our difficulties on those outside influences. We can claim not to have control of our lives. We are in the hands of "others" – employers, family, God, karma, destiny, fate, extra-terrestrials even.

It is another thing altogether to have a picture of ourselves and of others as unique spiritual beings who are always growing and changing. A picture like that means that we value ourselves and others and our ongoing life journeys.

In Paul's letter to the Corinthians he gives us one such pictures It is essentially very simple: "We have this treasure in earthen vessels". That is an image to hold within us: "treasure in an earthen vessel".

The Treasure

There are two parts to the image. There is a treasure and there is an earthen vessel. The treasure, Paul says, is that "God has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ." When I hear or read that statement it stirs me. It lifts us up. It speaks to us. It fills us.

And then when our feeling levels have been raised up, we ask, "What does it mean?"

“God has shone in our hearts.” That is the first thing. Our hearts have been illuminated, enlightened, by the action of God. At the core of our being there is light and warmth.

And that light is “the knowledge of the glory of God”. To know the glory of God is not a concept, it is an experience. We stand before a magnificent landscape and we say, “Isn’t that glorious!” We experience it as full of glory – the glory of the God who created it.

In our Mass, the word “glory” is used a number of times:

Glorify us with the glory we had when we dwelt with you

Heaven and earth are full of your glory

Glory be to you, O Lord most high

The glory of the Spirit now fills your whole being.

We have seen his glory, glory as of the only son from the Father.

Paul echoes John when he says that we know the glory of God in the face of Christ. Through Christ, we have come to know what God is like.

One of meanings my dictionary gives for glory is the “effulgence of heavenly light”. Isn’t effulgence a wonderful word! Glory is the effulgence or radiance of heavenly light.

This is the treasure we have within us. We might call it by different names. We might call it “the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ”, as Paul does. Or we might call it “the revelation of our divine self” or “the revelation of the I Am”, or “the revelation of Christ.” Whatever we call it, this revelation is a light within us.

It makes us know that we are not robots or earthbound creatures. . There is a life and a light at the heart of us. We have a heavenly dimension. The light of God is in us. Christ is in us. That is the treasure entrusted to us..

The Earthen Vessel

The second part of the image is the earthen vessel. That is where the treasure is kept - not in a bank vault or in a casket of precious metal, but in an earthen vessel. Not a very suitable container for a treasure, we might think. An earthenware container is easily broken. It may be quite plain in appearance and is not of great value. And yet, this is where God has placed this great treasure – in earthen vessels.

At times we are aware of the earthen part of us, especially when we make a mess of things. We act as if there were no treasure in us, as if we were worthless – a plain vessel of little value.

Jewish law makes a distinction between vessels made of earthenware and those of different materials. It says that "every earthen vessel into which any thing impure falls shall be unclean." So if any source of impurity comes within the inside of a vessel made of earthenware, the vessel becomes impure. But if the impurity touches the outside of the vessel, the purity of the vessel is not affected.

The opposite is true of vessels of other material. If something impure is inside them, the vessel does not become impure, unless it touches the vessel itself. This shows that the utensil made of earthenware has value when it is used as a container. Vessels of more valuable material have value in themselves. An earthen vessel is valuable because of what it contains, what is within our souls.

It is a wonderful thing to be an earthen vessel as Paul describes it. We are here on this earth, and we keep coming back to this earth, because this is where the light of the glory of God within us can increase. This is where we can develop our relationship with our I AM.

Shaping our Vessel

If you are a potter, or if you have watched a potter at work, you will know how much care goes into the shaping of a piece. If it is to be used for a particular purpose, then it needs to be the right shape. You don't want a coffee mug with a mouth so wide that the coffee runs down the side of your mouth, or a jar with a neck so narrow that you can't get anything into it. Just so, we want this earthen vessel that we are to be a suitable vessel to bear the light.

We probably all have different ideas about what treasure in an earthen vessel looks like. Perhaps for you it is a clay pot in which a treasure has been hidden, rather like an elegant piggy bank. Perhaps it is a bowl in which treasure is displayed. I think of it as like an eastern lamp - a flattish earthenware bowl with a spout at one end, like the one on the front of the songsheet. The bowl of these lamps was filled with oil, and a wick placed in the spout. As the oil flowed into the wick, so the light shone out.

Well, that is a great image of our being to keep uppermost within us - an earthen vessel, a being of fragility but also of great destiny, containing the light of life itself.

Our lives are a process of shaping this earthen vessel. Through our karma we confront the bits of us that are misshapen, or that are superfluous, or where there are gaps in our understanding and development. The more we co-operate by learning what we need to learn through our experiences, the more useful vessel we become.

Treasure in an Earthen Vessel

We are not just an earthen vessel. We are not just knowers of the glory of God. We are both. And at St John's Tide we explored the metaphysical principle that To be fully human is to be divine and to be divine is to be fully human.

When I was looking on the Internet for a picture of a lamp from biblical times, there were a number that were of empty lamps. And they had no life. But the lamps with a light shining from them attracted my attention. There was something alive about them. A lamp without light is not fulfilling its purpose. A vessel that contains nothing is not fulfilling its purpose.

A Transformed Vessel

St Paul had something more to say about vessels in his letter to Timothy. He said that in a household there are many vessels - we would call them containers. Just think about your own house for a minute. You have plastic containers and glass containers and wooden containers and maybe silver containers and brass containers and pottery containers and china containers and so on. Many different kinds with many different purposes: as Paul said, some for noble use - like holding your jewels - and some for holding the leftovers.

Paul says that if we purify ourselves, we will be able to be used for the highest purposes. We will become vessels for noble use.

A Vessel for Noble Use

At the end of our service, the priest says, "The glory of the spirit now fills your whole being," and we respond "And is magnified through us." That is the image of a treasure in earthen vessels.

So if we are aware of our earthiness, our fragility and our capacity for fragmentation, let us also be aware of the purpose of our existence: that within our mortal clay, as they used to call it, Christ dwells.

Though we may be of many different shapes - and we certainly are - that does not matter. What does matter is that all of us have within us a great treasure. The light that burns in all of us has the one source; it came to earth with the Sun being, Christ; it has entered into the earth and into us.

Let us recognise that treasure within ourselves and within one another and let us make it known through our lives.

So shall it be

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