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## STRENGTH IN WEAKNESS

What does it mean to be a mature Christian? I suppose there are many answers to that question.

Surely to be a mature Christian means that we know the Lord personally, and not just that we know about him. And that we are devoted to him, that we love him, first of all, or as much as we can with what we know of ourselves, which is most often not all we need to know, such love is the mark of a Christian. To know the Lord personally and to love him devotedly, these are surely indispensable attributes of a Christian.

But this is to look at the question from the point of view of spiritual activity. This is to see how we are when we are on the road of living the best we can by faith, and hope, and charity. And yet there is another mark, a quality, a sign that attends both our knowledge and our love. It is the mark of weakness.

The Christian is who he is by the grace of Jesus Christ. And while we who believe in him rejoice that we are made new, we also know that things remain in us which beset us. Blessed William used to refer to himself as an "attempting Christian," far from the perfection of the Lord whom he served. But in this William, and we all, are aware not just of imperfection but of flaws and weakness that stick with us.

In the ancient world, the man of virtue was a man of strength. The first and basic virtue on which all other virtue was built was courage. Without courage one could not fight against the enemy, whether it was a personal enemy, like an addiction, or a national one, like terrorism. Temperance, the virtue which measured things, like food and drink, required courage to act contrary to the insatiable wants of appetite. Temperance in turn needed prudence to know just what might be excessive and unacceptable, and what was moderate and healthful. Justice was the culminating virtue that held all of these together in a cooperative balance. The man who could attain this excellence in virtue was called the magnanimous man, the great-souled man. He was in character and disposition a man of strength.

The Christian Church has taken this idea of natural virtue and included it in another scheme. The natural virtues are taken up into the theological ones of faith, hope, and charity, and at least from the twelfth century, the connection of the natural virtues to the theological ones was made by the virtue of humility. This can be seen on the

famous bronze doors of the Baptistery in Florence and on the floor of the chancel in the Cathedral at Christ Church, Oxford. In order to get from justice to faith one needs humility.

In other words, the great-souled man is invariably open to the assault of spiritual pride. He needs humility if he is to come to Jesus.

St. Paul suffered from a besetting weakness. We do not know what it was but it may very well have been a most heinous case of pride. He had built his entire life on being a Jew, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Pharisee. And as a Christian, he had been given a vision, "caught up to the third heaven" (II Corinthians 12:2). Perhaps that gift of vision had become for him a means of pride all over again.

Whatever the case may have been, Paul had a weakness which he suffered with all his life. He agonized over it and prayed about it, and the answer to his prayer was not an instantaneous healing, but the grace of Jesus Christ. "For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me. And he said unto me, 'My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness'" (II Corinthians 12:8, 9).

This then is surely also a mark of the Christian. God's strength is made perfect in our weakness. The almighty and merciful Lord takes what are the flaws and weaknesses of our lives, and pours his grace upon them. In the end God is glorified because he has made us acceptable to him by his grace. It is not what we do, or how we are, that finally makes us acceptable to God. It is the power of his grace.

And so it should be with all of us toward each other. I have a passionate nature, an above-average intellect, and the disposition of a Southern male. The negative side of this results in a quick temper. Others of you have other weaknesses. I leave that to your own conscience. The worst is spiritual pride. But whatever it may be for you and me, the one fact of the grace of Jesus Christ is sufficient for us all. If God can make his strength known to us through our weakness, then we too can look with graceful compassion upon our fellow churchmen. Otherwise we make ourselves to be puffed up, presumptuous judges, and there is no health in that.

It is God who pours upon us his grace. He does this out of his great wisdom and power and love. And by an amazing quality of his nature God does this by his own humility.

The season that follows upon Advent is full of humility. God sends his Son to take our weakness upon him.

At first it is the weakness of our nature, not our sinfulness, but the fact that we are finite creatures, subject to the chances and changes of this mortal life. Jesus is born as a human infant, which means he was born without language. The Eternal Word, through whom all things came into being, took our fragile state, without language, full of dependence, that he might live a fully human life like you and me. At his birth there would be no place for him to rest but in the manger of common animals, indeed beasts of burden.

This humble beginning for Jesus would live out a full life until he took another form of our weakness. When he ascended the cross and took

the penalty of the sins of the whole world, he who knew no sin became the locus of sin's consequence. By the great strength of his sacrificial love, he made our weakness into an avenue for God's grace. And that is for us now a mark of what it means to be a Christian. Our weakness is made the avenue for God's grace. He has turned the fact of our sin into the possibility of new life in what is good, and true, and beautiful. Let us do the same for one another.

**The Rev'd. Dr. Michael L. Carreker**

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