

Sermon: 5th February

1 Cor: 2: 1-end; Matthew 5: 13-20

“GOD NEEDS US...”

The other night I saw a production of Peter Schaeffer’s “Amadeus” broadcast live from the National Theatre in London. If you saw the film years ago, you’ll remember how the story is told by Mozart’s rival, Antonio Salieri (who confesses that he was responsible for Mozart’s downfall and even his death). As an old man he recalls how he had dedicated himself to God almost as a bargain, offering his life in harsh self-discipline and purity so that he could be the great composer he aspired to be.

Only when he hears the sublime music of Mozart for the first time he knows that God has not kept his side of the bargain, at least not as Salieri understood it. “I am condemned to be mediocre”, he laments, and he curses God and vows to take his revenge *on God through Mozart*.

But in his anguish, in a moment of real understanding and insight, he says: “God needed Mozart to let himself into the world”.

Poor Salieri, if only he’d realised that God needed Salieri too to let himself into the world. And you, and me. Salieri sees Mozart absolutely shining and he can hardly bear it. But God asks all of us to shine. You are the light of the world, says Jesus. A city set on a hill. Whether prodigiously gifted in some way that makes you famous, or humble and unknown except to people who know and love you, it doesn’t matter. We’re all called to shine – no exceptions.

And this is something Paul understands only too well. Cranky, crabby, argumentative Paul who endlessly gets himself into trouble. He’s not an easy person to know, kind of high maintenance we would say today. But he is very aware of his own human frailties. Remember: “Wretched man that I am, who will save me from this body of death, for I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. But, thanks be to God who gives me the victory through Jesus Christ”.

So this is the man who approaches the Corinthians “in weakness and in fear and in much trembling”. In his struggles he asks God, as we all do, to take his struggle away, his thorn in the flesh as he calls it. “Three times I besought the Lord about this, that it should leave me, but he said to me ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’”

Now that isn’t an answer that would have satisfied Salieri, who wanted to shine with a brilliance that would outshine everyone else.

And Paul could have been a Jewish Salieri, if you like. The toast of Jerusalem, the favoured agent of the pharisees with a stellar career policing for the religious institution.

He had a great future, this smart young Pharisee from Tarsus. So on that Damascus Road where Jesus turns Paul's life upside down, the very one he was persecuting, when he was so sure he was right, maybe Paul could have cursed God for deceiving him.

But instead, almost like hearing Mozart's music for the first time but with a very different reaction, Paul's response is absolute wonder and absolute love. This will be his Gospel. This is how he knows that God's grace is sufficient.

So to the Corinthians he passes on the wisdom of strength made perfect in weakness. He knows himself far too well to preach himself. Who would he preach but the Jesus Christ whom he loves, who lives in him – weak and flawed as he is – and who was broken on the Cross so that in our brokenness, yours and mine, in our weakness we can look to the cross as the source of our hope and even our joy.

So can we begin to see what Paul saw? Because he pours his heart out to show us: "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" he asks. "No, I am sure that in all these things – all that life can throw at us – we are more than conquerors through him who loved us". He sees and he preaches this Jesus who is so united with him that he can say: "It is no longer I that lives, but Christ lives in me".

And why does he live in us, in you and me? So that we can know the glorious freedom of the children of God. So, he tells the Galatians, do not, under any circumstances submit to any kind of yoke of slavery – think of all those addictive behaviours we all have, our default patterns of anger or resentment, or jealousy, or despair over ourselves, those dark places we go to when life is tough or we're lonely or sad. If we can hear again the truth that the living Christ is calling us back into light, if we can hear the Gospel as if we were the first Corinthian Paul converted, how wonderful that would be.

New life, and Jesus in you, and Jesus in me, all our hope, for all of us. That's the promise. And it is the promise of a new life of which we are charged, in all our weakness, to be untiring heralds, loving messengers, each in our own way. God needed Mozart to let himself into the world. God needed Paul to let himself into the world. God needs you to let himself into the world. He just needs us to say "Yes."