



SERMON - Trinity 1 2024 a.m. Sermon - **Jars of Clay to Lamps of Fire! - 2 Cor. 4; 5-12**

On a table at the front of the church - A Book, a fossil and some broken pottery that came out of my garden and from the corner of the church grounds...

I love books! I have far too many and cannot resist a wander around a proper book-shop - especially a second-hand bookshop - or a book sale. It was in one of those book sales that I saw advertised down in Cambridge that lured me to see what I might find in the sale of the whole library of one of the College Dons. I came away lighter of pocket but well pleased with my finds! Amongst them was one book in particular - an anthology of religious texts chosen by Juan Mascaró, who was one of the last century's foremost translators of such texts and who settled in Cambridge after a quite exciting life. The book is a first edition - actually an Author's Edition of just 200 and is signed as a gift by the author to one Dr F Brittain of Cambridge, whose library I was raiding. Juan also gave one to someone called George Harrison, suggesting that as inspiration for a song Harrison might use one of the entries in 'Lamps of Fire' called 'The Inner Light' which, is all very interesting, but it is simply the title of the book that I want you to remember for now - 'Lamps of Fire'

Mascaró explains his selections in a preface where he maintains that all the passages are lamps of fire that all merge into what John of the Cross called *"the lamp of the being of God"*

One of the most common finds in archeological digs in the Middle East and indeed, even as far as outposts of the Roman Empire like the UK, are Clay Jars. They turn up everywhere. They were, for food at least, and occasionally for hoards of Silver and Gold, the go-to transportation container for centuries, including the era of the Roman Empire. Many are what we know as 'Amphora' - the classic shaped clay jar with a narrowish neck used for transporting Wine and Olive Oil, the Olives themselves and much else around the Empire from their regions of production. These Amphora followed the Roman Armies around everywhere they went, bringing a taste of home to those soldiers and others living in damp, cold, grey Britain, and through subtle changes over the year in shape and even their maker's or exporter's name stamped into the soft clay, the Archeologist loves them as a source of accurate dating of other finds in the same layer of buried history.

Today we are practically knee deep in plastic waste everywhere we look. Our beaches, the ditches around our fields and the corners of my front garden seem perpetually to collect more and more plastic rubbish and it does not weather or dissolve or rot so unless we collect it to recycle it then it just hangs around - {we should be looking at how we use such plastics as a matter of urgency - just look at your bins as you put them out for emptying and see how much is plastic and not recyclable! - but I digress!} . In Roman times (and for many centuries before or since), what was clogging up the same spaces around the towns and cities was broken pottery! In places there are significant mounds (Hills!) of the stuff to be found outside the great cities like Rome, and those deposits too are sifted through by historians and archeologists for the data they contain about everyday life long ago.

Those days were the days of Paul and the others with him as he travelled around much of the Mediterranean on his Missionary Journeys, often in trading ships whose holds may well have contained many such Amphora, and then in those places just outside the cities he visited where he went to find those groups of people who gathered there for prayer, there may well have been one of those mounds of shattered shards or 'Potsherds' of mainly terracotta red-brown.

I say all this to underline just how everyday and common those 'Jars of Clay' that Paul mentions were in his day! I suspect that in every household in the Empire there was a broken clay pot to be disposed of every day. Accidentally dropped or cracked by a cooking-fire's heat or simply discarded when too battered or soiled for use - there were millions of them, and millions more were pouring out of the Potter's workshops and factories... - So, when Paul looks for a metaphor with which to highlight the contrast between the wondrous treasure that is God's Salvation in Christ that He invests in our brief lives and the prosaic, everyday-ness and the fleeting shortness of those lives, he turns to that most ubiquitous of all receptacles of his day - he turns to the common Clay Pot!

But Paul does not do so as to belittle either himself or his readers! He is not saying that in God's eyes we are valued as little as would be a broken clay-pot! There was another clay-pot or 'Earthen Vessel' as the King James Version of the Bible puts it, that was as common and everyday as the Amphora - The ubiquitous Oil Lamp! They also were everywhere in Paul's day. Simple little clay

vessels, usually with a handle to put your finger through for carrying them, and then one or two wicks to burn the oil (olive oil of course) and so produce light. There would almost certainly have been at least one on the very table where Paul sat as he dictated his letter to his scribe!

And when you read carefully what we read this morning you realise that Paul has both vessels - Oil-Lamp and Amphora in mind! And the 'Treasure' is not gold or silver, or fine-wines or fragrant Olive Oil from the very best groves in Italy No! Paul's treasure is the very Light of Christ that God makes to shine out of our lives. God entrusts this precious light - God's very Glory displayed in the face of His Son, His Christ and our Saviour! - He entrusts this to us - to you and me and millions of other ordinary folk!

The thing about such an oil-lamp is that the vessel itself has little or no value! They were quite literally 'ten-a-penny' items. True, in upper-class families there would be examples far more ornate and made from precious metals, but in every case the real treasure was and is the light that the flame burning the oil gives. This light enabled the darkness of night to become useful time. Their purpose was always to bring light to dark places! - to reveal faces, make known the unseen and banish shadows of obscurity.

What God planned from the beginning of time and revealed to us in His Son, Jesus and His Death and Resurrection is a great treasure! And by placing that treasure (the very real Life of Christ - God's eternal gift to His children!) - into our hearts of clay - into our worthless and fragile beings - and in so doing He tells us and the whole world that far from worthless, we are all precious in His sight!

So when Paul tells his readers that 'We have this treasure in in Jars of Clay' the treasure is indeed the light of the Gospel of Christ - the very glory of God - displayed in the Face of Jesus!' And it is what is contained inside that makes the container precious! By entrusting His Own Glory to our Jars of Clay He makes them precious and gives them purpose. Yes, that fired clay is still just that - brittle, fragile, ephemeral and of no intrinsic value, especially if shattered to shards - but what it contains - what it is entrusted to contain - the very Glory of God - the very brightness of which obscures and hides from sight the lamp itself, but this is what the Lamp was made for! It is its very purpose and reason for being - to display and demonstrate in our lives the all-surpassing power of God, and wonder of His Love for us! As He pours Himself into us

we are transformed from 'Pots of Clay' and 'Earthen Vessels, into 'Lamps of Fire'! **AMEN**