

It is not unusual to be asked at a job interview 'what are your weaknesses'. I was asked the very question when interviewed for this job. I can't remember what I actually said. An inability to resist the plaintive cries of chocolate 'eat me, eat all of me, in one go, now'? The ease with which a shiba inu can twist me round its cute little furry finger to get anything it wants- it really does deserve it after all, look how pretty it is? Lewis Tan, any of the preceding reasons. They might have been shortcomings to have been shared with the panel but definitely weren't; however, though I have suppressed the traumatic memory of that grilling in a windowless room in the Cathedral, I'm sure the answer I gave when asked about my weaknesses was true, if not exactly comprehensive. Those of you who've been watching me these past eight years could almost certainly give a much fuller answer than I gave that day; indeed I'm sure if you've just wandered in after a fruitless search of the churchyard for Jeff Beck's grave, hoping the coffee shop was open today and we're too embarrassed to turn round again when it turned out not to be, even you could give a longer list of my faults and failings. Not because I'm not self aware; I'm all too aware of my imperfections; but because there's no point giving a fully comprehensive answer in this context to this question, because when an interviewer asks what your weaknesses are it's not an invitation to the confessional, even if the questioner is a bishop, and archdeacon or a dean. It's not, definitely not, an invite to be brutally honest. Nobody's stomach is that strong. It's just a way to distinguish you from other interviewees, another hoop jump through, a ball to balance on your nose while you clap your hands. Like much else about interviews, it's about performance not reality. If at every interview the question 'what are your weaknesses' was answered fully, well interviews would last several days for each candidate all of who would be unsuccessful and the unemployment rate - for clergy at least- would be close to 100 per cent.

So far, so HR. There is a possibility though, that I haven't entertained maybe because of the championship level of cynicism I have reached after 20 years interacting with the bureaucracy of the Church of England, a possibility I might consider if I were still an infatuated ingenue rather than a grizzled grouch; a possibility which, if we were getting the whole Jesus thing right really might actually be the case, a possibility that would cause us to throw the whole managerialism business culture human resources speak out the window, and that possibility would be that the question about weaknesses is a crucial one for Christians to ask because, when it comes to deciding who to choose for a rôle in our faith, it really should be the weakest candidate that get's the gig.

*I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling.*

*God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong;*

Not my words, obviously, but St Paul's: and not just talking about formal ministries but applied to all who would follow Jesus. Where now muscular christianity?

God loves us. If there is one message and one message only to take from Christianity that is it. It is the bedrock nature of the relationship between divinity and humanity. And God does not love us in spite of our weaknesses, but because of them. Out of weakness and failures are new beginnings made, out of weakness are the strong shamed, out of weakness, mistakes and failures does wisdom grow; in all our weakness, out of our weakness, love for God grows.

Survival of the fittest, when the going gets tough, the tough get going, only the strong survive: strength is the law of the jungle, not the law of God. When God created you, he made you weak; warts and all, and he looked at what he made and said that it was good.

Man does not live by bread alone; and nor does he succeed by his own strength. You are not strong enough. You need God.

*Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit.*

More words of St Paul. Why you might ask, would a strong person need breastplates and armour, shields and swords? The answer is: You are weak: that is why you put on the armour, the shield, the breastplate.

We are not strong enough. We need God. *And*. We need each other.

There is a strong culture in certain parts of our faith to talk about a personal relationship with God. It is indeed true that the incarnation of God in Jesus allows us to approach the ineffable, unknowable divine, the transcendent reality of heaven, allows us to approach the unapproachable on our own level: as we would approach

any other human person. That much is true. But there is a real danger here of thinking that what the Christian faith is all about is the *individual*, that it's all about our own salvation, all about our own weaknesses, all about our own sins.

But. It isn't. It's not about your personal failings or your personal virtues. It's not all about you. Because if it's about you, your inadequacies, your weaknesses, your sins and personal failings, then you can never, ever succeed. None of us can. Ever.

And then Heaven is empty of humanity.

Even Jesus is absent from the pearly realms.

*The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.*

It was weak for Jesus, and it is weak for us. Always was, always will be.

There's a very telling episode recounted in the gospels where a rich young man comes up to Jesus and asks him:

What must *I* do to have eternal life?

Subtext: (It's all about me)

'Keep the commandments' Jesus answers

Somewhat presumptively perhaps, the man responds 'I have', to which Jesus replies 'Sell your possessions, give the money to the poor and follow me'.

So, the ten commandments. I'll assume you know at least vaguely what they are: not stealing, murdering, coveting etc. None of them are about the self: they are all about relationships, with God or other people. If there was just you in the universe, you couldn't break any of the ten commandments. If there was just you and God, you could only break some of them. The commandments are not about you or better, they are about you only insofar as you relate to somebody else.

Our young man has, or at least thinks he has, ticked that box. But still, he is rich. Individuals are not wealthy in isolation. He has more because others have less, so Jesus's next requirement is, just like the commandments, for the young man to bring his relations with others into a way that better reflects the love of God.

We know the denouement of the tale: the rich young man cannot give away his possessions- for all the good intentions, it is all about him. God still loves the rich young man, of course, for all his weakness, and wealth really is a weakness. The trick of money is it makes its possessor feel powerful, important, strong, while making its owners powerless slaves.

So, let's recapitulate.

We are weak. God knows this: it's how he made us. And He works not around our weakness but with it.

Christianity is not about how 'good' individuals are. We cannot be good, only God is. Christianity is not about my personal piety, it is about justice. mercy, compassion; how we treat each other.

It's not all about you. What a relief.

We are weak. But when we trust in God and love each other, we gain the strength we cannot possess on our own.

*God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong;*