

28TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME – YEAR A (2026)

Over the past few months, I've noticed something that was undoubtedly there before, but is equally undoubtedly rising in prevalence: the public use of the Bible reference 'Phil. 4: 13'. Ranging from wristbands for footballers and customised gym-wear to it being the sole descriptor on an influencer's Instagram profile, the use of S. Paul's words from today's Epistle, 'I can do all things through him who strengthens me', not only witness to an individual's Christian faith; but also act as a reminder to secular modernity that, beyond the visible and tangible of this material world is the realm of the spiritual, which we, as individuals and a society, ignore at our peril. And, whilst not seeking to impugn those who proudly witness to this truth by using 'Phil. 4: 13' on their clothing or social media profiles, I suspect that their confidence in God's power to strengthen them is not necessarily focussed on societal transformation, but on the footballer scoring the winning goal, the gym-bro bench-pressing his own weight in iron, and the influencer influencing more effectively, and attracting ever-more followers. There's nothing wrong with any of that, of course; but I have a hunch that S. Paul had no such things in mind when he first penned those words; save, of course, his desiring to influence more people to follow not him, but Jesus Christ.

S. Paul's Letter to the Philippians is pretty standard fare: exhorting the Christians of Philippi to beware false teachers, and to check the ubiquitous sin of pride, this Epistle continues to remind the Church to expect hardship and suffering in the

face of the proclamation of the Gospel; and to counsel Christians that the only status that matters in God's eyes is that we are all his beloved children, equal in dignity and worth, created in his image of love, and made heirs of his Kingdom through baptism into his Church. It was in this context that S. Paul wrote those words, 'I can do all things through him who strengthens me'; so, what did he mean by them, and what might they mean for us today?

What is clear is that, in his immediate context, Paul meant what he said: 'In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me'. Here, he was stating his complete reliance on Jesus Christ; that, in whatever situation he found himself, he drew his spiritual strength and wisdom from God. This would have contrasted markedly with contemporary Stoics, Greek philosophers, whose wisdom was believed to come from themselves; and thus, in ascribing his strength to God, Paul was setting Christianity apart from pagan philosophy, and establishing the theological principle that humanity can do nothing of true worth without reference to God; just as it is only in co-operation with the divine that life can be transformed for the better. Because the Greek word that we usually translate as 'strengthen' here actually means something more like 'empower'; and, understood in this way, we can see that Paul means that he is powerless without Jesus; and that Christians should understand ourselves so to be, in order that we, like S. Paul, might depend ever-more fully on God.

But, of course, none of us likes to be or to feel powerless: we all, to varying degrees, want and need to be in control of our lives, and to exercise what agency we have with free will. And one of the great lessons of the spiritual life is learning to inhabit the paradox that demands that, in order to be truly free, we must relinquish our autonomy – life in Christ is lived within purposeful, protective parameters, and is not an unbridled, infinite licence to do whatever human desire dictates. Likewise, in acknowledging our powerlessness without his grace, we quell our pride, and open ourselves to a deeper relationship with God, whose power is perfected in our weakness, and turns anxiety to peace. We who, as the Prayer Book puts it, ‘have no power of ourselves to help ourselves’ can only wait upon God, and must trust in him alone to heal and to save.

And this is what it means to appropriate those words, ‘I can do all things through him who strengthens me’, for ourselves: whether we emblazon our clothing with ‘Phil. 4: 13’ or simply keep them as our watchword, they challenge us to require our faith to make a real difference to our lives, to have confidence in the supernatural power of God’s grace, and to expect more of Jesus – whose infinite power we so often minimise and domesticate, but whose Cross and resurrection are the only truly reliable source of all strength, victory, and hope. So, may we be more audacious in claiming Christ’s power for our spiritual battle; and may we use his grace to witness to the truth behind ‘Phil. 4: 13’ – that all things are indeed possible with God; but only when our egos stop getting in his way. Amen.