

Amphorae (Am-fur-ee). They were the mass-market beverage containers of the ancient world -- distinctive, two-handled clay jars used by Greek and Roman merchants to transport wine. Some amphorae were glazed and intricately decorated, intended for use by the upper class. Most were not, having been fashioned from plebeian red clay.

The typical amphora, when full, weighed about 100 pounds. Sailors would stack them by the dozens in the holds of their ships, lacing ropes through the twin handles to stabilize them in rough seas. Once the amphorae had been delivered to their destination and their contents consumed, no one bothered shipping the empties back to their point of origin. It wasn't economical to do so: amphorae were cheap and plentiful. It was easier just to smash them.

There's a hill in Rome, near the River Tiber, called Monte Testaccio. It's more than 100 feet high and nearly a kilometer in circumference. It's not a natural hill at all. It's an ancient trash heap, composed of the fragments of nearly 53 million amphorae! That's a lot of wine.

Of course, that was then. And now, some of you might remember the role that Coke bottles have played in the 20th century. Those thick-bottomed, green-glass containers, with their iconic shape, used to be everywhere. Of course, Green Coke bottles, like Amphorae, are mostly artifacts of the past. Beverages today are far more likely to arrive in clear plastic bottles, either the common 2-liter size often used for soft drinks or the smaller, individually packaged 12 to 16 ounce bottles which often hold water. And whether composed of the red clay of the ancient world, the glass of the 20th century, or the polyethylene bottles of the 21st century, disposable beverage containers have long been with us.

While some people have found different uses for the containers themselves, it's usually the contents within them that hold the most interest. In fact, in our second lesson this morning, it's surely a disposable beverage container -- an

amphora -- Paul has in mind as he writes, "But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us."

Being that Corinth was a major port, undoubtedly the wharves of its harbor were stacked high with hundreds, even thousands, of amphorae waiting to be loaded onto ships. We can imagine the apostle remembering that distinctive sight as he writes to the Corinthians. It's a visual aid they know well. Ancient amphorae held treasure indeed; for wine, to the people of the Roman Empire, was more than merely a beverage. It was liquid wealth.

Think of the dilemma faced by ancient vineyard owners. Their crop was fragile and highly perishable. Grapes couldn't travel far. Today we don't have that problem. Like many other forms of agricultural produce, bunches of grapes can be shipped around the world in refrigerated cargo ships, trucks, rail cars, and airplanes. But that wasn't an option for the ancients. The solution was to stomp their grapes into a pulp, let the juice drip down into collection vats and then ferment it. Wine is, of course, perishable, but with its alcohol content it's far less susceptible to spoilage than the original grapes.

Clay jars are an apt metaphor for Paul as he writes to the Corinthians about how God uses ordinary people to bear divine truth to their neighbors. He and his helpers have evidently become the target of certain detractors who have charged him with seeking acclaim for himself as he goes about his apostolic work.

"Not so!" replies Paul. "You've got us all wrong. For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake." In fact, it's Paul's earnest desire that in his preaching and teaching he does not become an object of worship. Only one subject is fit for a Christian's worship: Jesus the Lord.

As for Paul himself, he readily adopts the label of a "slave for Jesus' sake." And it's rather extraordinary that this apostle -- a learned rabbi of great education and verbal talent -- turns his back on personal fame and gives all glory to Christ. "I'm just the container, the clay jar," he says to them. "Pay no attention to me; focus your praises on the one I'm bringing to you, Jesus the Lord!"

In saying this, he strikes a note that's similar to something he wrote to the Philippians as he was likewise struggling to define himself and his ministry. In chapter 3 of that letter, Paul constructs what could be called his spiritual résumé. Cataloguing his reasons for having "confidence in the flesh," Paul recalls his birth into the people of Israel, his distinguished ancestry as a member of the tribe of Benjamin, his exalted status as a Pharisee, his flawless record as a persecutor of heresies (including Christianity), as well as all the progress he made in the pursuit of righteousness. Yet, all these human achievements, he maintains, are nothing -- even rubbish to be cast away -- compared to "the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord."

The outward form of Paul the apostle -- truly an earthen vessel -- is not the point. It's only the message he bears -- the good news of Jesus Christ -- that's worth paying attention to. And this is a hard thing for most of us to wrap our minds around because we've been so carefully schooled to value ambition and achievement. Yet, in our Christian faith we have a treasure surpassing anything we ourselves could possibly achieve. And it's a gift -- totally free and undeserved. All we need to do is reach out and gratefully claim it.

Ambition is a wonderful thing. We do well to encourage our children to be ambitious, to work hard, to make a success of themselves. Yet, we also do well to teach them that ambition can be a two-edged sword. Even the most impressive, shimmering material success, is but a crude clay pot compared to the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus our Lord.

In his book, *The Song of the Bird*, Anthony de Mello tells a little parable about those who continually hunger for more in life. It's a story of a humble barber who was passing by a tree that turned out to be haunted. From out of the tree the barber heard a voice: "Would you like to have seven jars of gold?"

Looking around, he saw no one. He couldn't imagine where the voice was coming from. But his greed had been aroused, so he shouted eagerly, "Yes, I certainly would." "Then go home at once," said the voice. "You will find them there." The barber ran all the way home, and it turned out to be just as the ghostly voice had promised. There, sitting by the hearth, were seven jars, six of them filled to the brim with gold -- and the seventh, which was only half-full.

Of course the barber was delighted with the unexpected gift, but something bothered him. He couldn't bear the thought of having a half-filled jar. He knew that, somehow, he had to fill it. If he didn't, he could never be happy. So, he took all his wife's jewelry, and begged his family and friends to loan him theirs. He threw them into the half-filled jar. But the jar was enchanted. No matter how much treasure he threw in, it remained half-filled, as before. He saved, and scrimped, and starved his family, but he could never bring the level of that seventh jar any higher.

One day, he asked for an audience with the king and demanded that his salary be doubled. The king agreed, but still it was no good. The jar devoured each piece of gold he flung into it. When the king summoned the barber to cut his hair, he noticed how desperate and unhappy the man looked. "What's wrong with you?" he asked. "You used to be so happy when your salary was smaller. Can it be that you have been given the seven jars of gold?"

The barber was astonished to hear this. "Who told you about that, Your Majesty?" The king laughed. "I know the symptoms. The ghost once offered the jars to me. When I asked if the money could ever be spent, or was merely to be

hoarded, he vanished without a word. Take it from me: that money can never be spent. It only brings with it the compulsion to hoard.

Go and return the seven jars to the ghost this very minute. You will be a happy man once again." So he did and so he was. And, so it will be with us too, if we look not to the earthen jar that is our lives, but to the treasure of Jesus Christ that the Holy Spirit has called us to bear. Let us remember that rather than amassing more containers to hoard earthly things, that we are the container God wants to fill with his Holy Spirit and the love of Jesus.

The reason Paul served the church and openly proclaimed the gospel was because of God's work in his life. Much as in creating the world God acted to bring light ... out of darkness, so in spiritual creation He brings light to the hearts of those in darkness. This had been Paul's experience on the Damascus Road, when "a light from heaven flashed around him." Confronted with the risen Lord, he became a new creation.

Similarly, in Christ when we are washed in the waters of baptism we become a new creation. We receive God's Light, and as we seek to shine that light we are reminded that we have graciously been given the knowledge of God's salvation, a glory issuing from and seen in the face of Christ and reflected by Paul. So as we leave worship this morning, and in the days ahead, as containers of God's grace let's shine the light of His love and forgiveness for the whole world to see.