

RE IMAG INING Paul

Exhibition Guide



University of
Sheffield



What relevance do biblical texts and figures have for thinking about questions of identity today?

Exploring this question, *Reimagining Paul* is an exhibition of two newly commissioned works of art created to spark conversation about the apostle Paul, themes of identity, and the interpretation of Paul's letters in contemporary society.



Reimagining Paul on display at Rotherham Minster, October 2022. Left: *St Paul of the Thorns* (Elizabeth Tooth, 2022); right: *I am more like this* (Bettina Furnée, 2022).

Photo: Grace Emmett.

Who was the Apostle Paul?

Paul was a first-century Jew who lived under the Roman Empire. We know about his life predominantly from his letters and what is recorded about him in the Book of Acts, both of which form part of the New Testament.

After an encounter with Jesus, Paul saw himself as the ‘apostle to the gentiles’ (non-Jews) and spent the rest of his life travelling and preaching what he understood to be the ‘good news’ about Jesus. The letters attributed to him in the New Testament were written to a mixture of groups as well as individuals and provide a window into how the earliest Christ-followers sought to live.

Why Paul?

Paul has been very influential in the history of Christianity and his letters are continually being reinterpreted. It is for this reason that he is a significant figure to ‘reimagine’, which is the invitation of this exhibition: to explore passages from Paul’s letters from the perspective of visual art.

The two works of art—*St Paul of the Thorns* and *I am more like this*—both take inspiration from passages in Paul’s second letter to the church in Corinth. In doing so, the works prompt reflection on various themes concerning the body, disability, and identity. Therefore whether you’re familiar with Paul and his letters or not, these pieces highlight important contemporary themes and offer an opportunity for reflection.

Engaging with the Exhibition

There is no 'right' way to understand these works and they will likely carry a variety of different meanings for those who view them. However if helpful, there are some suggested questions below that you might ask yourself as a way to navigate your own impressions of the works. In the rest of this guide, you'll find the biblical passage each work relates to followed by a short commentary and some additional questions for reflection. At the end, you'll find information about how to give feedback on the exhibition and share your thoughts on the two works. Feedback responses are a really important part of this project and much appreciated, so please do share your thoughts if you have a few minutes.

Suggested Questions for Reflection

- What are your initial reactions to the two works in the exhibition?
- Do the pieces remind you of any other works of art you know of? In what ways are they similar or different?
- What do you think the two pieces are emphasising?
- How do you think you would interpret each piece if you viewed it in isolation? Is that different to how you interpret them together?
- What stands out to you when you read the passages from Paul's letters (see pp. 6 and 8) associated with each piece?
- What did you know about Paul before this exhibition? Has that changed at all since viewing the two works, and if so how?
- Are there are points of connection or disconnection you find you have with the two works? What about the two biblical passages?

St Paul of the Thorns



St Paul of the Thorns (Elizabeth Tooth, 2022).
Photo: Stanhope Photo.

2 Corinthians 12:7–10

'...Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." So I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ, for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.' (New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition).

St Paul of the Thorns (Elizabeth Tooth, 2022) depicts the artist's husband, who has a disabling pain condition. By painting a portrait of her husband, there are lots of ways in which the subject of the painting is unlike Paul: he is white, tattooed, and wearing a wedding band, for example. But here the artist's husband is imagined as Paul through the depiction of thorns. In doing so, the painting draws inspiration from 2 Corinthians 12:7b–10, making reference to Paul's famous 'thorn in the flesh'.

This 'thorn in the flesh' has puzzled interpreters for centuries as they have tried to work out what Paul's 'thorn' might be. The thorn is equated with a 'messenger of Satan' in the text, but many commentators read the thorn as also representing an impairment of some kind. Even without diagnosing what sort of impairment Paul might be referring to, this passage is often read as Paul describing a disability: the thorn has a disabling effect on him. Paul asks the Lord to remove the thorn and is told

that ‘power is made perfect in weakness’ (v. 9). As a result, Paul decides to boast of his weaknesses, concluding this section by saying ‘whenever I am weak, then I am strong’ (v. 12). The cruciform posture of the figure in the painting might also allude to the way Paul understands this ‘strength in weakness’ paradox to be possible, which is because of Christ (v. 9).

Tooth’s painting offers the opportunity to reflect both on Paul as well as disability more generally. The thorns pierce and constrain the subject’s body, but he also actively grasps at the thorns and pulls himself upwards. In some ways this mirrors how Paul describes his own ‘thorn’; he is constrained by it, resists it, yet also comes to accept it. More than that, weakness caused by the thorn is refigured by Paul as a marker of strength.

Tooth’s work portrays one perspective of lived experience of disability. This portrayal is open to various interpretations, just as experiences of pain and disability are themselves varied. Paul’s articulation of his experience in 2 Corinthians 12 might be helpful for some and not for others; similarly, some viewers might experience a sense of solidarity with the painting’s subject, while others do not.

- What do you notice about the figure in the painting?
- How does the depiction of the thorns in the painting influence how you read the biblical passage?
- What does ‘strength in weakness’ mean to you?

I am more like this



I am more like this (Bettina Furnée , 2022).
Photo: Stanhope Photo.

2 Corinthians 11:21–30

'...Whatever anyone else dares to boast about—I am speaking as a fool—I also dare to boast about. Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they Abraham's descendants? So am I. Are they servants of Christ? (I am out of my mind to talk *like this*.) *I am more*.

I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn? If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.' (New International Version).

I am more like this (Bettina Furnée, 2022) is a neon text piece that offers a snapshot phrase from 2 Corinthians 11:23 (italicised above). Rendering the phrase in neon dislocates the words from their context and gives them a different meaning compared to how they read in the context of Paul's letter.

This passage comes before the reference to the thorn in the flesh and constitutes one of Paul's 'hardship' lists as he documents the different trials and tribulations he has sustained as part of his ministry as 'apostle to the gentiles'. Paul 'boasts' of things that might not typically be considered boast-worthy,

which he recognises at the end of this section, saying that he will boast of things that show his weakness. Just before this passage, he also says he will only boast 'as a fool' (2 Corinthians 11:7).

Though the neon text piece takes Paul's words out of context, when the wider passage is read through the lens of 'like this I am more' it becomes something of a summary of the different credentials Paul lists: he is more fully a 'servant of Christ' because of all these experiences.

Many of the things that Paul boasts about relate to physical persecution—things that would presumably have left their mark on Paul's body. This 'lattice-work of lacerations', as Jennifer Glancy puts it, means that Paul's body tells a story—the story of his ministry and hardships. While people might have 'read' those marks in a variety of ways, Paul saw them as something to take pride in (see, for example, Galatians 6:17—'From now on, let no one make trouble for me, for I carry the marks of Jesus branded on my body.')

Reading this passage in a different translation to the New International Version will likely not provide the same phrase that appears in neon. The fact that the neon flashes over two lines, and the order is constantly reversed by animation (like this...I am more...I am more...like this) is a reminder that biblical texts are not static: translation is itself a process of interpretation.

- Are there ways in which the neon format makes you read the words differently compared to if you read them printed on a page?
- What do you make of Paul's 'boasting' of his weaknesses?
- How does our society interpret different bodily marks?

Reading Together: *St Paul of the Thorns and I am more like this*

On their own, the words in neon are vague and the phrase feels unfinished: like what? More what? Viewers might supply their own answers to these questions. Taking the two pieces together, 'like this I am more' might be read as a description of the subject of the painting. The words in neon could even function as a paraphrased conclusion to the thorn in the flesh passage: like this I am more, I am more like this.

Allowing the pieces to dialogue with their respective texts, but also one another, creates different pathways to think about Paul and ways in which his letters might be read today. What expectations do we have for the way certain bodies should look and behave? What do we think of as 'weakness' and who decides if something or someone is weak? What does it mean for weakness to be reconceived as strength?

About *Reimagining Paul*

Reimagining Paul is a project based at the Sheffield Centre for Interdisciplinary Biblical Studies (SCIBS), part of the University of Sheffield. The project is led by Dr Grace Emmett and Dr Ryan Collman and was initially inspired by Grace's doctoral research into Paul's letters and representations of masculinity. For more information, visit reimaginingpaul.co.uk.

To find out more about the artists involved with this project, visit elizabethtooth.co.uk and bettinafurnee.co.uk.

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