

“Thorn in the flesh”

Fourteenth Sunday, July 9th, 2006; Ezek. 2:2-5, 2 Cor. 12:7-10, Mk. 6:1-6

By Father Jose Uppani

The central idea of today’s liturgical readings can be summed up thus: “God’s power is made perfect in human weakness”. The very first reading, where God chose Ezekiel to become a prophet, clearly substantiate this point. Ezekiel is the best symbol of weakness, because he was an exile and had all its disabilities. As an exile he possessed the stigma of a rebel. Yet God decided to demonstrate his power of regenerating His people through Him. Though in all the first 33 chapters, chapter after chapter, we see God warning people through Ezekiel about the punishment awaiting them and in the part of the Book from chapters 34 to 38, we see God holding out a wonderful message of hope, His compassionate scheme of reuniting a scattered and disrupted flock—a message of reconciliation and emancipation.

The gospel speaks of how Jesus was rejected by his own people in his home town. And yet he demonstrated God’s strength in the very midst of denial and rejection unto Calvary. In the 2nd reading this theme is further highlighted. A thorn in the flesh of St. Paul, proved the source of an abundance of revelation, the ultimate cause of his salvation.

‘Thorn in my flesh’, an angel of Satan—This affliction disturbed him for quite some time but by the time he wrote 2 Cor, he had been freed of the menace. Three general interpretations of the nature of this affliction have been given: persecution, disease, and concupiscence. The last of these seems far-fetched, for concupiscence is something that afflicts everyone to some degree. Moreover, it is difficult to conceive that Paul had not earlier been unaffected by such an inclination. As for the general nature of this affliction, modern exegetical opinion generally opts for some physical malady. It is called “an angel of Satan” either because the devil was regarded as responsible for sin (cfr. Gen. 3:1-4), and to him was the cause of physical disease attributed (cf. Lk. 13:16), or because those attempt to pervert others are satan's agents.

In any case, St. Paul actually prayed for getting freed from this affliction about which the Scripture says thus: “Three times I begged the Lord about this, that it might leave me, but he said to me, ‘**My grace is sufficient for you**’”: As an answer to his prayer the Apostle obtains not the removal of the affliction but a promise of the continuation of Christ’s outpour of grace, which is all that matters for him and all that he truly need. Note what was Paul’s response to it: “**Therefore I am content**” : The assurance of God’s favor and support satisfies Paul.

The reason Jesus gave Paul for not removing the particular physical condition which has been a thorn in his flesh is clear “ **My power shows up best in weak people**”. The weaker a man is , the stronger is the divine power manifested it through him(I Cor. 1:25). In other words , the power of God is more evident when the instrument through which that power is exercised is naturally weak. What an encouraging condition it is for us who are ever so weak in most cases! If God is going to make our weakness a fitting background to demonstrate His almighty power in and through us isn’t our weakness a blessing?

Here, what Paul means is not that weakness is something intrinsically good but that it is a favorable circumstance to seek God’s help more enthusiastically. Paul is very

definite about this: *“Since I know it is all for Christ’s good, I am quite happy about “the thorn,” and about the insults and hardships, persecutions and difficulties; for when I am weak, then I am strong—the less I have, the more I depend on him”* (2 Cor. 12:10).

This is a most beautiful interpretation of weakness. The weakness in us should in justify our failures but demands a greater dependence on God. It should really lead us closer to God .

Paul discovers that his weakness makes him one with the Lord who himself was crucified in weakness. To a superficial observer , Jesus’ ministry was a failure. His life ended –not in triumph as the conquering warrior Messiah with legions of armies—but as a naked, helpless man facing an ignoble death. Yet in the weakness and vulnerability of the cross, we see most clearly the glorious love of God.

I would like to conclude this reflection with the following spiritual exercise for all of you. It will take a couple of minutes. But if you do it regularly its effect will be incredibly great:

(1) Enlist all you past sufferings and bitter experiences, whether that may be rejection from others, or mental torture, or physical illness or unjust punishments, or misunderstanding, or loss of beloved ones, or serious failures in life such as failure in family life/ business/ profession etc.

Praise God for each one of them on the strength of the Scripture: *“All things work for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose”* (Rom. 8:28).

(2) Surrender to God all the problems that are troubling you at present, invoking God’s grace to tide over them.