

Homily – 14th Sunday “B”
July 5, 2015: St. Monica’s

“Whenever I am weak, then I am strong.”

Ezekiel 2:2-5 “Whether they hear or refuse to hear, they shall know that there is a prophet among them.”

Ps 123: Our eyes are fixed on the Lord, awaiting His mercy.

2 Corinthians 12:7-10 – Paul’s “thorn in the flesh” and Jesus’ response: “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” “When I am weak, then I am strong.”

Mark 6:1-6 – Jesus rejected by the people of Nazareth: “a prophet is never honoured among his own kin.”

In today’s Gospel, we meet Jesus, preaching for the first time in front of the folks from home – the villagers who had seen him grow up, including his own extended family. This was a tough challenge. Small towns, which have their definite advantages, also sometimes breed small-mindedness. The people of Nazareth, it seems, were not ready to have their horizons challenged by a “local boy”. Implicit in their response to Jesus is this attitude: *“What can he tell us that we don’t already know? And just who does he think he is, anyway?”* Mark tells us that “they took offence at him.” He also adds that their lack of faith blocked their ability to see and experience Jesus’ power at work. It’s amazing – God can break down every barrier – except our refusal to see him at work. God so respects our freedom that when we are not ready to let him in, he stands waiting at the door. He does not break it down.

Can we not relate to this experience of Jesus? I think most of us can identify times in our own lives when we too have tried to introduce a new idea, a new perspective – and have felt “cut off.” Maybe at work we came up with a more effective way of performing a task, but could not overcome the narrowness of those who see only the old way, or the inertia of those who do see the merits of the new way, but don’t want the bother of learning something new. Maybe we tried to help resolve a family dispute, and discovered that the people were more attached to their grudge than to the desire to heal the relationship. Sometimes, **we** are guilty of resisting change. Because of our own inertia, stubbornness, or hard-heartedness – we refuse to welcome a new perspective, insist that we know best.

It is important that we not allow the dynamic of rejection to prevent us from doing the good we can contribute. Listen to this poem which hung from the wall in Mother Teresa's orphanages:

People are illogical, unreasonable, and self-centered. Love them anyway. If you act unselfishly, people will accuse you of selfish or ulterior motives. Act unselfishly anyway. The good you do today will be forgotten tomorrow. Do good anyway. People really need help, but may attack you if you do help them. Help people anyway. Give the world the best you have and you'll get kicked in the teeth. Give the world the best you have anyway.

Mother Teresa knew the truth of this, from deep and often painful experience. So did St. Paul. In his second letter to the Corinthian church, Paul appeals to his authority as an apostle to speak the hard truths which need to be spoken. And yet, this authority comes not from any merit on his part, but from the superabundant power and grace of God: he is but the earthen vessel, fragile and cracked, in which the treasure is contained. Therefore, Paul emphasizes not his achievements, but his weakness and sufferings. Most of all, he insists on his constant concern and anxiety for the Churches committed to his care.

Against this backdrop, Paul confides to the community that he too is a wounded individual. Everyone has their own theory about what Paul's "thorn of the flesh" might have been. Some think it refers to the persecutions he underwent, or to some particularly stubborn opponent of his preaching. Others have opted for some kind of physical ailment – migraines or epilepsy – or his bad temper, or even some particular sexual temptation. The variety of theories illustrates the variety of struggles to which we humans are subject, and perhaps it is good that Paul is not too specific about it. This leaves the rest of us lots of room to plug our own particular struggle into the equation.

Do we not also pray that the Lord will remove our struggles, our sources of temptation, the daily reminders of our human fragility, of our inclination to sin? But in the end, what matters is not so much what my own "thorn in the flesh" happens to be, but the Lord's response: "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness."

We live in a world where weakness is something to be concealed, where we are made to feel ashamed of our limitations. Society is only interested in you if you are strong, beautiful, wealthy, or successful; losers need not apply. This mentality even creeps into the Church: clerical careerism, jostling for power and influence, subtle castes and cliques which can destroy a parish community.

In such a world, we need to hear the message of Paul, of Jesus. We are not content with weakness for its own sake, but for the sake of Christ. In our weakness and emptiness and yes, even in our sin, Jesus wants to unleash his strength, his fullness, his life-changing love. Perhaps our success, according to the vision of the world, has blinded us to the weaknesses and vulnerabilities which lie just beneath the surface. Perhaps we have become so rooted in the inertia of a closed mind or a hardened heart, that we prefer our own weakness to the power which alone can set us free.

In either case, the message is clear: we depend neither on our strength, nor on our weakness, but on the One who shatters the idol of our strength, in order to pour the fullness of his treasure into the emptiness of our earthen vessels: body and mind, heart and soul and spirit.

Shortly after he was elected Bishop of Rome and chief shepherd of the universal Church, Pope Francis granted an interview that was published in Jesuit journals throughout the world. The very first question posed to him by fellow Jesuit Antonio Spadaro, editor of *La Civiltà Cattolica*, brought forth an unexpected response:

I ask Pope Francis point-blank: "Who is Jorge Mario Bergoglio?" He stares at me in silence. I ask him if I may ask him this question. He nods and replies: "I do not know what might be the most fitting description.... I am a sinner. This is the most accurate definition. It is not a figure of speech, a literary genre. I am a sinner."

*He continued to reflect and concentrate: "Yes, but the best summary, the one that comes more from the inside and I feel most true is this: I am a sinner whom the Lord has looked upon with mercy." And he repeats: "I am one who is looked upon by the Lord. I always felt my motto, **Miserando atque Eligendo** [Looking upon him with Mercy, God chose Him], was very true for me."*

The motto is taken from the Homilies of Bede the Venerable, who writes in his comments on the Gospel story of the calling of Matthew: “Jesus saw Matthew the tax collector, and looking at him with mercy, he chose him and said to him, ‘Follow me.’”

“When I came to Rome, I always stayed at the residence on Via della Scrofa. From there I often visited the Church of St. Louis of France, and I went there to contemplate the painting of ‘The Calling of St. Matthew,’ by Caravaggio. That finger of Jesus, pointing at Matthew. That’s me. I feel like him. Like Matthew. Here, this is me, a sinner on whom the Lord has turned his gaze. And this is what I said when they asked me if I would accept my election as pontiff. “I am a sinner, but I trust in the infinite mercy and patience of our Lord Jesus Christ, and I accept in a spirit of penance.”

Because of this realization, Pope Francis is free to be himself. He knows his gifts, and he knows his limitations. He feels no need to hide them, no shame about them. Most of all, Francis knows himself as Christ knows him: loved in his sinfulness and his weakness, empowered by Christ in his giftedness, he can reach out with tender love and compassion, with courage and conviction, speaking words that challenge us to be the best we can be. God loves us exactly the way we are, chooses us and calls us where we are, and sends us forth to share in his mission. He did it for Paul, he did it with Pope Francis, and he does it with you and me.

One of my most treasured ordination gifts was a little book entitled “Blessed are the cracked ... for they shall let in the light,” offered to me “from one cracked friend to another.” It communicates beautifully why our weaknesses – which we so often seek to deny or conceal – are part of God’s plan.

So inspired by the example of Paul today, may our sharing in this Eucharist fill the emptiness which we carry within, and let us pray that the Lord’s light will shine through our cracks, God’s strength through our weakness, God’s amazing power transforming and converting us, and through us, the world.