

## *14<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time*

*Readings: Ezekiel 2:2-5, Psalm 123: 1-4, 2 Corinthians 12:7-10, Mark 6:1-6*

### *Strength in Weakness*

We all admire strength. We look for it in our athletes, our financial planners, our politicians, and our armed forces. On the other hand, we are not really prepared to deal with weakness. In our athletes, weakness means poorer performance; in our financial planners, loss of revenue from dissatisfied customers; in our politicians, possible loss of office; and in our armed forces, possible humiliating defeats. While weakness is all too blatant, we don't seem ready to handle it.

Today's readings are a study in weakness. They propose for our consideration three individuals who experienced significant weakness in the exercise of their mission. Ironically, they hold up their achievements as a basis for hoping. In the face of a strength-intoxicated society, these biblical selections argue that weakness can mean strength.

The passage from Ezekiel is part of his vocation scene. In the year 593 B.C., God appeared to Ezekiel in the land of exile and called upon him to prophesy. Ezekiel felt God's dynamic presence ("spirit") but at the same time, he became acutely aware of the opposition of his countrymen: "rebels...impudent and stubborn" (2:3-4) Given such an audience, it is hardly surprising that the prophet felt discouraged. At the conclusion of the call scene, Ezekiel records: "I came to the exiles at Tel-abib, who lived by the river Chebar. And I sat there, among them, stunned, for seven days" (3:15).

The rest of this prophetic book reveals a spokesperson who pantomimes God's message and performs bizarre symbolic actions. He first attacks the people for their infidelities. Nevertheless, when news of the fall of Jerusalem reaches the exiles, he offers them a message of hope. The biblical record ultimately discloses a resilient person in the service of his people. Here, weakness can mean strength.

### *The Flesh and the Devil*

In this section of his Letter to the Corinthians, Paul has just finished speaking about his visions and revelations. He pushes on to discuss other personal experiences with his God. "A thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated" (12:7). While this may refer to a grave illness (see Lk 13:16), it more probably implies persecution at the hands of his own people (see Ez 28) In these circumstances he earnestly

asked God to remove the affliction.

God's response was not to remove the problem, but to assure Paul of his ongoing support. "He said to me, "my grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness" (12:9). This experience was the catalyst for Paul's understanding of the interrelationship of weakness and strength. The weaker the person, the greater the display of God's power. "I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me" (12:9). Paul insists that weakness can mean strength.

### Homecoming

In 4:35-5:43, Mark exploited Jesus' power and acceptance by a series of great feats. Now, however, when Jesus returns to his hometown, the people reject him. They sense a glaring discrepancy between his family tree and his teaching and miracles. They are prompted to ask: "Is not this the carpenter?" (6:3). Jesus' reaction is one of both discouragement and astonishment: "Prophets are not without honor except in their hometown..." (6:4). Apart from curing a few sick, He works no miracles; the lack of faith is all too distressing.

Previously, Mark had noted the growing opposition to Jesus by the Jewish authorities (2:1-3:6) and his own family (3:20-35). In this synagogue scene, Mark is probably foreshadowing the final rejection on Good Friday (15:6-15). The last word, however, is neither weakness nor defeat. Looking up at the dead body of Jesus, the centurion proclaims: "Truly this man was God's Son!" (15:39). The message to the women at the tomb, "He has been raised" (16:6), also testifies that weakness can become strength.

### Today's Good News

We witness many forms of weakness in our daily lives. We are challenged to transform weakness into strength. The married couples who recognize the problems in their relationship can begin to solve them. Those dependent on drugs or alcohol who acknowledge their addiction can start on the road to rehabilitation. Leaders who realize their mistakes can undertake strategies for improvement. These examples may be multiplied time and again. They ultimately suggest that weakness need not be the final word. After all, God is able to use our faults as well as our assets. Weakness can become strength.

*Have you ever experienced acceptance among strangers, but rejection at home? Can you imagine Jesus' feelings of amazement at his neighbors' lack of faith? What else do you suppose Jesus felt?*

*Much has been made of Paul's "thorn in the flesh" statement, but it is not known with certainty what he was referring to. What do you see as your "thorn in the flesh"?*