

Rev. Derek Fairman

14<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time B

St. Paul speaks today in the second reading about a thorn in the flesh. What was this particular thorn? We are not entirely sure, but we can ascertain a few things about the effects that it had on St. Paul. St. Paul writes about how this thorn in the flesh prevented him from becoming conceited. St. Paul had been given extraordinary revelations and had written extensively about the Christian life.

St. Paul had seen much success, and he had endured so many sacrifices in the process. So, we can understand that St. Paul may have become conceited. No doubt that St. Paul would have recognized that God was in his midst, doing so many good things that only God could do. The danger was not necessarily that St. Paul would have thought that he had the power to work miracles, but that God was able to do so much, because of the merits of St. Paul.

It is true that God works through human hands, that He works through the instruments that we provide. Ordinarily, God prefers to work through those who seek to do His will, through those who are obedient and devoted to Him. He can work through unworthy ministers, but that is not the ideal. So, God prefers to work through those who are holy. God certainly worked through the efforts of St. Paul.

Yet God gave St. Paul a wound to make sure that St. Paul understood that he was still fragile, that God was able to do so much in spite of the fragility of St. Paul. In fact, St. Paul was able to do so much *because* he was fragile, not in spite of it. If St. Paul had grown arrogant, he would have done more to drive away people from the faith than bring them to it. But because the Lord kept him from being proud or arrogant, St. Paul could have more appeal to his listeners.

Sometimes we do not like to admit our faults and weaknesses, but for St. Paul he is able to admit them readily. It was this admission that made him just like everyone else. It was this admission that allowed him to not be conceited but rather to be humble. He understood that he was fragile and weak, and yet God chose him anyway. His greatness was not just in his ability to write and preach, and those were his strengths, but in his humility, he was able to relate to those who were less gifted. He could sympathize with the weaknesses of others.

For St. Paul, what others would have considered weakness was for him a strength. God can do that too in our lives. Sometimes sources of bitterness and anger can actually lead to forgiveness and draw us closer to someone. Those times that we feel let down can help us to

realize how much we need God. God can turn ugliness into beauty, and evil into good. Perhaps we have seen that for ourselves, that God turns a bad situation into a moment of grace.

We also keep in mind the importance of being humble. Those who are given many gifts have many temptations to grow conceited. There is the temptation to be condescending to those who do not have as many gifts. There is the temptation to think that everything depends upon those gifts. However, we keep in mind that just as our weaknesses can be a source of strength, our strengths and gifts can also be a source of weakness just as much.

Perhaps we too have a thorn in our flesh. Perhaps there is some weakness that we have, that does not seem to go away. There are some sins that we seem powerless to overcome. Those temptations get the better of us over and over. Maybe there is some other weakness that is not sinful but nevertheless makes life difficult. Whatever it is, St. Paul's letter today reminds us that we are not alone. There are many people who struggle now with a thorn in the flesh. There have been many saints who have also struggled. There is reason for us to hope.

We have hope not just that the Lord will take away our thorns. Sometimes that does happen, as St. Augustine was able to overcome some of the thorns in his life, even though previously he had despaired of ever being free. Other times, the Lord gives us hope that our weaknesses can actually become a source of blessing. We have to be able to see our weaknesses in a new perspective and see good where otherwise we might only see bad.

This letter also teaches us about how fragile life can be. God is not fragile, and His grace is not fragile. However, He chooses to bestow His grace on us, who are weak and whose lives are fragile. The Lord can accomplish great things through His weak and fragile creatures. That is because His grace is at work, and the Lord does great things, and not our weaknesses and not ourselves. Our weaknesses do not have to stand in the way of the Lord doing great things. The Lord can do great things even with the most fragile of creatures.

As we approach the altar, we think about our weaknesses and we ask the Lord to turn them into strengths. No doubt that we have our own ideas about what needs to happen, but the Lord can surprise us by coming up with solutions that we never thought of. If we are open to the solutions that the Lord has in mind, then we can understand what St. Paul meant whenever he wrote, "...for when I am weak, then I am strong."