

Homily based on the readings from July 7, 2024 (Ezekiel 2.2-5; 2 Corinthians 12.7-10; Mark 6.1-6)

Today's second reading presents us with a bit of a mystery. The Apostle Paul, writing to the Corinthians, refers to "a thorn in the flesh [that] was given to [him], an angel of Satan, to beat [him], to keep [him] from being too elated." Perhaps the Christians in Corinth knew what Saint Paul was talking about, but there is no clear indication – in Holy Scripture or elsewhere in the Church's tradition – what this "thorn in the flesh" actually was.

Over the years, many people have speculated about the meaning of this cryptic remark. Based on the phrase "angel of Satan," some people have suggested that Saint Paul was literally tormented by some sort of demonic force. Others have maintained that he was referring to a human being who interfered with his ministry, or that he was talking about a particular sadness or disappointment. It has even been proposed, although I find it rather unlikely, that Saint Paul was speaking about

some sort of sinful behavior that he himself was unable to control. The explanation I find most credible – especially in light of a certain passage from his Letter to the Galatians – is that Saint Paul was referring to a physical ailment, perhaps one that affected his eyesight. The plain truth, though, is that none of us – absent some sort of extraordinary revelation – will ever know with any certainty what Saint Paul was actually talking about.

Whatever the *thorn in the flesh* happened to be, Saint Paul was not eager to endure it. As he explains to the Corinthians, “[t]hree times I begged the Lord about this, that it might leave me.” Nevertheless, despite – or perhaps even *because of* – Saint Paul’s unique role in the history of the Church, it was God’s will that he should face this particular challenge. Regardless of the pain he was suffering, Saint Paul accepted this outcome – and even welcomed it: “I will rather boast most gladly of my weaknesses, in order that the power of Christ may dwell with me.” In a sense, Saint Paul was echoing Christ’s own prayer in the Garden of

Gethsemane: “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet, not as I will, but as you will.”

Besides the mystery of what the thorn actually *was*, the most obvious question is *why* there needed to be a thorn at all. Certainly God possessed the power to make it vanish instantaneously. The answer can be found in the Lord’s response to Saint Paul: “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” *Power is made perfect in weakness*: in *human* terms, this sentence is completely nonsensical – like a slogan from some dismal dystopian novel. In *divine* terms, though, this statement *epitomizes* the way in which God chooses to work through human beings.

Whenever a person applies for a job, whether it is scooping ice cream or overseeing a multinational corporation, the hiring process is devoted to answering one basic question: does this individual possess the necessary experience and ability to fulfill the responsibilities of the position? The same is true for political campaigns, at least in principle. The objective,

at least, is to make sure that nobody ever receives an office for which he is unqualified. That is not *at all* how God selects the men and women who labor on *his* behalf.

We do not know much about the professional backgrounds of the original twelve apostles, other than that four of them were fishermen and one was a tax collector. As far as we can tell, none of them had any specialized theological training or possessed any concrete skills that would be useful in establishing a worldwide religious organization. Nevertheless, God chose these flawed and imperfect individuals to be the instruments of his own design. As the saying goes: “God does not choose the qualified; he qualifies the chosen.” Even though the Church has benefitted over the years from many wise, learned, and talented individuals, the Church has never depended on their wisdom, their learning, or their talents. There is one and only one source of the Church’s strength, and that is Jesus Christ himself.

The forces of the *world* will never be able to comprehend the power of *weakness*. In today's Gospel, we see the residents of Galilee sneering at the uneducated carpenter who presumed to teach in the synagogue. As Christians, though, we recognize that whatever the world deems powerful – wealth, education, prestige, physical strength – is utterly insignificant in the face of God's eternal majesty. Nevertheless, we all need regular reminders – thorns in our *own* flesh – to prevent us from confusing God's accomplishments with our own.

When we consider our own personal struggles and challenges, it is tempting to view them as *roadblocks* that prevent us from reaching our full potential. If only we had more money, if only our health were better, if only the people around us were kinder or more appreciative – imagine what we could accomplish! Although that is a natural perspective to take, it is almost entirely *backwards*. We can certainly ask the Lord, as Saint Paul did, to eliminate the difficulties we face – or at least make them easier to bear. In the end, though, we are required to be “content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and

constraints, for the sake of *Christ*.” It is when we are *weak* that we are *strong*, for *that* is when we have the opportunity to surrender ourselves *fully* to God’s strength – *that* is when the power of Christ may *truly* come to dwell in each of us.