

*Good morning everyone,*

*Our readings for this Sunday (Fifth after Trinity) are certainly rich in inspiration and encouragement for the work of Christian mission. If there is a single theme that unites them it is: in your human weakness know that if you put your trust in Lord, you will be strong and have sufficient resources for the task. You have been given much by God so now you must also give of yourself for God, and not be put off by the obstacles that will inevitably accompany your journey.*

### **Ezekiel 2: 1 – 5**

Ezekiel is an unusual prophet, a priest and a visionary, called to a tough ministry in the darkest period of ancient Israel's history. He was to be prophet to the newly exiled Israelites and was himself presumably among the first batch of exiles taken to Babylon in 597BC. Our short passage today is about the beginning of his call and commission. He is to speak in God's name to a stubborn, hard-hearted people who are being punished because of their wilfully disobedient behaviour, their faithlessness, and their failure to live as God's chosen people. This people had long been rebellious. They would now come to know that a prophet, a messenger of God, is among them, who will admonish them but show that God is in control of their destiny. Ezekiel will assure them that God has not abandoned them but will instil in them a new heart and spirit and ultimately restore them to their own land.

### **2 Corinthians 12: 2 – 10**

Paul is also having to deal with troublesome people! Some of them have been questioning his authority and spiritual experiences. There are clearly some Corinthian Christians who are obsessed with spiritual gifts and 'highs.' By relating a special spiritual high of his own, Paul attempts to refocus his readers' attitudes. To avoid any hint of boasting, he tells of his experience in the third person. Clearly, he is not referring to his dramatic conversion but to some more recent transcendent experience. He wishes to make no capital out of it and plays it down, as if to say to his readers, 'Whatever spiritual grace God gives you, it is not a matter for boasting, but is to encourage you and help you build up others in the faith.'

Paul then goes on to speak about a 'thorn in the flesh' that he has been given by 'a messenger of Satan' to keep him humble. What he means is unclear, and all manner of afflictions have been suggested – epilepsy, bouts of malaria, stammering, struggles with his celibacy, and more. However, it could be a metaphor for hardships such as he relates in the previous chapter, or even having to deal with difficult people in the Church, such as at Corinth itself. 'A thorn in the flesh' does rather sound like 'a pain in the neck' (or wherever)!

Whatever this 'thorn' is, it reminds Paul of his weaknesses, which he discovers are a gift because they make him totally dependent on God's grace, and the power of Christ within him, which through prayer he has found is sufficient for him and enables him to have the strength to put up with his sufferings and challenges in whatever form they take. Of his weaknesses he is happy to boast.

Here, we have a passage to help us put our own varied Christian experiences into perspective. Sometimes we are lifted up in joy by the experience of God's presence and love. But deeper and more solid roots may be planted when our difficulties and sufferings

make us more aware of our need of the grace of God. Such hardships lived through with humility and resilience produce a deeper witness of faith and can become useful tools to encourage and assist the growth of our fellow Christians.

### **Mark 6: 1 – 13**

Jesus was already famous in Galilee. People were thronging to him in the villages and towns around the Sea of Galilee. His home base was Capernaum on the north west shore of the lake. But now he journeys a few miles west to Nazareth where he had been brought up. His reception there is rather different and rather shocks him. He faces rejection from the people who all knew him and his family, which he understands as the lot of a prophet.

The stress so far in the Gospel is that Jesus has been able to do works of power such as healing and deliverance because of the faith in him of the recipients or their sponsors. But in Nazareth Jesus can do no such work, although he does manage to heal a few sick people. It is a case of familiarity breeding, if not exactly contempt, then clearly a lack of expectation and respect.

In the following scene, Jesus sends out his disciples to do the sort of work he himself had been doing. They have been following Jesus and watching him as he works, now it is the time for them to go and represent him. He warns them that they too face the possibility of rejection from some people. Their poverty of resources and dependence on God are highlighted. This reflects Paul's teaching about human weakness as the spiritual 'base' for being effective servants of God.

Christian mission is all about representing Jesus in our own localities and communities and wherever we are in life. It requires no special skills or techniques, just the possession of an openness that will allow God to take the initiative.

A prayer for the day:

*Gentle God of power and strength, you chose us, weak as we are, to put the mighty to shame and to stand up and speak up with our words and our lives for what is right and good. Make us realize more deeply that without your help our human efforts cannot but fail and that our very weakness entitles us to your strength. Be our courage and joy through him who was weak with the weak, but who revealed the strength and power that comes from you alone, Jesus Christ, your Son and our Lord. Amen.*

Every blessing for Sunday and the week ahead.

Love and prayers,

John