

## Fourteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time July 05, 2015

Ezekiel 2:2-5; 2 Corinthians 12:7-10; Mark 6:1-6

One of the most common failures of our human condition is that we tend to take things and people for granted especially if they have become very familiar to us. We underestimate people and situations and finally experience things as not conducive to happy living. This also happens when we deal with something holy and sacred. Hence considering the situation in today's world, we can say that presently our world is in constant turmoil and looks towards healing. We fail to see the presence of the divine that is in the universe and around us. The nature opens itself with the presence of God and invites us to search for the inner meaning. Prophet Ezekiel in his times heard the heavenly voice to go among the nation that has rebelled against God. The Prophet heard this voice and obeyed. The people knew then that there was a prophet of God among them and they had to listen to him. This was the time of rebellion of the people of Israel against God and God punished them by sending them into exile. Ezekiel the prophet offers them hope. He tells them that if they are faithful in witnessing to their beliefs even as strangers in the strange land, Israel would be restored. In the New Testament Jesus gives us a similar hope indicating the divine presence and those who trust in him and see the presence of God would get fulfilment for the hope. In today's gospel Jesus himself comes as a sign of hope. Even when rejected by his people and despised as they knew him too well, he works miracles and heals people. In the second reading Paul tells us that weakness can be a very precious gift. When we are weak before God we remain strong.

Today's three readings from the Holy Scriptures echo the Christian virtues of obedience, servitude and humility that should be the part of every Christian life. In the First Reading from the Book of Ezekiel, begins with the powerful vision granted to the prophet while he was living with the exiles in Babylonia. Through the vision he learns of the rebellion of people and their disloyalty to God. He is called upon to tell the people of the security they have to look for in their God who will be their protector. In the overwhelming presence of God Ezekiel collapses and the Spirit of God enters into him, giving him strength to stand on his feet and commissioned him to go to the people of Israel and to preach to them. During his commission, Ezekiel was warned that there was a possibility that the people would reject the divine message that he was delivering. His task was specially to proclaim God's message to his people. God did not promise him an easy time. But, whether they heard or refused to hear, they would know that there has been a prophet among them. Ezekiel obeyed the Lord God and served him. He went to the people with the message from God, preached to them, and the Word of God was rejected by many. Yet he remained faithful to God and continued his work. He was God's spokesperson and his call was gratuitous. At the same time we know that God too expects every person to give something to him in return. Our gift to God is our person, our existence, our life and our words and our actions.

In the second Reading Paul tells of the real danger even in serving God where the virtue of obedience can make a person proud and self-sufficient. As we mature in Christ, by the grace of God the Father and the power of the Holy Spirit, we gain greater understanding and knowledge of the spiritual mysteries of Christ and his mystical Body. We are called to always remember that if our spiritual work shines in inspirations because we have the gift of teaching, it is because it is a gift of teaching. It is not because of anything that we can or have achieved on our own. All praise and glory should always be given to the Lord God for his spiritual work that is manifested through us as humble servants. Here Paul speaking about a

thorn in the flesh tells the Christians that God provides all of us with a message to the extent of being tormented, to keep a person from being too elated. We are not going to speculate as to what was the thorn because it is not revealed in the Bible. The lesson that is important to learn from this is that sometimes the Lord will allow painful human weakness to torment us in order to keep us humble. As long as we have a weakness, it will discourage us from judging others who have a weakness of their own. Our hearts will tell us that we too are weak in the human nature and we should refrain from judging others. There are times when we may be afraid, or when we feel incompetent or inadequate. We can take encouragement from Paul in the cross he bore in his life. He had some very painful handicap which he felt prevented him from preaching the Gospel effectively. He begged God to take away this affliction but accepted this thorn as part of his sufferings.

The Gospel of today begins with the episode when Jesus goes back to his hometown, Nazareth along with his disciples. According to Mark, Jesus had been preaching and working miracles in Galilee for many months. He had spent most of the time in towns and villages around the Sea of Galilee. Before leaving Galilee he paid a visit to his home town Nazareth where he was to meet with total disappointment. He went to the synagogue on Sabbath day and began to preach there. His fellow townsmen had heard about his fame, the extraordinary miracles he had worked around the other towns of Galilee, and the way he attracted huge crowds around him wherever he went and preached. Many of those who heard him for the first time in their own synagogue were astonished at his wisdom and learning. They wondered about the source of his wisdom for they were aware that he had studied to be a Rabbi and they could not understand the miraculous powers he possessed. All these years of stay in the village, they knew him as a person one among them, an ordinary carpenter. They knew his mother and father and all his relatives. They were too familiar with him and knew him too well. They could not even think of the idea that he could be the messiah or anyone extra ordinary. They began by being astonished at his preaching but they ended up by shutting their eyes to the truth and refusing to believe that he could be what others thought or said he was. For them he was their neighbour and they knew him too well.

Familiarity breeds contempt is the term that accurately summarizes the return of Jesus to his home town Nazareth. His ministry was in fact a very successful one. He was accepted as a preacher, teacher and a healer and people flocked round him all the time. His popularity had spread all over the place and gospels tell us that he did not even have time to eat or sleep. Yet when he taught in the synagogue of Nazareth, the reaction was very hostile towards him. The issue was not the content of his teaching. The real issue was that Jesus taught with his own authority. This was clearly interpreted by his home town people as rank arrogance. After all he was well known to all the village people there. He was nothing but an ordinary person, one like them. Jesus seems to be aware of their quick negative response and attempts to head it off by quoting a well-known Hellenistic proverb about a prophet not being well accepted in his native place and by the prophet's own people. While the passage gives us details of the family of Jesus by mentioning his mother brothers and sisters, the author intends to focus on two things. First, Jesus is rejected by his home town and second, his authority is denied him. This is the second time he is rejected by those he feels ought to accept him and support him. Earlier, Mark tells us of their accusation that he casts out devils by the prince of devils and now they reject him and think his authority cannot be accepted as he is according to them a fraud.

The Gospel of Mark tells us that Jesus taught in the synagogue of Nazareth and it was the right of any devout Jew, to proclaim the divine message in the synagogue on a Sabbath. The

townspeople are amazed. They are astonished at the wisdom with which he speaks, and the power of the miracles they had heard he was performing. They were even more amazed because they think they knew who Jesus was but their vision was external. They saw the outward person but they do not listen inner meaning of his words. They had made up their minds not to listen to him. It is an experience all prophets must be ready for. A prophet is a person who has been commissioned to proclaim God's message, to call people to accept God's word, to urge them to change their lives and base them on truth and love. Traditionally, prophets anywhere in the world and at any time have met with resistance, hostility and even violent deaths. We have a perfect example in the prophet Jeremiah, Ezekiel, who had been called to proclaim God's message to his people. God does not promise him an easy time. It is strange that messages urging truth, love, justice, freedom and peace arouse such opposition, hostility, hatred and violence. But it is happening all the time. Strange as it may seem, there are people who do not want to hear them. Martin Luther King died for promoting the equality of all human beings irrespective of race. Mahatma Gandhi died because, as a Hindu, he was friendly with Muslims. Bishop Oscar Romero died because he denounced the exploitation of the poor. Dietrich Bonhoeffer died because he attacked the racist evils of Nazism. And the list could go on and on.

There are many who think that Jesus could have gained the confidence and support of the local people if he would have immediately engaged in miracles of healing. This could have proven his authority and authenticity. However it does not work that way and is not the way his Father wanted him to fulfil his mission. Jesus cannot and could not mediate God's power without some kind of faith response. There was no such response evident in Nazareth and thus he could do no extensive healing there. The author indicates that Jesus himself was caught somewhat off guard by this negative response as he was amazed by their lack of faith. Nevertheless Jesus did not try to prove his divinity and messianic power by working some healing among them. He was not just the person who looked for any popularity among people by doing extraordinary works. His real identity can be grasped only by faith. He accepted the rejection by his own people and went away from his village. This rejection of Jesus as messiah is the foreshadowing of the ultimate rejection by the leaders of the nation which also takes place for similar reasons namely due to their lack of faith.

The Gospel of Mark tells us how Jesus took his missionary task seriously and served God the Father in obedience and humility. He was truly the person who carried out the prophetic and messianic mission among his people. It is something each of us needs to remember that we too are missionaries and prophets like him. Every one of us, simply because of our baptism, has been called to be a prophet. We have all been called to spread the message of the Gospel in our families, in our working places, among our friends, in our society. Whatever is happening around us, our task is to prepare to proclaim and defend truth, love, justice, freedom, people's rights and dignity. There are some things over which we cannot compromise; there are some times when we cannot keep silent. The people of his village did not hear the message because they were blinded by the familiarity of the person. The same thing can happen to us all the time. God is constantly speaking to us through the people we know, through things that happen to us, through situations in which we find ourselves. Again and again we do not recognize his voice, his message because he is speaking through someone we know very well, or someone we do not like, or someone who is a total stranger or a foreigner. Jesus now makes a sad comment on his townspeople. "A prophet is only despised in his own country, among his own relatives, and in his own house." While people in other places greeted Jesus with enthusiasm and hung on his words, his own townspeople, his own family wrote him off, treated him with cynicism. So let us too not be discouraged by

our shortcomings – spiritual, psychological, social, physical. God wants us to be his instrument. He will stand by us and give us what we need when we need it.

Today's readings call us to awaken our hearts so we may see the divine truth beyond the human appearance of those we know. It is hard to understand the irrational opposition of the people of Nazareth during the visit of Jesus to his village and of the Pharisees and scribes later. The people of Nazareth had all wonderful reports about Jesus and on reflection could have seen in him the true messiah. Instead they turned against him in bitter hatred and then decided to put an end to his career. Luke tells us that they wanted to throw him down the cliff of the mountain. There was the tinge of pride and envy that made them refuse to accept him. Their hatred towards him made them close their eyes against all goodness he possessed. This is a typical human situation which is repeated later and led him to the cross. He was obedient to his Father and was humble before him. This experience exists even today when the church is challenged grossly by the powers of the world for the good work it is doing. The challenge that Jesus faced two thousand years ago is alive even today to all his followers as we stand for values of truth, justice and love. We need our faith to grow as the readings of today tell us. When we will have attained that elevation of spiritual knowledge and understanding, our faith will bring us to the realization that God is manifesting Himself all around us, in ways that we have never seen before.

During the second month of college, the professor gave his students a pop quiz. All were conscientious students and had breezed through the questions until the last one: 'What is the first name of the woman who cleans the school?' Surely this was some kind of joke. We had seen the cleaning woman several times. She was tall, dark-haired and in her 50s, but how would one know her name? We handed in the paper, leaving the last question blank. Just before class ended, one student asked if the last question would count toward our quiz grade. 'Absolutely,' said the professor. 'In your careers, you will meet many people. All are significant. They deserve your attention and care, even if all you do is smile and say 'hello.' No one has ever forgotten that lesson. We also learned her name was Dorothy.

Fr Eugene Lobo S.J. Bangalore, India