

[Readings: Ezekiel 2:2-5; Psalm 123; 2 Cor. 12:7-10; Mark 6:1-6]

Our First Reading today makes me think of that time of the year in the spring when parish openings take place in the Archdiocese. Pastors are moving or retiring, Associate Pastors may be moving into their first pastorates, other priests are staying put. Last Sunday, I celebrated my fourth anniversary as your pastor, and look forward to more years of ministering and serving with you at St. Martin de Porres. (At this point, the congregation breaks into applause!)

It may be hard to believe, but some parishes in the Archdiocese are NOT on a priest's wish list. The reputation of some places is so bad that priests will not go there voluntarily. I am happy to report that TWELVE priests applied for this parish four years ago! St. Martin de Porres definitely has a positive reputation, not like those pesky Israelites that poor Ezekiel is being sent to.

Our Second Reading from Second Corinthians describes the Apostle Paul's struggle with grace and freedom. Paul was granted great revelations and insights in his teaching. He was getting a little too full of himself, calling himself the greatest of all the Apostles. He had to be brought down a notch or two. He had to learn that he wasn't as strong as he imagined himself to be. He was giving himself credit for his many talents and his zeal for the Church's mission.

So God had to give him a reality check. God gave him some reality exercises to learn his weakness, and the need for God's power over those weaknesses. He even calls that "thorn in the flesh" "an angel of Satan to beat me." What is that "thorn in the flesh" that he refers to? Take your pick; this is what I found that various authors and commentators suggest: temptation to sexual sins (that's the most common), an eye disease, epilepsy, migraines, malaria or a speech impediment.

What is the "thorn in YOUR side?" What is that humbling reality that causes you to realize your dependence not only on yourself or others, but on God Himself? Is it physical, spiritual, mental, emotional? Whatever that "thorn" is, that life or nature has given you, God's strength and hope to live with and in spite of that "thorn" makes life worth living, and makes faith worth believing.

God's words to St. Paul are the same words directed to us: "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness."

I had a little bit of apprehension thirty years ago when I was assigned to Our Lady Queen of Apostles Parish in Hamtramck, only two miles away from the Detroit neighborhood where I was raised. I was grateful to be close enough to know some of the people there and far enough that they didn't remember me when I was in diapers! Even when I went to New Baltimore as pastor, I soon learned that ten of my Denby High School classmates were in that parish! When my sister Kathy was working at the bank, it seemed like half of the people here at St. Martin's were her customers. Because her married last name was different than mine, folks didn't know we were related. So she could give me "the skinny" on some of you folks! And it was all GOOD!

What is the "thorn" that Jesus has to deal with, not only in His own time on earth, but in our own time now in the present? Is it physical? No, that would come later when He would be handed over, made to suffer and die a horrific death. For the moment, and for us, Jesus bears for the sake of the Gospel all of our physical, emotional, spiritual and psychological wounds.

Despite all the wonders and miracles He has done to this point, the people who thought they knew Jesus best have rejected Him. Offended by Him, they refuse to believe. They thought they "had His number." They did not allow Jesus to surprise them with His wisdom and power. He was amazed at their lack of faith. They were envious that someone from their home town had done so well.

In this Gospel reading, we see the painful truth of what happens when we share our faith with those who knew us before we became alive in our faith. Like Jesus, we are rejected, misunderstood, and disbelieved by people who don't understand why we changed. They feel threatened by our example; they don't want to consider their own need to change. We sound like fanatics to them, and they use this as an excuse to remain uninfluenced by our testimony.

Jesus changed after He quit living an ordinary life in an ordinary town with an ordinary job to begin a ministry that would instigate persecution, and He

invited everyone to follow his example. How crazy does that sound?

Making matters worse, He was now spending all of his time trying to change the status quo of everyone's normal life and their normal ways of relating to others and their normal attitudes about religion -- even affecting the status quo of those who did not want to follow him and become like him.

People don't like to be challenged, especially when it means giving up what's familiar and comfortable. However, this is not a reason for us to keep silent. We have been called by Christ to share the Good News about him. We must make it known that conversion is important, or else we are sinning against Him and against those who need to learn more about Him.

We fulfill this mission by sharing our personal conversion stories and our spiritual insights, and especially by making this an *invitation* rather than by *demanding* that others change. Especially with spouses and adult children. Sometimes parishioners ask me: How come my spouse or adult child isn't at the same level of spirituality that I am? And I ask them, when did YOUR conversion happen? Did anyone else force it? Was it instantaneous or gradual? Give THEM the same opportunity. In the meantime, inspire them by your example.

If you're being rejected because of believing and living out your faith publically, remember that Jesus understands how you feel. Let the sting of their rejection be replaced by an awareness that God is very pleased with you. You are becoming a joyful, missionary disciple!

In what ways has Jesus changed your life? Who are the people that misunderstand these changes? Now think of those who do understand you: What can you do to enjoy their company more often? When have you been rejected because of your spiritual growth? What have you learned about how to lovingly respond to their objections? What are your frustrations in doing this? Have you ever walked away like Jesus did when he left his hometown?

Anyone who stands for goodness and truth and who stands in solidarity with all of their brothers and sisters throughout the world cannot travel through this life unhurt. Rather, they bear the same battle scars that identify those who struggle for justice. However, they – and we – are stronger for the struggle

because we cling to that promise God made and continues to make to each of us: “My grace is sufficient for you; my power is made perfect in weakness.” As weak, scarred and vulnerable as you and I are, God’s grace and power are always with us to sustain us in the fight, the race, the faith. And that is all the comfort that we need. AMEN!