

Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

The first reading for Mass this Sunday is from the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel, who addressed the people of Israel while they were in forced exile, far from home, around the year 593 B.C. The prophet Ezekiel, as God's messenger, spoke to the people of their stubbornness, rebellion, and refusal to listen to God.

The mission of the prophet Ezekiel was to awaken in the hearts of God's people the need for getting back on the right path of God's commands, especially embodied in the Ten Commandments, given to Moses on Mount Sinai hundreds of years earlier.

Ezekiel prophesied not for his own benefit, of course, but for the good of God's people, emphasizing that God is in their midst and that he is the one true God, to be obeyed always. The Ezekiel reading this Sunday acts as a backdrop for this Sunday's Gospel message about the blindness of the people that Jesus encountered in his public ministry.

The Gospel passage today concerns the rejection of Jesus by his own people. In the Gospel of Saint Mark there is a recurring theme of opposition to Jesus, culminating in the betrayal and crucifixion of the Lord. Leading up to that, the teaching of Jesus ultimately incites the religious leaders to plot Jesus' death. The leaders go so far as to attribute the deeds of Jesus to an alliance with Satan. Nothing, of course, could be farther from the truth.

Along with the religious elite, people of Jesus' own town and among his relatives reject the miracles, teaching and ultimately Jesus himself. Despite their perplexity and hostility, Jesus nonetheless is the Son of God, endowed with wisdom and power from the Father, who sent his Son into the world as Redeemer of the human race. The humble human origins of Jesus, born not in wealth and luxury, are a stumbling block for the people. Not being the apparent disciple of a great master (if the people only knew!), Jesus was known by his relatives, but considered just "one of them," without outstanding traits.

Jesus was in some ways a scandal to his relatives, and his home town failed to see the prophetic mission of Jesus and so rejected it. That did not stop Jesus, though, for we are told, "He made the rounds of the neighboring villages instead." To that we might add: and look what happened. The ends of the earth now know of the saving power of our God in Jesus Christ! Many still reject the message, but many adhere to it as well.

In the context of being rejected, Jesus cites a presumably already existing proverb: "No prophet is without honor except in his native place, among his own kindred, and in his own house." "Familiarity breeds contempt," as another proverb expresses it. In any case, experience teaches that a prophetic voice is more likely to be heeded by those who are not so close to the prophet.

What is lacking on the people's part is faith. Jesus does not lack power to do what he does, but the people do not accept it as real. The lack of faith that he encountered "distressed" or "amazed" Jesus, the Gospel tells us. Unbelief is an obstacle to Jesus' power, because his miracles are signs and works of faith. He himself says that in various places: "your faith has made you well" (see Mark 5:34; also, Matthew 9:22 and Luke 17:19).

The Greek word used to express “made you well” or “has cured you” means to preserve and rescue from death, to keep one alive, but it can also mean spiritual salvation, which in any case is more important than physical cures.

Another way to think of the reality of having faith is this: confidence in Jesus, what we call faith, is a channel of restoration, which means being open to God’s action in one’s life. The power that Jesus possessed effects the cures described in the Gospels, as well as in our lives today. The power of Jesus is more easily put into action where faith exists. The faith of some people described in the Gospels enabled them to receive healing, just as a lack of faith easily thwarted the action of Jesus, as described in the Gospel passage for this Sunday.

May we possess the necessary faith, receptivity to the action of Jesus, in our daily lives. The Lord is ready and willing to assist us in our needs, great and small.

Lord increase our faith!