

Homily for 14th Sunday of the Year in Ordinary Time 2018

Have you ever had a splinter under a finger nail? It is at once painful and difficult to get out. Such an injury, like a toothache, small though they be, can distract us completely. The whole world becomes the pain we experience in that small wound.

Is that the kind of thing St Paul speaks of saying he has a “thorn in the flesh?” Many have speculated what this was for Paul. He prayed for it to go away. But it remained. But whatever it was it certainly seemed to be a hindrance to his mission. Otherwise he would not have mentioned it.

For us such a thorn might be another person who really gets under our skin. But we cannot escape them. We may have to work or even live with that person. Internally it might be our own personality which is prone to anxiety for example. That can be debilitating. Our thorn might even be a habitual failure or moral weakness.

The path to holiness does not always mean we need to extract those thorns. It may not even be possible. The sense of Paul is that we do not become holy in that way, not just in spite of them, but through them.”My grace is enough for you, my power is at its best in weakness.” That was the Lord’s message for him. It is the same in prayer. Distractions are always with us. So we cannot wait till we get rid of them. We pray through them.

The very distraction of the pain of his thorn kept Paul grounded. His was a zealous personality. We all know of people whose zeal for some cause or some religion can make them fanatical. They are so caught up in their own ideas and fantasies and their conviction that they are in the right. Paul needed that thorn, as it were, that humbling experience, to remind him that it is by grace that we are saved.

We are not accustomed to speak of Jesus as a prophet very often. John the Baptist yes. For us a prophet seems a bit inadequate a title for Jesus. It also brings Mohammad to mind whose title, The Prophet, is at the centre of Islam. We do not like to compare Jesus with Mohammad. But in his life people did speak of Jesus as a prophet. Jesus referred to himself as one in the Gospel today. Like Jeremiah and Ezekiel, Jesus performed prophetic symbolic actions, for example, in his table fellowship with outcasts, his choice of a donkey to enter Jerusalem, his clearing of the Temple area, his washing of feet. Prophecy was a key aspect of Jesus’ mission.

Again like the prophets of old he experienced rejection. He was rejected by his home towns people. He experienced the thorn in the flesh of every prophet, “A prophet is only despised in his own country and among his own relations and in his own house.” That was the experience of Ezekiel as we heard too.

It is not unrealistic to suspect that such was the fate of Paul too as he went about his missionary journey. This very personal experience of weakness of St Paul seems to have helped him put God’s grace at the front and centre of the Christian life. Our weakness leaves room for God’s strength to work in us. Jesus weakness disclosed on the cross opened the world to the working of God’s grace in us all. This is particularly important to remember when we try to make sense of the many problems our world faces. When we feel powerless to change ourselves or our world we do what we can and let God do what God does.

Fr Graham