

Commentary on the Gospel for Sat, Jun 22nd 2013

St. Paul did not spend much of his letter writing time describing his own mystical experiences, and in the common Christian imagination he is rarely categorized with the great mystics of Church history. But today's first reading invites us into a very intimate place in his prayer even beyond his astounding encounter with the Risen Christ on the road to Damascus. In careful third person description, Paul helps his reader appreciate the ground of his faith experience – like Ignatius fifteen centuries later who referred to himself as “the pilgrim,” Paul simply calls himself “a man he knows.” About this man Paul will “boast,” but in the first person Paul will only tell us about his weaknesses and sin. In both cases he is really not ascribing any credit to himself, but only to God in Jesus. When Paul is less than perfect or even when he sins through his weakened human choices, Christ's grace redeems him – and Paul will boast of this redemptive grace. When Paul encounters Jesus in prayer and discovers the mystery of God hidden for generations and now revealed, Paul gives all credit to Jesus for the revelation, not to any merit on his own part. BUT, Paul does want the reader to know that he is a credible witness of Jesus Christ – one to be taken seriously because he knows Jesus through his mercy and through his generous inner revelation. He is sharing in both cases what can only be described as mystical experience to give his readers a sense of his qualifications for being an apostle - a trustworthy witness of Jesus and his work of proclaiming the Reign of God. Unlike the disciples and apostles who actually accompanied Jesus in his human life and mission, Paul knows Jesus because he has been privileged to share in the mind of the Risen Christ – and he challenges all of us to share his experience. If Paul is a credible witness – and the Church has certainly thought so down through the centuries – then so can we be if we are willing to make ourselves available as Paul has done by prayer, apostolic work, suffering and endurance of the various thorns in the side that we have to endure on behalf of the work of the Kingdom. Paul's “thorn in the flesh” is rather equivalent to the expressions of “pain in the neck” that often apply to those we don't easily work with. But the “salvific” pain-in-the-neck is not just anyone we don't like to see coming into the office first thing Monday full of complaints, rather it is a pain-in-the-neck within our work on behalf of Christ. When we are doing the loving thing, when we are teaching or preaching or nursing, or cleaning out files for the sake of the promotion of God's Reign, then those who serve as “pains” to us are graces to make us stronger – because in the weakness we feel from their intrusion into our lives, God's grace is made both necessary and welcome. All of us have such pains – occasionally they are other people, sometimes they are rules and regulations, sometimes they are aspects of our work that we find tedious, time consuming and draining – but they are part of our mission – and, endured graciously, they bring about our perfection – which we can't boast about because the fact that we consider them pains is already a sign of our weakness and incompetence! In the Gospel passage we feast on today we discover with joy that we can fully trust God's grace to care for us as long as seeking God's Reign is our highest priority. In this day and age those who have responsibility for the university here at Creighton, those who run programs or do other important work, can feel frustrated and frightened that there never seems to be enough money. Today's Gospel reminds all of us that there is more than enough of whatever we need if we are about seeking the Reign of God. Ignatius of Loyola is famous for his challenge to do everything for the “greater glory of God.” Such greater glory is the “magis” we speak of so often in Jesuit institutions. It is not about doing our best at something – it is not even about BEING our best. The Magis is about seeking, as the one and only purpose for our existence as persons or institutions, the greater glory of God. If, as Church, we fail to seek God's Reign, we fail to be what we are. If as a Christian my whole life is not ordered to serving God's Kingdom, I cannot count on God's support and resources. If I am not ordered to serving God's Kingdom my whole life as a human person is a complete waste –

because ONLY in God's Kingdom can I – we – all of us – flourish as the human persons we were created to be. Of course this is a faith statement. I can only prove it the way Mary does in her Magnificat, and the way Paul does in his boasting: it is all about God. When I fail, God makes up the difference, and unworthy as I might be, God has chosen me for his service and companionship. I need not fear what I will have to wear; I need not wonder if there will be enough of any resource to do whatever it is that will serve the GREATER glory of God. I am baptized; I have been called by name to serve God's reign and so have all our baptized brothers and sisters. On a summer Saturday in June that knowledge offers enough joy to echo the gratitude of the flowers of the field and the lambs on the road to mountain pastures and clean water!

Eileen Burke-Sullivan