

Commentary on the Gospel for Sun, Oct 9th 2011

An angry mob gathered around Paul of Tarsus, this little but loud missionary of Jesus Christ. They didn't want to hear what he had to say. It was time to shut him up, permanently. So they threw light stones at him, and then dropped heavy on him. They left him, unconscious and presumed to be dead. At other times, Paul was beaten with rods, and whipped. He was left cold and homeless in the elements. He was even shipwrecked, drifting at sea wondering if he would drown. He survived all this. Eventually, though, Paul was tried for treason before the Romans in Jerusalem. All expected him to be sentenced to death, but Paul used his status as a Roman citizen to appeal to the emperor and have his trial moved to Rome. In Rome he preached and converted gentiles right in the heart of the empire. This continued until the Emperor Nero had him beheaded.

Besides all his physical difficulties, Paul had to deal with himself. He had a fiery temper, and he knew it. He carried the guilt of having persecuted Christians. He also carried a secret problem. He called it a thorn in his flesh. He cried to God to heal him, but was told that God's grace was sufficient for him. Paul was a weak man, but he was given the Power of the Lord, and it was this Power that brought Eternal Life to people throughout the Mediterranean world, and beyond, throughout the ages and to the ends of the earth. When Paul complained about his humanity, God told him that his very weakness gave evidence to the Power of Christ, "My power is made perfect in your weakness." Paul did not complain about his new life as an apostle of Christ. He embraced it. He embraced Jesus Christ. It was Jesus the Christ who was acting in Paul, and Paul knew it.

So, we come to today's first reading where Paul is addressing his beloved Philippians. He is elated that they are concerned about his welfare, but he tells them not to worry about him. He knows how to live in poverty and how to enjoy abundance. He knows joy. He knows suffering. He also knows that he is not alone. He tells them that he can do all things in Him who strengthens him. And so can we. Our lives have a great deal in common with Paul's life. There are times that we have joined with what the mob says is right, and participated in the stoning of Christianity. Perhaps we let ourselves go, go bad, and then mocked those who were trying to live a decent life. Perhaps we heard a voice telling us to follow, and we ran the other way. But God did not give up on us. Perhaps he knocked us to the ground and then called us out of blindness into His Light. Maybe we suddenly realized that the main problem of our lives was within us, not around us. And so we call upon the Lord to heal us and guide us. Then we trust in Him when he says that He is With Us Always. We trust Him to such a degree that we proclaim with Paul, "I can do all things in Him who strengthens me."

And life throws it's worst at us. A loved one dies. A husband or wife, a parent or grandparent, or, far worse, a child, a baby dies. And everything around us and within us hurts. For a fleeting moment we think, "My life is shattered." But then, we stop and say, "I can't make it through this alone. And I am not alone. He is with me. I can and will survive, and will be more caring and loving to others who suffer like I suffer. I can do all things in Him who strengthens me."

A job is lost and there is slim hope of any sort of replacement position. In fact, there is not much hope of any job at all. Self doubt begins infecting us to such a point that a person enters a depression, perhaps not clinical, but certainly emotional. But then, the person says, "I am not going to let this be about me. I will make the best of whatever opportunities I can find, and if I can't find any, I will create work. I can get out of my funk. I can do it because He gives me the strength to get back into action. I

can do all things in Him who strengthens me.”

And a Mom or Dad is out of gas, physically, emotionally, even spiritually drained. “How can I be a good mother, a good father? It is too hard. I am not good enough. I just screamed at my daughter, and now she’s in her room crying. The children deserve better. Maybe I should just run away. But I can’t run away. They need me. I won’t run away. God placed me here. He made me a mother, a father. I’ve got to draw closer to Him. I can do this. I can do all things in Him who strengthens me.”

And a high school or college student is afraid. “How can I get through trigonometry? I barely made it through algebra. What is the use of studying this or anything for that matter? I just want to give up. But I can’t give up. I have to be prepared for whatever it is that God is calling me to. I can do it and will do it.....in Him and with Him. I can do all things in Him who strengthens me.”

And the prostitute who is told that her sins are forgiven stands up and walks away with dignity, and with the Lord. And the alcoholic who has embraced sobriety, stands up and walks with dignity and with the Lord. And the drug addict who is fighting the good fight against his self destruction, walks on with the Lord, confident, not in himself, but in the One who strengthens Him.

What are we really called to do in life? What are our lives really about? The skirmishes of life, skirmishes with our family, our spouse, skirmishes in school, or work, or lack of work, difficulties with friends and those who do not want our friendship, all those things that really irritate us; none of these are what life is about. Life is about Jesus Christ and proclaiming His Presence to a world that longs for Him. I can do this. We can do this, no matter what difficulties we might have, no matter what challenges we may need to overcome. Here is what matters: Jesus Christ is what matters, or, more correctly, He is the One who matters. We can live His Life and thereby have purpose in our lives. We can do this because He does it with us. We can do all things in Him who strengthens us.

Jesus took a man named Saul, a man who murdered Jesus’ first followers, and transformed Saul into Paul, the great apostle of the early Church. The Lord does this for each of us. He takes each of us, with all our humanity, with all our weakness, and He uses us to make Him present to others.

There is nothing that matters that we cannot do with Him. I, we, can do all things in Him who strengthens us.

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