

## **The Fourteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time** (Year B)

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| <i>First Reading</i>      | Ezekiel 2:2-5  |
| <i>Response</i>           | ...so our eyes look to the Lord our God,<br>till he have mercy upon us.                              |
| <i>Psalm</i>              | Psalm 123:1-2, 2, 3-4  |
| <i>Second Reading</i>     | 2 Corinthians 12:7-10  |
| <i>Gospel Acclamation</i> | The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,<br>because he has anointed me to preach good news to the<br>poor. |
| <i>Gospel</i>             | Mark 6:1-6   |

The fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time for year B brings us to one of the most mysterious passages in all of 2 Corinthians — one of the passages that I always get asked about by my students. It's the passage about St. Paul's mysterious thorn in the flesh. So let's look at this together and see if I can unravel the mystery of what Paul's thorn in the flesh really was. So 2 Corinthians chapter 12, verse 7-10, Paul says these words:

And to keep me from being too elated by the abundance of revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan, to harass me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I besought the Lord about this, that it should leave me; but he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities; for when I am weak, then I am strong.<sup>1</sup>

Alright, it's actually really rather fascinating to me that this passage was chosen for the lectionary, precisely because it is so mysterious and it's such a highly

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

controverted passage — very mysterious, very mystical passage. In fact, all of 2 Corinthians 12, if you back up to the verses that the Church didn't give us... verses 1-6 are about Paul's revelations, his *apokalypseis*, these visions that he experienced where he actually describes being caught up into the third Heaven, whether in the body or out of the body (he doesn't know) and hearing mysteries that he cannot repeat. So Paul has a mystical experience that happens, he says — fourteen years ago happened to him.

And the reason he brings that up, by the way, is because some people in Corinth were criticizing Paul and saying that he had no knowledge; he didn't understand the mysteries. They were kind of criticizing and questioning the authenticity of his apostleship. So he retorts back at them by calling them false apostles, servants of Satan. He doesn't mince any words, but he also is kind of pushed into telling the Corinthians about his own experiences of authentic revelations from Christ.

At the same time, as soon as he does that — as soon as he mentions this lofty experience of being caught up and seeing into the third Heaven and hearing mysteries — he immediately pulls it back around and focuses not on his exalted and extraordinary experiences of mystical vision, but on his suffering and on his weakness as the real testament to his apostleship. So that's kind of the broader context here, because Paul is always preaching the cross. If you want to see if I'm a real apostle, just look at whether there's a cross in my life or not ... is effectively what he's saying.

So in that context, he makes this mysterious reference to a thorn that was given to him in the flesh. And unfortunately, he doesn't tell us what he means. So for centuries — literally, centuries, two millennia now — commentators on Paul have been fascinated by this thorn in the flesh, because Paul says that he asks God three times to take it away from him. So it's obviously serious, it was painful, and it was something that Paul wanted to be delivered from. And yet, three times God refused him. Christ refused him and then uttered these powerful and beautiful words:

“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”

I think that's one of the reasons this passage is given to us, because that is such a ... first of all, it's one of the few words of Jesus that are outside of the Gospel. We don't get many words of the risen Christ, and whenever the risen Christ speaks, we want to pay attention. So this is a fairly unique passage, not just in the New Testament, but especially in the letters of Paul. The risen Christ speaks. And it also reveals to us that for Paul, he doesn't boast in his power; he boasts in his weakness:

...for when I am weak, then I am strong.

So that is a very paradoxical but also very essential message for any Christian. Life in Christ is not a walk in the park. It's not... at the end of the day, for Paul, it's not ultimately characterized by extraordinary visions and glorious consolations. Life in Christ in this world means sharing in the cross. As Paul said in Romans 8, we will be glorified with Him provided that we suffer with Him. So Paul always brings it back to the suffering. The question is, what is the nature of this suffering? And so I just want to walk you through three major suggestions in the history of interpretation.

So the first thing I'll say — let me start by saying that the Church has no doctrine about the thorn in the flesh. As far as I know, the magisterium has never ruled on what Paul meant, never given any definitive interpretation to the thorn in the flesh. So we're just speculating here, but we're going to speculate with the saints and hear what they had to say about it. So there are three major options in the history of interpretation.

Option number one: the thorn in the flesh is a metaphor for Paul's opponents. It's a metaphor for the suffering Paul experienced from the opponents that he was fighting against — the false apostles — who were badmouthing him, gossiping about him, criticizing him, questioning him in the Church at Corinth. And if you've ever had a thorn in your finger or in your foot or something like that, the pain doesn't go away, right? It's constant. Until you pull it out, it's going to aggravate you. So St. John Chrysostom, for example, in the 4th century, said that the thorn in the flesh was the suffering that Paul underwent at the hand of:

...“all the adversaries of the word.”<sup>2</sup>

So in other words, his opponents were the cause of his suffering. Now the strength of this interpretation is that Paul, when he mentions the thorn in the flesh, he also calls it “a messenger of Satan” sent to harass him. Sure enough, early in 2 Corinthians, Paul describes the false apostles in 2 Corinthians 11:13-14 as servants of Satan.

So if you read 2 Corinthians 12 in light of 2 Corinthians 11, you could make the case that the messenger from Satan that Paul is describing here, the thorn in his flesh, is one of these false apostles who’s been opposing him, causing him problems, persecuting him, and criticizing him. Paul has asked God to eliminate these opponents, and He’s left them there.

The weakness of this particular interpretation (of Paul’s opponents) is that it seems to leave unexplained the image of a thorn in the flesh, which again, although flesh can sometimes point to the fallen world in Paul, it also points to the suffering human body, the flesh.

So the second major interpretation that people have suggested over the centuries — in addition to Paul’s opponents — is that the thorn in the flesh refers to a fleshly temptation experienced by Paul himself, like sins of the flesh, for example. You see this primarily in the western tradition in which the Latin Vulgate translated the term “thorn in the flesh” as *stimulus carnis*, as the stimulus of the flesh or the sting of the flesh.

So for example, Thomas Aquinas, in his *Commentary on II Corinthians*, proposes one of the options for interpretation, that what Paul was speaking about here was:

“Concupiscence arising from [the] flesh”...

...by which Paul:

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<sup>2</sup> John Chrysostom, *Homilies on 2 Corinthians* 26.2 [trans. *NPNF1* 12:400]

... “was troubled a great deal”...<sup>3</sup>

In other words, according to this view, Paul experienced physical temptations that he asked God to deliver him from. Now the strength of this interpretation is that it makes sense of the fleshly nature of the torment that Paul is suffering. It puts an adequate emphasis and explains the image of Paul’s *sarx*, the flesh.

Another strength is that in 1 Corinthians chapter 7, Paul describes physical fleshly temptations as something that can be prompted by Satan. So for example, in 1 Corinthians chapter 7, verse 5, he talks about abstinence between husbands and wives, and he says:

Do not refuse one another except perhaps by agreement for a season, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, lest Satan tempt you through lack of self-control.

So again, fleshly temptations Paul will elsewhere associate with the activity of Satan. So when he says “a thorn in the flesh”, “a messenger of Satan” was sent to “harass me”, figures like Aquinas and other western Fathers saw this — especially with the Latin translation “stimulus of the flesh”, *stimulus carni* — as a description of concupiscence, effectively... fleshly temptation.

The weakness of this interpretation is that the Latin translation is, shall we say, less than literal. So *stimulus carnis* is not what ... it’s not the stimulus of the flesh, it’s a thorn in the flesh. So it’s kind of a mistranslation, some scholars have argued. And the other problem is that elsewhere, Paul — for example, in 1 Corinthians chapter 7, verse 7, same chapter — describes himself as having received the gift of celibacy, the gift of chastity. 1 Corinthians 7:

I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own special gift from God...

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on II Corinthians* no. 473

So you don't get the sense elsewhere in Paul, at least, that chastity is a particular struggle for him. So that's one of the arguments some scholars have used against that. So, strengths and weaknesses. But this has been the majority interpretation in the west.

A third interpretation that is ancient but has picked up steam in modern times is that the thorn in the flesh refers to a physical ailment — some kind of physical suffering that Paul undergoes and in particular, to problems with his eyes. So let me explain why that interpretation is there. So for example, Jerome, in his *Commentary on Galatians*, suggests that what Paul refers to here is:

“Some bodily infirmity” ... <sup>4</sup>

Jerome doesn't specify exactly what. Tertullian, another Latin Father earlier than Jerome, actually said that Paul is referring to headaches and earaches — that he had a pain in the head or a pain in the ear. In other words, some kind of chronic physical pain that he was suffering from that he asked God to deliver him from, but that God (the Lord) refused to deliver him from. And if you've ever suffered from chronic pain — chronic physical pain, the kind that just doesn't go away, like the pain of a thorn in the flesh — it's understandable that Paul would beg God to deliver him from this. Because chronic pain is torture. It is excruciating.

So that is another theory that some of the Church Fathers had. Now in modern times, scholars have kind of run with that a little bit further and suggested that not only did Paul have a physical ailment, but that we can actually infer that the physical ailment he's referring to here (the thorn in his flesh) were problems with his eyesight. Let me tell you why modern scholars think that problem with eyesight would be the only physical ailment we can see that there's evidence for. So for example, in Galatians ... if you look at Galatians chapter 4, verse 13-15, listen to this. This is really important. When Paul is writing to the Church at Galatia, he says this:

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<sup>4</sup> Jerome, *Commentary on Galatians* 4:13 (T. Scheck)

...you know it was because of a bodily ailment that I preached the gospel to you at first; and though my condition was a trial to you, you did not scorn or despise me, but received me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus.

So pause. Here Paul is saying that for whatever reason, some kind of physical ailment is what led him to stop at the Church of Galatia, and they took him in and they cared for him. And what's interesting, it says in verse 15, Paul keeps going:

What has become of the satisfaction you felt? For I bear you witness that, if possible, you would have plucked out your eyes and given them to me.

That's a very interesting way to describe the hospitality of the Corinthians — I'm sorry, of the Galatians — unless it was some kind of problem with his eyes that Paul was suffering. It would make sense in context that if he referred to a bodily ailment, and then he says:

...you would have plucked out your eyes and given them to me.

That he had some kind of severe problem with his eyes. Another clue — just a clue, but possible — that Paul had eye problems is in Acts chapter 9, whenever he converts and when he encounters Jesus on the road to Damascus, the risen Christ. And he has his famous conversion experience. Chapter 9, verse 8, he says:

...when his eyes were opened, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus.

And then eventually it goes on to say, several days later, verse 18, once he accepts the Lord Jesus:

And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes and he regained his sight.

So we have evidence from the Acts of the Apostles that Paul actually experienced temporary blindness, to such a degree that he had to be led around by the hand, and

then some kind of scales fell away from his eyes after he was converted. It sounds in context like it's not just a metaphor but some kind of actual physical ailment.

And then last, but certainly not least, at the end of Galatians itself, when Paul addresses the Galatians, he actually takes the pen away from his scribe and signs the end of the letter himself, and he says (in chapter 6, verse 11):

See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand.

So some scholars have suggested he writes these giant letters because he can't see anything, so he has to write with large script in order to be able to read. So that's the third option, that it's a physical ailment.

Now I'm just going to confess to you, I like option three the best. At the same time, I should say that I may be projecting, because I haven't been able to see a thing since I was in fifth grade. And it is a trial for a scholar to have problems with your eyesight, so I can imagine somebody like Paul who was a scholar, a rabbi, a student of the Scriptures, not being able to see and having difficulty reading and writing ... would be the kind of chronic difficulty — especially if it was coupled with severe eye problems like we see in the book of Acts, even temporary blindness — would be the kind of trial that I could imagine him praying to be delivered from.

And so for me, there's enough clues there to suggest that that might be the most plausible explanation of that particular verse. At the same time, it is a little strange ... one weakness of it would be, why would problems with eyesight ... why would he describe that as a messenger from Satan? It's an interesting way to describe what we would just consider a physical ailment.

So of course, there is this fourth option I almost left out, which is that we just don't know. It's unknowable. In fact, Augustine in his writing *On Nature and Grace*, he mentions a thorn in the flesh and he says:



“Whatever that was”... <sup>5</sup>

Because he recognizes that there’s an enigmatic and mysterious dimension to it. And I think that might even be (in the end) fortunate, because it makes the experience that Paul undergoes of some kind of chronic, lasting, torturous suffering — that God has the power to deliver him from but chooses not to deliver him from — something we can all identify with, the mystery of a thorn in the flesh. Because it provides Christ the opportunity to teach Paul that at the end of the day, “my grace is sufficient for you” *and* “my power is actually made perfect” in your weakness.

So weakness, hardships, insults, persecutions, calamities, or whatever this thorn in the flesh was, these are not impediments to Christ living in Paul. But they actually make the power of Christ shine forth more resplendently through Paul as Paul accomplishes these astonishing miracles, these astonishing conversions of so many Gentiles in the midst of his weakness, suffering, his persecution, and whatever this thorn in the flesh might have been.

So I’ll end with a quote from John Chrysostom on this, where he says:

Paul wanted to be delivered from these things, but when God told him otherwise he accepted it and was even glad about it. There is consolation in affliction and grace in consolation.<sup>6</sup>

Beautiful, beautiful reflection of John Chrysostom — Paul’s abandonment to Divine Providence. He’s a human being. He doesn’t want to suffer. He asks the Lord to remove the thorn, but when it’s clear that it’s not the Lord’s will for Him to take it away but for his power to be made perfect in weakness, Paul accepts it and gives us those powerful words:

...when I am weak, then I am strong.

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<sup>5</sup> Augustine *On Nature and Grace* 27, 31

<sup>6</sup> John Chrysostom, *Homilies on 2 Corinthians* 26:3-4 (trans. NPNF1 12:401)

And that's a lesson for us all as we live out the mystery of the cross and the mystery of our own thorn in the flesh (whatever it might be), to remember those words:

...when I am weak, then I am strong.