

Serving Berlin's English-speaking Catholic Community since 1957



**Catholic Community**

**Member of the English-Speaking Mission**

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**Our Mission Statement:** The All Saints Catholic Community is a fully integrated, multicultural community with English as its unifying language. It is an open, warm, welcoming, inclusive community that prays together and celebrates its unity in diversity.

**July 15, 2012, Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time**

**Celebrant: Fr Wolfgang Schonecke, M.Afr.**

### **... success isn't an option when one works for Yahweh**

Do we expect God to work mighty deeds in mighty ways on our behalf? If we expect this, then we shouldn't listen to today's readings. Our three authors (Ezekiel, Paul and Mark) aren't familiar with that kind of God. And throughout Scripture, the normal way to discover God's will is to listen to the community's prophets. So prophets are essential to salvation history. Yet God frequently lets those unique individuals twist in the wind. He rarely steps in to help them even when their lives are in danger.

**Ezekiel** (Ez 2,2-5) cannot say he wasn't warned about this lack of support. In calling him, Yahweh first warns him of the rebellious character of those to whom he is sent. The Israelites are "*hard of face and obstinate of heart.*" Then God basically says: "*You're not going to convince many of them. Their will to resist you will be stronger than your ability to convert them.*"

God must send prophets to the Chosen People – his Covenant with the Chosen People makes this necessary. But God is under no obligation to force anyone to listen to those prophets. The good thing for Ezekiel is that Yahweh recognizes the situation of the prophet. Like all prophets, Ezekiel eventually learns that *success isn't an option when one works for Yahweh.* Weakness, not strength, seems to be the name of the game the prophets have to play.

Even **Jesus**, Yahweh's prophet *par excellence*, discovered this reality. Jesus faces a similar situation in today's gospel (Mk 6,1-6). But here, the attack on Jesus is more personal than the one Ezekiel encountered. "*Where did this man get all this?*" the synagogue crowd asks. In their mind, there is no way Jesus could be a real prophet. "*Is he not the carpenter, the son of Mary, and the brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon? Are not his sisters here with us?*" In other words, "*Who does this guy think he is?*"

We see something important here: God sends prophets, men and women, to convey his message. But for us, these men and women can't possibly be so common or familiar to us as Jesus is to his hometown community.

You might have noticed, this is the only place in the Christian Scriptures which mentions Jesus' occupation. It's certainly not meant to be a compliment, else Matthew wouldn't have later changed it to the "*son of the carpenter*." Carpenters were not too highly thought of in Jesus' day. But even more important is Mark's comment that Jesus was "*not able to perform any mighty deed there ... He was amazed at their lack of faith*." It makes no difference that Jesus is God. His ability to help people is limited by their ability to have faith in him. At this point, he couldn't be weaker – so writes Mark.

Matthew (who wrote later than Mark) really had problems with that, so he switched Mark's "*not able to perform*" to "*he did not perform ...*" A huge difference!

It is interesting (and very revealing) to discover that our evangelists had the same problem as the people of Nazareth. As the gospels progress (from Mark, Matthew and Luke to John) Jesus becomes more and more God and less and less human. Some third and fourth generation Christians were really bothered by the weakness of Jesus. There's no way John, for instance, would ever say in his gospel there was something his Jesus could not do. Jesus eventually becomes much more than just the village carpenter.

Gospel **theology** always wins over historical **reality**.

Yet, writing at least ten years before the first gospel according to Mark, **Paul** takes us back to that reality by mentioning his "*thorn in the flesh*", for Paul this is about his own vulnerability (2 Cor 12,7-10). No one knows exactly what he is talking about, some say it was malaria, others epilepsy. Whatever it is, it puts Paul in a position of weakness. This "*thorn in the flesh*" takes away the force he originally thought he needed to successfully proclaim the risen Jesus.

It leads Paul to utter one of Christianity's most important statements: "*For when I am weak, then I am strong*" (2 Cor 12,10). Or in a different translation: "*Power is made perfect in weakness*." In spite of Paul's fear of being inadequate, many of the people to whom he preaches still end up converting to the New Way of Jesus and his friends.

Instead of being a drawback, his thorn becomes a force they can't resist. As humans, we would rather operate from a position of power than weakness. But our three texts force us to reflect on the strength we possess when we actually are weak. A strength which comes not from us, but from God. A strength we'd never fall back on if weren't forced to be weak.

Through the centuries, organized religions have always been tempted to become powerful entities, to become organizations which impress and enthuse people by their strength and influence.

But attention! We forget that we can be prestigious and important and impressive without being people of faith. Our ancestors in the faith discovered that God only works through the powerless. What a revolutionary concept! It is too bad so many of us, so many of us in the Church, have lost that ancient, essential insight of faith.

cf. <http://www.dignityusa.org/breath>

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