

Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time  
February 3, 2019  
Fr. Rick Lorenz

### Reflection:

I wonder if you've ever been confronted about your religion? Maybe at Christmas time you saw friends and relations who know you go to Church. They don't practice their faith, and they tackle you for your beliefs. It's an awkward feeling being singled out, and it feels like nothing we say can convince them.

You're not alone. In today's Gospel, Jesus faced the same problem. At first "All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth." But it didn't take long for the doubts to come out: "Is not this Joseph's son?" They wanted to confine him to their own notions; to limit him to what they knew. Then he perceived that they wanted to challenge him: "Doctor, cure yourself!" "Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum."

Jesus reminded them that "no Prophet is accepted in his hometown." He expanded the idea of "hometown" to include all of Israel. God didn't send Elijah to one of the chosen people during the drought. Elijah brought relief to "a widow of Zarephath in Sidon." There were many lepers in Israel, but "none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian." The people of Israel had rejected God in favour of idols, so God showed his mercy to others. Being compared to these idolators infuriated the people of Nazareth.

Jer 1:4-5, 17-19  
Ps 71  
1 Cor 12:31-13:13  
Lk 4:21-30

Galileans were regarded with suspicion as "not very Jewish:" neither pure-blooded, nor law-abiding, nor well-studied. They were viewed as outsiders, which made them sensitive. At his words "all in the synagogue were filled with rage." They wanted to hurl Jesus off the cliff, "but Jesus passed through the midst of them and went on his way."

It's hard to be a prophet! God made this clear to Jeremiah. "They will fight against you, but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, says the Lord, to deliver you." A prophet doesn't rely on his own strength, but on God. This is what he said to Jeremiah: "I for my part have made you today a fortified city, an iron pillar, and a bronze wall." This strength is echoed in the psalm: "you are my rock and my fortress."

But what is this strength? Was Jeremiah like Superman, able to catch a bullet with his teeth? Power like that would have filled with him confidence. Clearly not. Many of the prophets paved the way for the apostles, who followed Jesus into martyrdom.

The strength of the prophets, the apostles, and all Christians who tell "the deeds of salvation" is their weakness. In a different letter, Paul told the Corinthians what he heard from God: "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness (2 Cor 12:9)." Because Paul had infirmities, deficiencies and constraints there was space within him for grace.

There was room in him for the Holy Spirit and the gifts he brought. Paul was a sinner, "the least of all apostles, not fit to be called an apostle (1 Cor 15:9)." These are his own words: he accused himself, because he had persecuted the Church. We do not say that he was full of grace. But the grace he received was enough that he could say, "when I am weak, then I am strong (2 Cor 12:10)." God had appointed Jeremiah "prophet to the nations." But the strength in Paul let him bring the Gospel to the gentiles; it took him all the way to Rome.

Still you wonder, how can weakness be strength? Because weakness makes room for grace; it makes room for love. Paul tells us, "If I speak in the tongues of human beings and of Angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal." Love perfects all the virtues within us. If we don't have love, then prophetic powers, understanding, knowledge and faith leave us with nothing. If we don't have love, then generosity and even self-sacrifice can gain us nothing. The love that Paul is speaking of is not sentimental love, but charity. Don't think of charity as giving money to various causes. Charity is a virtue. It lets us love God above all things for his own sake, and to love our neighbours as ourselves. It is the love that God has for us, revealed by Jesus, and given to us so that we can love each other. Charity is the fruit of the Spirit and the fullness of the Law. It lets us love our enemies, making neighbours of those far away, so that we can love children and the poor. Paul tells us that "love is kind [and] rejoices in the truth.

It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends."

Prophecy is not enough; sharing the word of God is not enough; telling people what we know about God is not enough. We are called to love. Notice that Jesus mentioned prophets who brought the love of God even to those outside of Israel: Elijah to the widow of Sidon, Elisha to a Syrian. Charity reaches even prophecy fails.

And prophecy does end. Paul says "We know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end." Our Christian hope is that we will reach clarity, forgiveness and charity in heaven. Our knowledge will be complete, so prophecy will end, but love will endure. We will see the face of God, and will understand how He guided creation even through sin and evil. We will see how our charity, our love of God and neighbour, how it reached people even through their doubt and lingered long after their biting words faded away.

For this Eucharist, let us thank God for charity that sets us free. Let us pray for its strength in weakness, so that we can join the prophets and witness to our faith through love.