

Fourteenth Sunday Per Annum (B)

July 5, 2015. *My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness' (2 Cor. 12: 9).*

I have always been intrigued by the meaning of these words by which Our Lord assures the Apostle Paul of the assistance of His grace and the power of this grace at work not only in him but if we will believe it, in us as well. The Second Letter of St. Paul to the Corinthians, from which our second reading is taken, again this Sunday, is the most autobiographical of the Pauline letters. In this epistle St. Paul speaks of his ministry as an Apostle. In many ways it is a personal response to a serious crisis that threatened his very ministry. There were those who questioned whether he was in fact an Apostle. This question is not unlike the opposition encountered by Our Lord by those who took offence at Him (Mk. 6:4): *Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him?*

St. Paul responds to his critics and in so doing he recounts a great deal about his travels, his sufferings, his disappointments, the persecutions he endured, the mystical experiences and visions he had and also of the consolations he received. *My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness' (2 Cor. 12: 9).* In the First Letter to the Corinthians St. Paul had already affirmed that indeed *God chose what is foolish in the eyes of the world to shame the wise [and that] God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong (1Cor. 1:27).* St. Paul understood this and he knew it experientially and so he was able to declare in all humility: *So I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong (2 Cor. 12:10).* His realism is in no way an excuse for sinfulness nor is it a declaration of defeat. It is rather an affirmation of faith and trust in God who wills that we be justified by faith in Christ Jesus (Rom. 3:26).

Some would argue that the question of faith and unbelief is a modern phenomenon. While it is true that atheism is undeniably more prevalent in our times, unbelief even in the very presence of God Himself is not altogether a novel thing, as the Gospel clearly illustrates: *And Jesus could do deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. And Jesus was amazed at their unbelief (Mk. 6:6).* The Russian philosopher and convert to Roman Catholicism Vladimir Solovyev affirmed that *to believe in God is to recognize the existence of that good which conscience attests, which we seek in our life, but which neither nature nor reason gives us; it is to see that this good exists, but outside us and in itself.... Not to believe in good is moral death to believe oneself the source of good is lunacy: the highest wisdom and the principle of moral perfection is to believe in the Divine Source of good, to pray to Him, and to abandon oneself utterly to Him (God, Man and the Church, p. 34-35).* This insight affirms what the Church has always taught: namely, that there is an objective divine and natural law which is not subject to our will and fancy, and to this law we must conform ourselves, despite our weakness and failures.

St. Paul endeavoured to teach these very truths to the Corinthians – a community consisting predominantly of recent converts from Gentile paganism, struggling through trial and error to understand the uniqueness of the Christian faith and to appropriate and live the message of the Gospel. In this same epistle St Paul addressed to them words that are and always will be relevant because human nature does not change. *But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted but not forsaken; struck down but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies (2 Cor.4:7-10).*

God knows of what we are made and He knows our struggles and difficulties. It is however, absolutely essential for us to dispose our hearts and minds to the truth of God which abides for ever. This is why an important part of the worship that we give to God consists in instruction; that we might be *formed by divine teaching*. As we have noted on other occasions, through the ages the truths of Revelation have been affirmed also by the special intervention and instruction of Our Lady, who embodies the obedience of faith and who also reveals to us God's tender love for a fallen humanity, as this image of the Immaculate Heart of Mary beautifully illustrates. This statue was carved at the instructions of Sr. Mary Lucia of Jesus and the Immaculate Heart, one of the three seers to whom Our Lady appeared at Fatima in Portugal in 1917. Sister Lucia interpreted the maternal gesture of the hands: *with the left hand [She is] lifting the son who fell and with the right hand sustains and blesses him. This son is each one of us (A Pathway Under the Gaze of Mary, p.318)*. To each one of us Our Lady says what she said to Sister Lucia: *My Immaculate Heart will be your refuge and the way that leads you to God*. With great confidence we go to Jesus through Mary. More importantly, we go to them with faith and trust in the hope that Our Lord and Our Lady will be amazed not at our unbelief but our deep, confident faith. Let us, each one of us consecrate ourselves to Our Lady's Immaculate Heart; in the sure and certain knowledge that our *perishable nature must put on the imperishable, and this mortal nature must put on immortality (1 Cor. 15:53)*. It is true that *we have this treasure in earthen vessels*, but it is equally true that where sin abounds grace abounds all the more (Cf. *Rom. 5:20*), and *power is made perfect in weakness (2 Cor. 12: 9)*.

In the Epistle to the Hebrews we are told that *faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen (11:1)*. The Apostles wavered and doubted. St Thomas, *doubting Thomas* as he is known wanted proof; and he who doubted and felt Christ's wounds eventually became a witness to the reality of the resurrection. Likewise, we who waver and sometimes fall are lifted up and sustained by the loving hands of our Blessed Mother and we in turn become witnesses to the reality of her loving protection and the steadfast love of God that endures forever. May we never fail to call upon her in all our necessities and trials; and sustained by her and with her may we lead everyone to the Sacred Heart of Jesus (St. Maximilian Kolbe).

