

## FOURTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

*Gospel: Mark 6:1-6*

He left that place and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. On the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, "Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joseph and Jude and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?" And they took offense at him. Then Jesus said to them, "Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house." And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. And he was amazed at their unbelief. Then he went about among the villages teaching.

### REFLECTION 1:

### IF ONLY!

During the summer of 2008, I visited a basilica at the base of the Tatra Mountains – that colossal range of snow-capped peaks bordering Poland and Slovakia. This basilica was erected in honour of Our Lady of Fatima to celebrate and mark the several homecomings of Poland's famous pope, Blessed John Paul II. The tremendous outpouring of welcome that greeted this man of God on his visits home to his native soil stands in sharp contrast to the reception Jesus received on his return visit to his hometown of Nazareth as related by Mark in today's Gospel (Mark 6: 1-6). Like John Paul, Jesus' homecoming was never meant to be a private visit to his own home and his own people. Both came attended by disciples, as God's vicar on earth and as rabbi/teacher. In Jesus' case he went to the local synagogue and taught. His teaching was greeted not with wonder but with contempt, 'they took offence at him' – familiarity had engendered a mixture of envy and resentment. 'Is this not the carpenter – the mere handyman, a 'tekton'? They despised him because of his ordinariness – a man of the people. Jesus even remarks, 'a prophet is not without honour, except in his native place and among his own kin'. Jesus was taken aback by their lack of faith, so much so that he was unable to perform any mighty deed there, apart from curing a few sick people by laying his hands on them. Recording the same incident in Luke's Gospel, the evangelist adds that the townspeople actually hunted Jesus out of Nazareth and would have thrown him to his death from an adjacent hill, only Jesus evaded them. As St. John might have put it, 'his hour had not yet come'.

Many of us are familiar with the 'if only' lament, 'If only I were younger, I'd have more energy'. 'If only I were older, I would relax and retire'. 'If only I had more time ... the 'if only' litany goes on. Well, Ezekiel, whose call to be God's prophet is featured in today's first reading, could have added a few verses to this lament, 'If only God would choose someone else...if only the people would listen...if only they would believe that God had sent me to them'. Jesus could have sung a duet with Ezekiel. He had arrived at his native place and there, where people thought that they knew him best, he received a less than cordial welcome. The resistance to Jesus was that all too common habit of putting others in their box. Perhaps we can imagine Jesus praying, 'If only you could see and believe the gift that God has given you in me'. But like Ezekiel who had championed God's word before him, Jesus would continue to experience rejection and misunderstanding. Through their faithful service, Ezekiel and Jesus were able to accept their struggles as part of their efforts for God. By surrendering their 'if only' desire they were able to find and rely on God and in that strength, there were able to do good and resist evil.

Even Paul in our second reading today had his own personal 'if only' lament. Something or someone he referred to as a 'thorn in the flesh' burdened him. We don't know exactly what this thorn in the flesh was, we can only speculate, but Paul who yearned for its removal, discovered that he was thrown back on a greater reliance on his need for God's grace and a closer intimacy with the Lord whose Gospel he preached. He even learned to boast about his weaknesses. Through the many sufferings Paul endured

for the sake of the Gospel, he cultivated serenity because he was sure that through it all, Christ was near, dwelling within him and sharing his yoke so as to ease his burdens.

When choruses of the 'if only' lament well up in us, we can look to Ezekiel, Paul and Jesus and all those whose faith grew deeper and their love grew truer in the crucible of suffering. Sometimes we may be tempted to chant, 'If only the Vatican were in touch with the issues that plague our world, if only the Curia were less rigid, if only the rich would share their surplus with the poor, if only there were more priests, less bigotry and more merciful love! In the meantime, let us take care not to be that 'thorn' that prompts others to beg God for relief!

## **REFLECTION 2: BEYOND EXPECTATIONS**

On the 11th April 2009 episode of 'Britain's Got Talent,' a woman made her way to the stage and said she wanted to sing like Elaine Paige. The judges barely concealed their amusement and after a few minutes the audience was whispering their doubts and criticisms. How could this apparently unlikely candidate put herself forward like this? This was Susan Boyle's first chance to sing in public. Then amid the sniggering of the audience, she began to sing 'I Dreamed A Dream' from Les Misérables. In that instant scepticism changed to astonishment as Boyle's beautiful voice delivered note after note. The shocked audience who assumed they knew what to expect from her had judged Susan Boyle unfairly. It just shows us that the beauty that matters is often on the inside. Her story was a modern parable and a rebuke to all who judge by appearances and make judgements about who they truly are.

Unfortunately these tendencies continue to divide us; we are reluctant to be open to growth, surprises or new discoveries. Our inclination to judge others unfairly is not a new phenomenon. As we see in today's Gospel, Jesus' hometown friends and neighbours were sure they knew him. Jesus was just the local carpenter's son and they were resentful that he might be more than they gave him credit for. When Jesus first taught in the synagogue in Nazareth, those present were astonished. But soon that sense of awe evaporated because they were unwilling to accept that God was being made known to them in the person of Jesus. Could we make that same mistake?

Jesus' response to them, 'A prophet is not without honour except in his own native place and in his own house' rings out true today as it did during Jesus' ministry. (Mk. 6: 1-6) When someone is familiar to us, we assume that we know that person and we are too often unwilling to let him or her be greater than our opinion of him or her and there lurks the hidden jealousy in us all! Mark tells us that as a result of their close-mindedness, Jesus was not able to perform any mighty deed for his hometown folks. Jesus never forces anyone, and he cannot work in us without our free submission to him in faith. He offers his wisdom and his mighty deeds, and as human beings we are free to respond or not.

From all the readings today, Paul, Ezekiel and Jesus, we take our cue for our daily response to God – open to his grace and the prophets he sends, to make known God's love, mercy and beauty.