

Power In Weakness

Father Frank Matera

Ordinary 14B 2012

In the today's second reading, St. Paul makes a puzzling statement: he says that he prefers to boast of his weaknesses so that the power of Christ might dwell in him; "for when I am weak," he writes, "then I am strong." What could Paul possibly mean by this statement? Why would he, why would anyone, boast in their weakness rather than in their strength? How can we be strong when we are weak? What Paul says here flies in the face of common sense and contradicts the values of our culture. After all, are we not taught to be strong and self-sufficient? Are we not taught to view weakness as a sign of failure? So what does Paul mean when he writes "when I am weak, then I am strong?"

Paul was hardly a weak man. As Christ's apostle, he travelled thousands of miles, mostly on foot, to preach the gospel. On several occasions he was imprisoned and endured hardships of all kinds to spread the gospel. But in the midst of all that he accomplished, Paul learned that God does not reveal his power and wisdom in the way that we expect God to reveal it. Paul learned from experience that more often than not God reveals power and wisdom in the very persons and events that we count as weak and foolish, insignificant and of no account.

For example, when Paul encountered the risen Christ on the road to Damascus, he understood that God had manifested his power and wisdom in the weakness and folly of the cross—in the crucified Christ. Paul understood that God had chosen the weak and the foolish to confound the wise and the powerful of this world. He understood that God could—indeed God did—use the weaknesses and failures of Paul's own life to manifest the power and wisdom of God. In a word, Paul learned the central mystery of the gospel that we must learn if we hope to know God's ways, namely, that God can use what is weak, insignificant and of no account to manifest his power and wisdom.

All of this brings me back to Paul's puzzling statement: "for when I am weak, then I am strong." How is possible to be strong if we are weak? What does the Apostle mean when he says that when he is weak he is strong? The answer can be put this way: *When we acknowledge our weakness and failure, then, and only then, is there room for God to act in our lives.* When we accept the weakness and

brokenness of our lives, then, and only then, is there room for God to change our lives. When we understand that we are not in total control of our life and destiny, then, and only then, is there room for God to transform our lives. In a word, we are strong when we are weak because God can and does work through the weakness and failures of our life.

Consider the reaction of the people of Nazareth in today's Gospel. Although they had heard of Jesus' mighty deeds, they rejected Jesus. They refused to believe that God could work in such an ordinary man whom they thought they knew. They refused to believe that God would manifest such power and strength in this insignificant man from Nazareth. And yet, God was at work in Jesus, reconciling the world to himself!

Do not misunderstand me. I am not saying that the gospel encourages us to be weak and foolish. Rather, I am saying that God can use *even* the weakness and failures of our life to manifest his power and wisdom. Put another way, God's ways are not our ways, and our ways are rarely God's ways. The gospel does not call us to be weak, but it does show us how God can transform even the weakness and brokenness of our lives through the power and wisdom of the cross.

In a few moments we will receive the Eucharist, and we will enter into the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection. In receiving the Eucharist, we will be united with the crucified and risen Christ in whom God manifests his power and wisdom. As we receive this sacrament, we ask for the grace to understand the mystery of the gospel: that when we are weak, then we are strong—not because *we* are strong—but because the power of God is at work in our weakness and the wisdom of God is at work even in our foolishness.