

14th Sunday of Ordinary Time

Cycle B

July 8, 2012 4 and 5:30pm
Saint Margaret Parish, Bel Air

Lincoln's Thistle

President Abraham Lincoln was asked on several occasions why he kept an advisor who was a constant critic.

Lincoln told this story. He said that years ago, he had seen a man attempting to plow his field with an old horse.

The horse had a huge thistle in its side. Lincoln pointed out the thistle to the farmer and offered to remove it.

But the farmer said, *"Don't remove that thistle! If not for it, this old horse wouldn't move an inch."*

Paul's Thorn

Lincoln's story helps us to appreciate Saint Paul's words today.

Paul says that he has a *"thorn in the flesh."* He never says what the thorn is.

Scripture scholars speculate that the *"thorn"* might have been a chronic physical illness, or maybe an emotional problem, or maybe a moral fault. Paul says that he begged the Lord to be freed of this *"thorn,"* but no such luck – it remained.

We may be like Paul in wanting to be freed of the *"thorn in our side."* It might be loneliness, depression, an intestinal disorder, migraine headaches, a bad temper, and on it can go.

We also can have these *"thorns."* And often we just can't get rid of them and they just won't leave us.

Power/Perfection/Weakness

Paul goes on to give an insight into why we have these *"thorns."*

He says that God said to him, *"My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness."* *"Power is made perfect in weakness."*

This is a great insight. Each of us has a certain amount of power – of self-sufficiency, self-determination, even control or influence over others.

Paul's insight is that with this power, we can grow complacent. This is why the farmer did not want Lincoln to remove the thistle from the old horse – the thistle kept him moving!

So, if we are aware of the “*thorn*” in ourselves, we will not get complacent. Instead, we will use whatever “*power*” we have to keep growing.

Also, if we remain aware of our “*thorn*,” we will be much more inclined to be empathetic with others and their weaknesses. We will be slower to judge or put down or be harsh with others.

God says to Paul, “*Power is made perfect in weakness.*” Our human power is made perfect in and through our own weakness.

Divine Power

God also says to Paul, “*My grace is sufficient for you.*”

Here God is speaking of the divine power that helps us to deal with our “*thorns*.” It may sound amazing, but divine energy, love, and power flow through our human weakness.

Here is a great irony of our human condition. When we feel the most broken, divine power is potentially at its greatest.

When we feel weak and vulnerable, we come into touch with the presence and power of God and this is a great strength for us. Over the years, I have listened to some people who are members of Alcoholics Anonymous.

And I have learned that AA and these persons really understand what Paul is saying here. In our human weakness, whatever it is, we need to turn to the Higher Power – to the divine power.

The divine power can help us in our weakness like nothing or no one else. And with this divine power, with God, death in all of its forms can lead to life.

The cross can lead to an empty tomb. Personal weakness can lead to newfound strength.

And all of this can happen because we realize that we cannot do it by ourselves. So, when we are aware of that “*thorn*,” when we are weak, broken, or frustrated, we yield to the divine.

We turn to the only place we can go. We let go of self and yield to our Higher Power – to God, to the Lord Jesus, and then great things can happen.

Conclusion

What insight Paul gives us today!

God says, “*My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.*” And so Paul concludes, “*I will boast of my weakness, in order that the power of Christ may dwell with me.*”