

THE EMMAUS SERIES

14th Sunday Year B

Ezekiel 2:2-5

2 Corinthians 12:7-10

Mark 6:1-6

In our weakness we can find our true strength

Long neglected because of its brevity, the Gospel of Mark is now recognised to be a work of genius. Mark's was the first gospel to be written. Combining something of the freshness of the earliest memories of Jesus' life with an ordered presentation of his material, Mark intends to provide a guide to authentic discipleship – as a following of the crucified Saviour. Today's incident – which tells of the rejection of Jesus by the people of his own town, at the end of his ministry in Galilee - illustrates this. Mark's telling of the story of Jesus comes to its climax with the Saviour's passion – the rejection of the Messiah by God's own people. It seems that Mark was writing for the Christians of Rome in the decade of the first persecutions, calling them to be true disciples of the crucified Christ.

Today's gospel also conveys the sense of immediacy often present in Mark. We have an echo of the reaction of those who witnessed the event (the 'disciples' who accompanied Jesus to his "home town") – they are surprised and disconcerted by the very human reaction of Jesus. Rejected by the people of 'his own country' and 'his own relations', Jesus seems to be disarmed, so that 'he could work no miracle there'. A very human situation and a typical human reaction – Jesus truly became one of us, our brother. What the gospel describes is so true to life that Jesus' summing up has become a proverb: 'No honour for prophets among their own'.

For Mark, of course, as we have seen, this rejection is a foreshadowing of the great rejection described in the final chapters of the gospel - something for which Jesus will repeatedly prepare his disciples as they make their way to Jerusalem: he is to be 'rejected', 'put to death', but he will 'rise again' (Mk 8: 31). The reading from Ezekiel reminds us that a pattern of rejection and rebellion runs through the whole story of the Scriptures. The patient but firm spirit of the Saviour, so well captured in Mark's gospel, is an expression of the patient firmness of God as the divine plan unfolds in the life of an uncooperative and self-centred people.

Jesus made his own a life that shares in our common human experience. In the reading from Paul, the great apostle takes us into his confidence, explaining how he has faced his immense difficulties. It is uncertain what his 'thorn in the flesh' was: a physical ailment perhaps, or more probably the betrayal and persecution he had to suffer from those who should have been his friends. But he has learned the lesson of Mark's gospel, and he gives expression so well to what he has learned in this passage that it is very familiar. Having, at first, 'pleaded with the Lord' to be freed of his trial, he has come to recognise it as discipleship's taking up of the Cross, giving him a share in the divine power unleashed in the world through the Paschal Mystery. He will even 'boast' of his weakness, as bringing an assurance that 'the power of Christ' will 'stay over' him: 'For it is when I am weak that I am strong'.

John Thornhill sm