

St. Paul gives us these strange and yet beautiful words today about a thorn in the flesh, eventually finding that God's grace was sufficient, that his power came from weakness. *What prompted all this?* At the time St. Paul wrote this letter, the Good News of Jesus Christ was a new concept to people of Corinth—they were Christian toddlers, if you will. After he had established the community and got it to where it could self-sustain, he moved on to the next community.

Not long after he left though, some other figures moved-in and began "*preaching another Jesus, a different gospel*" (11:3-4). Even more, they boasted of their capacity to have visions and perform miracles. What we surmise from Paul's words is that these interlopers were having a strong influence on the people—drawn to the spectacle of these figures, whom St. Paul mockingly refers to as *superapostles* (11:5)—and all of it was spiritually disruptive.

Throughout the letter, we can see St. Paul's frustration, but also how much he cares about this community, regarding himself as a father to them. And like a father of grown children, realizing he is in no position to demand anything, he sought to persuade them by fatherly tenderness, but also by acknowledging to them his weakness, his humility.

That's where today's reading comes in. In response to the amazing powers of the *superapostles*, he was tempted to tout his own spiritual gifts, and as we hear: "*That I...might not become too elated....a thorn in the flesh was given to me....I begged the Lord...that it might leave me, but he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.'*"

Scriptures scholars have tried to understand just what was the 'thorn' in Paul's side: some have suggested an illness, a condition, or even struggles to be chaste. It might well have been that the thorn was people who were making life frustrating. In any case, it doesn't seem that it was profound human suffering, as much as it was frustration, nuisance, annoyance. And like any of us would, he just wanted it to go away.

We all have annoying circumstances in our life, at some time or another. Sometimes it's a person we have to deal with daily or regularly: someone who seems to excel at pushing our buttons. "*That I might not become too elated, a thorn in the flesh was given me, and his name is Bob (or whoever)*". What happens to us in those circumstances? For most of us, the toxins flow freely, pouring into our hearts—often bringing out ugliness in us....along with the desire for Bob to find his happiness on another planet....before we kill him.

What are we to learn from those circumstances? We know there's nothing to be gained in having a poisoned heart or in steamrolling Bob. I believe God would say to us, "*You're giving your heart to the wrong thing—it's not Bob, who even I occasionally find annoying. Put your heart and your focus completely unto me. If you do, none of that stuff will bother you, and you will learn to love Bob as I do.*"

But sometimes the thorn is merely our circumstances in life, such as health issues, or the limitations that people face as they move into their later years: the inability to do *what they want*, go *where they want*, etc. "*I begged the Lord again and again....Please take away this chronic pain*" or "*I begged Him....Please don't take away my independence. My life will lose its meaning.*" And God responds, as he did to St. Paul, "*For as long as you must face this hardship, trust that My grace is sufficient for you....you will find My power in your weakness.*"

That's one of the bizarre things about our faith: that weakness and struggles are a way that God comes deeper into our lives. While it's so contrary to our human logic, too many spiritual giants have found it to be true, for it not to be. It requires that we pray about it and seek to understand it.

It's so difficult to see beyond our immediate hardships, and the thorn pressing into our side. God sees beyond it, even if we can't. He always makes something good come out of the setbacks, the causes for irritation. More than anything, we typically gain new perspective of ourselves. We would be less than we are without the thorns that life has brought.

For the thorns we must endure—for as long as we must endure them—let us turn to God, seeking patience, temperance, to respond with grace, finding true power in the humble and lowly approach. God

will get us through—his grace *is* sufficient. The world already has enough people lashing out in irritation and brooding in anger. Perhaps to help us patiently endure our thorns, we can be grateful for all those who endure us, including God.