

### **Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time**

That last line of the gospel makes us stop and think about what faith is. The people of Nazareth seemed to be able to accept that Jesus had extraordinary wisdom and that he could work miracles. But they were unable to accept that Jesus was the one in whom they could put all their hope and trust. They could not believe that Jesus was God present in their midst.

If we say that we believe in somebody it is not enough to say that we accept a series of truths about them. Our belief in someone expresses our relationship with them. To believe in Jesus is more than being able to recite a creed. To believe in Jesus is to put our hope and our complete trust in him. What made it very hard for the people of Nazareth to believe in Jesus, was their familiarity with him. He was too ordinary to be a prophet of God. They could not accept him and the word that he spoke as being from God.

Being ordinary can be a problem for us too. Some of us struggle with the thought that God could be interested in each of us and in everything that we do. Some of us wonder how God could love each of us in a personal way. We don't think that we are important enough. Some of us might struggle to believe that God would choose an ordinary person like ourselves to do extraordinary things for others.

I think St. Paul struggled a bit with that. He became aware that God had gifted him in many different ways and had done great things through him. But today we hear him talk about being given a thorn in the flesh that prevented him from getting too proud. There is a lot of speculation about what that thorn in the flesh may have been. It really doesn't matter what it was. Whatever it was, God was not going to take it away. God told him, "My grace is enough for you. My power is at its best in weakness."

What sort of thorn in the flesh do we live with? What are the weaknesses of which we are most ashamed? There might be something about us that we wish wasn't there, and yet because it is there, God is able to touch into the lives of other people through us. We may feel a special compassion with others who share our weaknesses. There is also often a special bond between people who have suffered the same serious illness. That weakness can be another source of compassion.

The mention of brothers and sisters of Jesus may surprise us. The tradition of the Church is that Mary remained a virgin. Some suggest that those mentioned may be the children of Joseph from a previous marriage. We usually think of those named in today's gospel as being the cousins of Jesus. But whoever they were, the

emphasis is on the ordinariness of Jesus rather than his blood relations. These friends and relations of Jesus found his humanity a stumbling block to come to faith in him as a prophet of God.

But most people look for an excuse for not listening to a prophet of God. Many prophets of Israel were treated badly. Jeremiah was thrown into an empty well to die there. John the Baptist was beheaded. Most of us are unsettled by prophets because they confront and challenge us to hear God's word to us in a new way. True prophets are not self-appointed but commissioned by God. Today Ezekiel tells us how God appointed him. "Son of man, I am sending you to the Israelites, to the rebels who have turned against me. I am sending you to them to say, "The Lord says this. Whether they listen or not, this set of rebels shall know that there is a prophet among them."

While prophets may have to confront us and call us to a change of life, prophets can also be messengers of hope. Some of the most beautiful parts of the Hebrew Scriptures are found in the prophecies of Isaiah, where God speaks of the hope that he has for the people of Israel and for all of us. God uses the prophets to speak of his unconditional love for us, as he does with such tenderness in the prophecies of Hosea. We can easily use passages from the prophets in our time of prayer to allow

God to speak to us of the personal love that God has for each one of us.

Today we can thank God again for the gift of faith. The faith that we have been given ultimately is the gift of being able to know that God loves us deeply. When we truly believe this, then we can put ourselves completely into the hands of God, trusting that we are safe. Our faith frees us to be for others, knowing that God is going to be there giving us all that we need to make God present in what he calls us to do. We pray that God may deepen that gift of faith in us and in those we love.