

Pentecost Vigil
22.05.2021

At the heart of our Solemn Vigil of Pentecost I want to halt for just a moment to ponder one line heard in the extract read from Paul's Letter to the Romans. The line that catches my attention reads: *The Spirit comes to help us in our weakness*. Perhaps we could consider for a moment what our weakness leads us to experience when we look at our lives through the eyes of faith. In this optic what our weakness leads us to experience is *God's strength at work within us... God's strength which*, as Paul reminds us elsewhere (in chapter 12 of his Second Letter to the Corinthians), *makes itself felt best in our weakness*. When Paul was struggling at one point with his inherent weakness – with what he referred to as his *thorn in the flesh* – he came to see that this humiliating condition refrained him from becoming *puffed up with pride*. At a particularly low ebb moment the apostle was given to hear the Lord speak this reassuring word into the ear of his heart: *I am with in your weakness. My presence is all you need. My power is manifested best in weak people*. In light of the insight afforded to him here, Paul dared to say: *If I must brag, I would rather brag about things which show how weak I am*. He then went on to spell out his position even more clearly when he stated: *Now I am glad to boast about how weak I am; I am glad to be a living demonstration of Christ's power, instead of showing off my own power and abilities*.

I wonder have any of us arrived at that point yet. This is the point we are called to arrive at. Just like Paul, each and every one of us is called to place our confidence and trust in God alone. Some lyrics of a Worship Song entitled *In Christ Alone* come to mind at this point. While I am not comfortable with all the lyrics of that hymn, for in some places it speaks of the wrath of God in a way that does not reflect a good (truly Catholic) understanding of the mystery of redemption, the following lines do speak to me: *He (the Lord) is my light, my strength, my song, This Cornerstone, this solid ground (...) What heights of love, what depths of peace, When fears are stilled, when strivings cease, My Comforter, my All in All. Here in the love of Christ I stand*. I believe those words can and should speak to each one of us who are gathered here on this Pentecost night when the invitation addressed to us as we celebrate this Solemn Vigil is to open our hearts to receive a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is Christ's gift to the Church; it is the gift of His love for all who place their hope in Him. Aware as we are of our weakness, having come together in prayer tonight, we are called to dare to stand in the love of Christ, with our hearts wide open to receive the gift of God's love which is poured into us afresh in the celebration of this Holy Eucharist. At the core of each Eucharistic celebration stands the *epiclesis* – the invocation of the Holy Spirit. This invocation of the Spirit – the *epiclesis* – is called down not only upon the gifts we bring for consecration (the bread and wine), but upon the celebrating community of believers, each one of us who are gathered here tonight to celebrate this Sacred Liturgy. When we dare to adopt a stance of expectant hope, holding our hearts open to welcome God's promised gift, then we are led to experience nothing less than the Lord's power and His strength, in the place of our weakness.

What a consolation it is for us to know that God does not shy away from our weakness, but rather is attracted by it, for, in all our lives there are times when we can feel quite overwhelmed by our struggles. That is precisely when the Lord draws near to us. In all our lives there can be moments when we are led to feel as if everything has broken down within us and we have gone into meltdown. It can feel as if our whole system has crashed... our body, our emotions, our spiritual being. All our strength can seem to have departed from us. We can be left feeling terribly weakened, totally drained, as if sapped of all energy. Given the impoverished state in which we find ourselves, we may start to question if there is anything left for us to do. The temptation might be just to give up altogether; to withdraw into our shell;

to allow ourselves to become wrapped up in self-pity; to wallow in a depressed state of doom and gloom. When such discouragement sets into our lives something is being revealed to us that we must dare to face up to. I think what is being revealed to us is out of whose strength have been and are still trying to live our lives. It seems to me that what an exaggerated sense of discouragement draws to our attention is that we have been, and perhaps still are, living under the illusion that our own strength is what makes us live. We are still living in the illusion that we are (at least should be) self-sufficient beings. In God's vision for our lives we were never meant to live in this way. The Lord's desire for us is that we allow Him to live within us. How easily we can forget that! How readily we can fall into the trap of wanting to live independent lives; lives animated by our own strength alone; lives of self-sufficiency, rather than lives which depend upon *the power of God which makes itself felt best in our human weakness!*

To be made acutely aware of our weakness at times – however painful an experience that may be for us – can actually prove to be a great grace. It was so for Paul and it can be so for us. What our weakness leads us to realise is that we simply cannot live out of our own strength alone. It helps us grasp that we were never meant to do so in the first place! When our strength and sufficiency fail us this could and should help us to realise that we must rely upon God, lean on Him, place our confidence and trust in His graciousness, His merciful love. Let me echo anew the Lord's own words of promise and reassurance which I referred to earlier in this reflection: *I am with you in your weakness. My presence is all you need. My power is manifested best in weak people.*

Perhaps nowhere more than in our prayer are we led to encounter our weakness. How often as we struggle with prayer we are led to conclude, as Paul did, that *we simply do not know how to pray*. I can still see a nun who had given her whole life to prayer deeply pained to find herself unable to pray as she lay in her hospital bed. She was just too weak to pray in the way she had done hitherto, when she was in better form. However uncomfortable it felt for her to feel she wasn't praying as well as had done in the past, I am truly convinced that her experience of her weakness and what seemed to her to be her very poor prayer in her illness was greatly pleasing to God. Why? Because, it gave the Lord the opportunity to show her what true prayer is really all about: simply allowing oneself to be looked upon by His love; gazed upon with His regard of tender compassion. This is the regard which the Lord poses upon us when we are in our deepest need and feel only our misery. In the course of a General Audience last week, Pope Francis spoke of what contemplative prayer is all about. He spoke of it amounting to us simply letting ourselves to be looked at by God, knowing that He regards us lovingly.

I can still hear the echoes of the testimony of a migrant refugee who was picked up from a boat on which some 56 of the 59 passengers aboard had died from hunger and thirst. This young girl explained to those who questioned her about her experience on that craft after she was ushered to safety: *We prayed... and then the prayer stopped... Our prayer stopped*. I would say that when the people on that boat thought of themselves as having stopped praying, their prayer went on nonetheless. The prayer that went on was their moans and groans; their cries of distress as they hungered and thirsted. While their prayer at that moment was an inarticulate cry of distress, a prayer that made no sense to themselves and makes no sense to us, it will have made sense to God and been heard by Him. I dare to think of those people's prayer as having gone on and been prayed even though they themselves were no longer conscious of it. We can take it that the prayer of those suffering people echoed that which Jesus prayed as He hung upon the cross, feeling nothing but desolation and abandonment. Come to mind the following words of the apostle Paul. He writes: *When we do not know how*

to pray, when we are at a loss to know what to say and cannot find or choose adequate words to express our innermost sentiments, the Spirit Himself intercedes for us, expressing what is going on within us and what cannot be expressed in words with a real depth of feeling. And the Father who knows all hearts knows, of course, what the Spirit is saying as He pleads for us in harmony with God's own will. If our struggles with prayer reveal to us just how helpless we are, what they call upon us to dare to believe is that our helplessness actually wins for us God's favour.

In the same way our pining thirst – of which the Gospel passage heard this evening speaks to us – leads the Lord to pour out His Holy Spirit upon us. Our pining thirst leads the Lord to make well up within us *a fountain of living water*. Just as Jesus showed the woman of Samaria that He alone was the Living Water who could satisfy her thirst for love, so He satisfies the thirst for love we all carry in the very depths of our being. It is often when we are feeling most parched, most deprived of what we long for, and yet dare nonetheless – indeed, all the more – to put our faith in the Lord, asking Him to quench within us the thirst our own efforts simply cannot quench, that we are led to experience the gift of His Holy Spirit... with the deep peace of reconciliation this gift brings to our troubled hearts.

Like the woman of Samaria, like all who turn to the Lord in their longing and their thirst for love, may each one of us be given to experience a fresh start in life tonight – however weary, discouraged, tired, weak or unworthy we may be feeling as we come before the Lord right now.

With the Lord's powerful help promised to us we can and will be refreshed, restored, renewed, no matter how lamentable our past has been or our present may still be. What the Lord awaits of you and me is that we simply, trustingly surrender our inadequacy to Him so that He can fill us with His strength. We may feel just like empty vessels. All the better! The emptier the vessel, the more God's grace can be and will be poured into it.