



“The Spirit came into me and made me stand up” says Ezekiel in today’s first reading. To stand up! Most of us, if not all of us, do not like to have to ‘stand up’ in front of others: we feel uncomfortable, vulnerable, self-conscious, and weak. I’ve heard surveys indicate that most people’s greatest fear is public speaking; having to stand up and speak in front of others. Throughout my own life growing up, I always preferred to just be a part of the crowd and not to have to stand up or stand out in any particular way.

One example. Being the youngest in a large family, and having five elder brothers who had all been altar boys, there was a certain amount of pressure on me to do likewise. But I was a very quiet and shy boy: there was no way I was ever going to ‘stand up’ in front of everybody at Mass. I felt comfortable where you are in the pews. So I was the only one in my family not to be an altar boy.

For a boy so scared of ‘standing up’ in front of everybody it might seem rather ironic that as a young lad I felt drawn to becoming a school teacher, and that God then called me to the priesthood, and that I went on to say “yes” when asked to be the Bishop of Armidale. All of these are very public roles. It seems I’ve spent my entire life standing up in front of people - precisely the thing I was most frightened of as a boy!

And it’s not just about standing up in front of people to celebrate Mass and to give homilies and talks. As a bishop, priest, and vaticized disciple of Jesus Christ like you, it’s also about standing up for the weak and defenceless, standing up for the truth, and sometimes standing up to accept and be the brunt of people’s anger at the Church. It might sound paradoxical, but the reason I’m able to do it is because in the face of such responsibilities I am conscious of my own weakness, and therefore my need of God’s grace. I still carry that shy little boy inside me every day, but by the Grace of God I am able to obey the promptings of the Spirit and do what the Lord asks of me.

I invite you all to be aware of this reality in your own lives too. Each of us has our own particular weaknesses, flaws, and fear. Listen to what the Lord says to Saint Paul in today’s second reading: “My grace is enough for you: my power is at its best in weakness.” Your weakness! Saint Paul was very much aware of his weakness, his “thorn in the side/flesh” as he called it and he begged Our Lord to take it away and free him of his weakness. But God in his wisdom preferred to leave Paul with his weakness.

A complete reading of all Saint Paul’s writings shows that he is a man very much aware of his human weaknesses and shortcomings – at times he is brutally honest about them. But at the same time, he portrays this great inner strength of conviction, courage, and boldness. He acknowledges, quite simply, that this is the grace of God.

Further, he has learnt that the more honest he is in recognizing his human weakness, the stronger God’s grace becomes in him, and so he concludes: “For it is when I am weak that I am strong.”

How different this is to the message of the modern gurus who tell us: “you can do it; you have the strength within you to achieve anything you set your heart on and desire.” The wisdom of the Scriptures is the exact opposite. It says “Don’t trust in your own strength, but rather acknowledge your weakness and trust in the grace of God to strengthen you.” In Chapter 28 of the Book of Proverbs we find this little gem: “He who conceals his faults will not prosper.”

May each one of us, through prayer and through attentive listening and observation of the people and events around us, recognise when the Spirit may be prompting us to ‘stand up’ for something, for someone, for the truth, or for God himself! At such times be aware of and acknowledge your weakness to God; fix your eyes upon the Lord and trust in his grace which strengthens you. “It is when I am weak that I am strong.”

The people of Jesus’ home town, we heard in the Gospel, were astonished by Jesus’ wisdom yet they would not accept him, so he “could work no miracle there.” May we all not only be astonished by Jesus’ wisdom but actually accept him, actually open our hearts to accept and receive his grace, that he may be able to work wonders – even little miracles – through us and our weakness.



Let go
and
let God.