

# 14<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Year

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Most of St Paul's letters are addressed to churches he had founded. He often shows a special concern when he has received news that they have gone astray in some way. When he wrote the part of the letter we heard as our second reading today he had heard how other Christians, probably from Antioch, had gone to them with a message that undermined his presentation of the Gospel. They made much of their credentials as practising Jews and people favoured with visions and special insights, and pooh-poohed Paul as an indifferent speaker and one who lacked their insights. Paul tackles this in two ways – first he claims to have had visions too wonderful for him to speak about; then he says this is not what is important. We speak best from a position of weakness rather than strength because then it is clear that it is God who speaks through us – not us just making big claims. Prophets are not so much people who foresee the future as spokesmen sent by God to call people back to the truth and the right way of life. In the Bible people love to hear the prophets until they find themselves the objects of their criticism. Herod had a fascination for John the Baptist – but his tenth wife, Herodias, was not so pleased and found a way to have him killed.

We know the saying that the grass in the next field is always greener. In the same way we are more attracted to the new and the extraordinary than to the ordinary and familiar. This is why organisations bring in outside speakers. People are attracted by signs and wonders. Evangelical 'mega-churches' are often focussed on one charismatic preacher and frequently offer all sorts of signs and miracles. The people of Nazareth have heard of Jesus' growing reputation as a teacher and miracle worker but they cannot accept his message. They know him too well. He grew up in their midst. As a carpenter, miracles or no miracles, he lacks credibility. They do not expect to hear God speak to them through someone like him and are certainly not ready to take home truths from him. This is not a failing on Our Lord's part but theirs. If we are to hear God's voice we need to be free from prejudice and open to the truth wherever it comes from, however uncomfortable it may be.

Today's readings also suggest that we must not be disheartened if our own efforts to bear witness to the Faith seem to fall on deaf ears even from our family. Being a Catholic is often most difficult when we are with our nearest and dearest. Many families have disagreements about religion. When we are with people we know well, we cannot hide behind a neatly-decorated façade. They know what we are really like, and perhaps naturally enough, point out our hypocrisy, our inconsistencies, our habitual failings. They often tell us things which we do not want to hear, partly because we know they are true. So, like St Paul we need to cultivate the grace to accept these blows to our pride. He had his thorn in the flesh, but worse for him was to see his work being undone by others and his reputation tarnished.

Our task on Our Lord's behalf may not be to talk about our faith, but to be a Catholic sign of contradiction. Perhaps you are called to refuse to be drawn into prevailing dishonesty in the place where you work. Maybe God asks you to uphold the Church's teaching on the sanctity of life in the face of everyone around you dismissing the old or the unborn as disposable or the value of our common home in the face of financial and economic pressures. Perhaps attending Mass on Sundays and Holy Days of Obligation is an issue with your family or friends. In a secular world, simply "being" a Catholic can require huge determination which, sadly, many lose. We may not be successful or popular, but if we stand up for our faith and speak God's truth with love then like Ezekiel and St Paul, we too are God's prophets.