

# A Letter From Father Francis



My Dear Friends in Christ,

In today's gospel, Jesus returns to his hometown of Nazareth, having left there having spent close to thirty years. During that time, he was known by all as the carpenter, the son of Mary. However, since leaving Nazareth, Jesus' life had taken a new direction. He had thrown himself into the work that God had given. He had left Nazareth as a carpenter; he returned as a teacher and a healer. The gospel suggests that they could not accept this "more" in Jesus; they rejected him. They wanted him to be the person they had always known; they would not allow him to move on from that. Jesus' homecoming turned out to be more painful than his leaving home. God's unique Son who proclaimed the presence of God's kingdom was experienced by the people of Nazareth as a thorn in the flesh, to use an image from today's second reading.

The people of Nazareth thought they knew Jesus. The image they had of him, which they held on to, became a block to their learning more about him. We too can easily assume that we know someone, when, in reality, we only know one side of them. We can form strong opinions about people on the basis of past experiences. We can become so attached to these opinions that even when the evidence is there to challenge them, we are completely unmoved. There was more to Jesus than the people of Nazareth were aware of. Certainly, there is always more to every human being than we are aware of. That is true even of those we would claim to know well, such as family members, co-workers, people at our parish, and good friends. We are each made in God's image. We can never fully probe the mystery of another person's life. We each need to approach everyone with the awareness that there is more here than I can see. It was Jesus' very ordinariness that made it difficult for the people of Nazareth to see him as he really was. God was powerfully present to them in and through someone who was as ordinary, in many respects, as they themselves. God continues to come to us today in and through the ordinary, in and through those who are most familiar to us. In the religious domain, there can be a certain fascination with the extraordinary and the unusual. The gospels suggest that the primary way the Lord comes to us is in and through the everyday. This is what we mean by the incarnation. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. The ordinary is shot through with God's presence.

The Lord can even come to us in and through what we initially experience as something very negative. St Paul made this discovery for himself, according to our second reading today. He struggled with what he called a thorn in the flesh. It is not easy to know what he means by this. Whatever it was, Paul wanted to be rid of it. He saw no good in it and he prayed earnestly to the Lord to take it from him, fully expecting that his prayer would be heard. Paul's prayer was answered, but not in the way he had expected. In prayer, he came to realize that God was powerfully present in and through this thorn in the flesh. When we find ourselves struggling with something inside ourselves or with something outside ourselves, some person perhaps, we can be tempted to see the struggle as completely negative and just want to be rid of it. Like Paul, however, we can

discover that this difficult experience is opening us up to God's presence. The very thing we judge to be of little or no value can create a space for God to work powerfully in our lives. There is something of an irony in what Paul hears the risen Lord say to him, 'My power is at its best in weakness.' It is often when we most feel life is a struggle that God can touch our lives most powerfully and creatively.

In our first reading, Ezekiel says that the Spirit of God "set him on his feet." This should remind us that without the Holy Spirit, without grace, without God's gracious gift, faith life is not possible, and change is not possible. In saying this, it is easier to do nothing than to do something, it is easier to be negative than positive, easier to be destructive than creative. We are often determined and defiant, even cynical, because refusal to be responsible takes little effort and less understanding. To live the promise, however, demands awareness; it calls for a commitment to be **conscious of grace** and of the practical implications of grace that need to find expression in real, practical, reconciling, forgiving, growth-oriented patterns of life and relationships.

Today's gospel suggests we need to confront any tendency to judge others, take hurt and offense from them, reject them, and make them scapegoats for our own unrecognized dislikes and resentments. We can identify with Jesus and feel his pain when he gets rejected. There can be some comfort for us in this, particularly if we've known some sort of similar rejection ourselves by people who supposedly knew us best. Jesus knows our pain. We need to become more aware of how we spread negativity at home, at school, at our parishes, among our friends at work, or wherever, in case we become like Jesus' own people who so readily rejected him. We need to realize how easy it is to confuse reality with our own deep-seated prejudices and preferred viewpoints. We need to see that every story has another side, every person has his or her own reasons for what they do.

God requires some willingness and some humility on our part for God's power to work in our lives. The people of Nazareth lacked this humility. Their arrogance was in claiming they knew more than they did. In their minds, the possibility that Jesus had evolved into someone meant surrendering a pride that in their minds was too costly to surrender. How often do we claim to know more than we do, when in fact, what we don't know always vastly outweighs what we do know? Openness to **God's grace** and wisdom begins with an acknowledgment of our tendency for such arrogance. God wants to bless us, just as he sought to bless the people of Nazareth. What sorts of roadblocks might we be putting up to his grace?

May we remember God's grace, may we remember that it leads us, and may we allow it to set us on our feet and make us courageous. May we permit it to energize us for the next few steps on the hazardous, wonderful, bright, dark journey to personal growth, spirituality, and a deep connection with God.

**See you at Mass!  
Father Francis**