

What makes us different? (Ezekiel 2:1-5; 2Cor 12:7-10; Mark 6:1-6;)

* Friends, today is the Seventh Sunday after Pentecost. It indicates that we are in the middle of Summer, the season of growth and bearing fruits. Reflecting on the natural process of growth, my mind determined the six steps of growth we've already passed since the Day of the First Harvest. In fact, the six steps are not even a half of the 26 steps-marathon distance we decide to run over; but let's see how many things we've covered. Little by little we grow after the likeness of the Blessed Trinity in giving spiritual and physical sacrifices. Little by little we grow in understanding the way of life God wants us to follow. Little by little our church starts to grow in number. In addition to that we were encouraged to believe that *little by little* the dry and almost dead cedar tree will be originated into the finest and beautiful tree in the forest. This tree has already become a shelter for heavenly birds who perch their nests upon its branches and find bread and help in time of their needs. Thereby, the six steps of growth prepared us to take the next one that will cover the area of transitive emotions, from the state of amazing to the state of peace.

* Friends, setting up all lessons for today under one common idea, I wrote a slogan, While The Skeptics Surprise - The Stoic Survives. After reading the passages from Ezek. and Mark we've immediately got a meaning, both readings talk about Ezekiel and Jesus Christ, who were not believed as prophets due to the people's harshness and skepticism. Ezekiel says that on certain day a rebellious house of Judah would know *that a prophet has been among them*. On the other hand, the message from the epistle adds to the difficulty if we attempt to find a common ground with the previous two readings. The passage from 2Cor. focuses on Paul's physical suffering caused by a satanic angel. The reason for it was explained by the Lord, *My grace is all you need, for my power is perfected in weakness*, (2Co 12:8). In other words, in order to prevent Paul from boasting as a man of exceptional grace he was weakened in flesh. As the faithful servant of the Lord, Paul rather delights in that weakness than rejects it. For Paul the contemporary sufferings are incomparable with a joy of being a profitable servant. So, while rendering a three-dimensional picture on the screen, I didn't find a common sense between 2Cor. and the two other writings, Ezekiel and Mark.

* Friends, I learn that nothing significant comes true if a person will not work hard on it.

Keeping this in mind I worked hard to find the common meaning for Ezek, Mar. and 2Cor. Finally, with God's help, I received this meaning, and it fits perfectly. In fact, I didn't learn it from my books.

* Now let's go for that meaning. It is sad to know that Jesus was not accepted as the Messiah by his own countrymen. According to Mark, people were amazed upon hearing their townsman, Jesus, whom they knew from his childhood. I am sure while Jesus grew up he surprised many listeners, even rabbis, (Luk 2:47). But now, from the beginning of Jesus' ministry, people were not surprised any more, they were amazed, (6:2). Moreover, their amazements grew in their intensity as it can be seen from further reading of chapter 6.

For instance, when the disciples healed the sick and cast demons by Jesus' name, (6:13); or when Jesus fed 5000, (6:41-44); and finally, after seeing Jesus walking on the sea, people were completely amazed, even his disciples, (6:51). From this moment Mark draws a picture of massive healing in Galilee.

We can imagine the wall of skepticism and perplexity that was removed by the divine power flowing from Jesus. After that, people immediately recognized him, (6:54). They shouted aloud in their villages, on the streets, everywhere. *This man is Elijah*, they cried, *He is a prophet*, they shouted with joy; *he is like one of the prophets of old*, (6:15). Come up, sick and thirsty! Come up, hungry and troubled! God visited us! Alleluia! ... *and ran about the whole region and began to bring the sick people on their beds to wherever they heard he was. And wherever he came, in villages, cities, or countryside, they laid the sick in the marketplaces and implored him that they might touch even the fringe of his garment. And as many as touched it were made well.* (6:55,56). Jesus was believed, accepted and they received help. Unfortunately there were some who were still amazed and healed not, (6:5).

* In order to catch the reason of such amazement we look through the Greek lexicon for a definition. In Greek ἐξεπλησσαντο translates as *be greatly astounded*. This word describes an individual's emotion; a person who was stricken with astonishment, wondered greatly because a person believed something that was not being unanticipated. (Mark 6:2) says that the Jewish people were amazed by hearing Jesus' words. With all the specifics the same story is narrated by (Luke 4:15-30). It says that Jesus read the scroll from the prophet Isaiah in that moment. *The Spirit of the Lord is on me*, he read, *the Spirit of the Lord has anointed me to tell the good news to the poor. He has sent me to announce release to the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to set*

oppressed people free, and to announce the year of the Lord's favor, (4:18,19). Then he explained them, *Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.* Or saying more directly, he might say, *this Scripture is about me, I am Messiah, the Son of Almighty.* In response, the people were amazed, saying, *This is Joseph's son, isn't it? (4:22).* Mark says that Jesus was well believed as a carpenter, son of Mary and Joseph, (6:3), and so far, a carpenter couldn't be an Anointed. Jewish's prejudice always was centered on a notion that the Messiah must be a member of the royal family, David's offspring. But such belief was broken down upon the occurrence of the divine power flowing from the carpenter. This utterly amazed the countrymen from Nazareth. But because of Jesus' low social rank, it became a stumbling block for the Jews; it offended Jewish prejudice and beliefs regarding the Messiah even in spite of the mighty power that was vividly witnessed about Jesus as the Anointed One. And later, the crucifixion became the second stumbling block for the Jews, until now.

* Drawing two readings (Mark and 2Cor.) together, we found that St. Paul and the Jews from Nazareth were the listeners of the same person, Jesus Christ. In fact, both Paul and his countrymen heard the things that skeptics are not able to hear. For instance, regarding Paul, Jesus said to him, *Paul it is necessary for you to be weakened physically so that my power can be made perfect in you, (2Co 12:9; paraphrase).* Isn't it an extraordinary saying? What does he have in mind? Nobody think, that in order to be successful in a battle, even spiritual, a person must cut off his strength. For example, each candidate of our Theological Seminaries is tested regarding his mental and physical ability. As a former student of two seminaries I testify that both of them are equipped with all kind of athletic inventories to shape a new minister as strong as a horse. Now, after hearing these argument you may be surprised upon hearing Jesus' argument, *my power is made perfect in weakness.* But it doesn't surprise Paul. His reaction is very positive; he abides in peace because he has known Jesus as the most reliable person from all universes. Paul accepts such an extraordinary saying immediately, because these words come from Jesus who was believed as the Lord. Paul says, *... when I am weak, then I am strong, (2Cor 12:10).* Friends, be not surprised or even amazed, rather trust and believe the person Jesus, even he was just the carpenter, even if he was hung on the tree, even if the words of God seem hard to believe. Unlike Paul, the Jews could not bear such things; first, they were amazed and second they flew off the handle. Luke says they drove Jesus out of their town in order to strike him upon the rock, (Luk 4:29).

* Now, the common subject for today can be concluded as a discrepancy between what people see and what they think or believe. The result of such dissonance appears in the realm of people's emotions. The emotions make them different. Unlike the Jews from Mark and Ezekiel who were amazed upon hearing the prophets, Paul demonstrated peaceful mind and self-control. Therefore human emotions as the result of this discrepancy show that we are different. Some might be surprised or even amazed; some might be quietened with peace in their mind.

* Friends the words of God continue to wonder and surprise us as the life changing power, but the lessons for today teach us not to be surprised by a person through whom the life changing power comes to you; even he is Russian, even he doesn't speak perfect English, even he is not strong. Those who are amazed upon hearing this person are not alone; there are also pastors, laities or even presidents. Besides, I am not alone too, thanks to the Lord and to you, my dear Friends for your acceptance and love. Finally, while skeptics are amazed upon hearing God's messenger, we are enjoying with Paul, receiving assurance, peace and help in time of needs.

Dear Friends, my love be with you all in Christ Jesus.

Amen.