

The Eighteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time
(Year C)

<i>First Reading</i>	Ecclesiastes 1:2; 2:21-23
<i>Response</i>	If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 90:3-4, 5-6, 12-13, 14 AND 17
<i>Second Reading</i>	Colossians 3:1-5, 9-11
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
<i>Gospel</i>	Luke 2:13-21

The 18th Sunday in Ordinary Time continues our journey through Paul's letter to the Colossians. Here we are in chapter three of that letter, and we're going to look at what Paul says about the difference between what the Revised Standard Version translates as the old nature and the new nature, but which literally in Greek Paul refers to as the old man and the new man. In other words, what a person's life is like before baptism and faith in Christ, and what it's like after baptism and faith in Christ, the difference between the old way of life and the new way of life. The lectionary has chapter three, verses one to five, and then it skips down to verse nine. I'm just going to read the whole text so that you get all of the context of the passage. So Paul says this:

If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God. When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.¹

Now here the lectionary skips, but I'm going to read it:

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

On account of these the wrath of God is coming. In these you once walked, when you lived in them. But now put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and foul talk from your mouth.

Just to clarify, the new American Bible translates this as obscene language. And that's an excellent translation. What Paul's really talking about here is obscenity. Here the lectionary picks up:

Do not lie to one another,

or you could translate this, "stop lying to one another"

seeing that you have put off the old nature with its practices and have put on the new nature, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. Here there cannot be Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scyth'ian, slave, free man, but Christ is all, and in all.

So what's going on here, a few points we want to make. First, you can see Paul's drawing out a contrast, as I mentioned, between their old way of life before they were Christians and their new way of life in Christ. And one of the reasons I quoted those verses in between is that you can actually see this really clearly in verse seven when Paul says, "In these you once walked," right? "So in immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, those things. You once walked in them when you lived in them, but now put them all away.

Whenever you see the language of walking in the letters of Paul, that's a Jewish way of referring to what we would call morality, or a person's ethics, right? A person's ethical mode of life. And you get the actual Hebrew term I've mentioned before, *halakah*. *Halakah* is a rabbi expression that refers to the precepts of the law that tell us how to act, right? *Hagaddah* is another expression. That's the interpretation of scripture, especially the stories in scripture. *Halakah* is the interpretation of the law the more legal material in scripture. And *Halakah* literally means, it's from the verb *halak*, meaning to walk. So it's how to walk. It's teaching us how to live. So when Paul talks about you once walked in these sins, but you

don't any longer, it illuminates the fact that the whole context is about morality of life in Christ. What does life in Christ look like in terms of our moral standards and our ways of living and acting?

Okay. So with that in mind, go back to the beginning. What Paul's saying to the Colossians is,

If then you have been raised with Christ,

by which he doesn't mean the final resurrection, he means the sacramental resurrection that takes place in baptism. So if you've been raised with Christ through baptism, then you need to

seek the things that are above, where Christ is,

In other words, live according to the ethos, the ethics, not of earthly city, but of the heavenly city of Jerusalem, the heavenly kingdom, where Christ is

seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.

Now, let me pause here. Notice this is really important. On the one hand, Paul has a kind of dualism between heaven and earth, right? But this isn't an escapism. He's not trying to say heaven good, earth bad, spirit good, body bad, as you might find in some kind of dualistic or Gnostic or Manichean errors later on in early Christianity. The reason we seek the things that are above is not because the earth isn't good. It is good. Genesis 1 says it's good. The reason we seek the things that are of heaven is not because the earth isn't good. It is good. God made it. But we seek the things of heaven and the things that are above because Christ is there. Because Christ is reigning in his glorified and resurrected body, where? Not on earth, but at the right hand of the Father, right? So Paul's trying to get the Colossians to (to coin a phrase) lift up their hearts to the invisible reality of the heaven and the heavenly city where they belong, because that's where their king is. Now, is he going to return? Yes, but right now he's seated at the right hand of the Father. So they have to understand that they don't live for this world anymore. They live for the world to come. And that's why he says

For you have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God.

So when you were baptized, this is remarkable, you not only died to sin, you not only had your sins forgiven. You didn't just become a member of the local parish church in Colossae. Your actual life was caught up and united to the risen and exalted Christ so that your life is now hidden with Christ in God. You belong to that heavenly Jerusalem. That's where your true citizenship is. That's your destiny. That's your ultimate home.

[So w]hen Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

Now he's pointing to the final resurrection at the time of the parousia. Now here's the key.

Put to death therefore what is earthly in you...

So here, Paul uses the language of mortification. We talk about mortification. Sometimes people will say, "I was mortified," meaning, "I was scared to death." But in the language of the spiritual tradition of the Church, mortification has to do with voluntarily putting to death aspects of our life that are either earthly or sinful or both. Here Paul lists sins. He doesn't just say avoid them. He doesn't just say, "Do your best to try to not do them," right? He says, "Kill them." Put to death in you, therefore, what?

Number one, immorality. The Greek word there is *porneia*. So he's not just talking about cheating on your taxes. He's talking about sexual immorality. And in a first century Jewish context he would mean any sexual act outside of the marital covenant would be *porneia*: prostitution, adultery, homosexual acts, incest, anything outside of the marital covenant, that's *porneia*. So his first thing he has to tell these pagans at Colossae that they can't do is they can't live according to the sexual morals or sexual immorality of the pagan culture of their time.

Second, impurity. The Greek word here is *akatharsia*. Now, there's debate about exactly what he means by that. In a Jewish context, the term impurity would frequently be used to refer to ritual impurities like in the Old Testament, right? Where a person might not wash at the time they're supposed to wash, or they might

touch a corpse, or they might eat an impure food, right? But Paul can't be referring to that, because he's not talking to Jews, he's talking to Gentiles. So in a Gentile context, impurity, *akatharsia*, a strong case can be made that he's referring there again to sexual immorality, particularly, as we might use the expression, dirty or perverted acts with the body would be unfitting. Not just sinful, but somehow perverted. So put to death, immorality, put to death impurity, put to death passion, evil desire, covetousness.

Covetousness, the Greek word *pleonexia*, is a kind of envy that leads to the accumulation of possessions or wealth, right? It tends to be focused on the commandment "don't covet your neighbor's ox or his donkey or any of his possessions," okay? So covetousness, which he says is idolatry. It's actually the worship of a creature over the creator. On account of these, *porneia*, perversity, impurity, evil desires, passion, covetousness, and idolatry, the wrath of God is coming. So Paul's making really clear here that these are grave sins. Objectively, these are grave sins and they will be punished by the wrath of God. So he's preparing the Colossians to recognize something that they wouldn't have recognized as Gentiles necessarily. Namely, that their human actions have eternal consequences, right?

So in a Gentile context, you could definitely... I mean, they had an idea of supernatural punishment. Like if you angered the gods, because you didn't perform sacrifices, that gods might punish you with a plague or with a famine or a war or something like that, right? But these would be temporal punishments for faults. Here, Paul's trying to get them to realize, no, there's going to be eternal punishment for certain sins. And he lists the problem. He begins always with *porneia*. With Paul that is always the first one he's got to deal with because the Gentile cultures were so rampant with it. It was one of the first things that he had to get his converts to stop doing in order to change their lives and live lives in Christ.

But I added a verse too, because the list that he gives here, unfortunately when the lectionary skips these couple of verses in the middle, it leaves out a few of the vices that Paul lists. I thought it'd be helpful to mention them here.

anger, wrath, malice,

Malice is the desire to do ill to someone else.

slander,

So to lie about someone publicly to the destruction of their reputation is very grave sin. And also, note this,

and foul talk from your mouth.

So that last expression there is very interesting, *aischrologia*, that word literally means like logia words, right? *Aischrologia* is dirty words or foul talk, foul words, bad language. That's a looser translation...and also lying. Don't lie to each other. That's your old way of life. The new way of life doesn't have any place for that. And if you want an example of that, in particular the one on foul talk, because this is something that I've noticed that it's not always clear to me that readers in the New Testament walk away from it knowing that Paul and Jesus expect the disciples of Jesus to not use profanity and cursing, but Paul's really clear here. So for example, there's a use of the similar term in Aristotle. So in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, he's discussing all kinds of ethical issues and one of the things he brings up is bad language. And this is what Aristotle says, if you want a context for what Paul might be referring to Aristotle writes:

The well-bred man's jesting differs from that of a vulgar man, and the joking of an educated man from that of an uneducated. *One may see this even from the old and the new comedies; to the authors of the former indecency of language (Greek aischrologia) was amusing, to those of the latter innuendo is more so; and these differ in no small degree in respect of propriety.*²

So you notice there, Aristotle uses the term *aischrologia*, the same word Paul uses here, to refer to the difference between newer comedies, which use more innuendo, subtle things than the foul language of the older comedies, the kind of raunchy language that was part of the older comedies. So you can see here, just Aristotle recognizing that profanity, bad language, dirty talk, we might say, dirty words, are part of Gentile culture. It's part of pop culture, the culture of these comedies, right? And Aristotle says that that actually shouldn't be part of the educated man's

² Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1128a.

vocabulary. That's the basic thrust of the quotation here, but Paul is making that much stronger. He's saying, put all foul talk out of your mouth if you're in Christ. Don't walk according to the ways that you did when you were a Gentile. That has no place in your mouth anymore.

And if you pick up there, verse nine, in that context, he says, "Don't lie to one another." So there's two ways you can profane your speech, with profanity, but also with lying, with bearing false witness.

Don't lie to one another seeing that you have what? Put off the old nature or the old man and put on the new nature, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. So the reason Christians should not use profanity and lie is because you're a new person in Christ, and you're supposed to image the creator who isn't profane and who doesn't tell lies, right? God speaks, but when He speaks, He speaks the truth. And it's profanation of the sacredness of the gift of language for human beings who are in Christ, in particular, to have foul talk coming out of their mouths.

Then he closes by saying:

Here there cannot be Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scyth'ian, slave, free man, but Christ is all, and in all.

So the final implication of the coming of Christ and the creation of a new nature in Christ...not the creation of new nature, but the inauguration of a new creation in which we participate as new men and women through baptism, is that all of the divisions that were part of this world, Greek against Jew, circumcised against uncircumcised, barbarians, and Scythians, slaves against freed men. All those divisions are meant to come down and be replaced by a unity because if Christ is in a slave and he's in a free man, then they're united. If he's in a barbarian and Scythian, they're united. If he's in a Jew and a Gentile, then they are united in Christ because Christ is all in all. So the divisions and divisiveness that are part of Greco-Roman society at the time are going to be healed and transfigured by a new way of life, which is the way of unity in Christ.

So in closing, this is a powerful passage. It's a very challenging passage because what Paul's saying here to the Colossians is that becoming a Christian, although he doesn't use that language, he just talks about being in Christ, is not just about

adopting a new set of beliefs, right? Professing a certain set of truths. It actually has to change the way you walk, the way you live. It has to have a moral impact and involve a moral transformation of the human person so that they no longer live the way they did when they were a pagan. They don't do things with their bodies that they used to do when they were pagans, right? They don't lust after things, other people's possessions in their hearts, in the way they did when they were a pagan. They don't worship creatures and created things in the way they did when they were a pagan. They don't give into anger and wrath and slander in the way they did when they were a pagan. And they don't speak the way they did. Their actual language should change, both in avoiding dirty talk and dirty words and profanity, and also avoiding lying, refusing to lie to one another so that they might manifest the image and the likeness of God, the creator.

I bring this up because I think it's an important point for us to note. One of the reasons the Church gives us the second readings is because Paul is a catechist. Paul, as an evangelist is teaching the Gentiles...he continues to teach the Gentiles to this day. And we still need to hear the message of Paul about how Christians should look different from their surrounding culture, especially to the extent that the surrounding culture is pagan, or more or less pagan. And at least I've noticed that there's this, at least in contemporary Christianity, there seems to be a remarkable tolerance for the use of foul talk, of profanity. At least that's been my experience, especially online, and in print. It's not clear to me that contemporary Christians are aware that the New Testament prohibits the use of foul talk by disciples of Christ and those who are in Christ. Now, some people might respond and say, "Well, that's Paul, not Jesus," right? But the reality is the reason Paul's so strong about the sanctity of human speech is because Jesus was even stronger.

So if you have any doubts about this being teaching of Jesus, don't forget in Matthew 12, if you go back to the Gospel of Matthew and you're of the opinion that it's not a big deal that Christians use profanity, listen to the words of Jesus. Matthew 12:33-37, he doesn't pull any punches. Jesus writes, or he doesn't write, he says:

“Either make the tree good, and its fruit good; or make the tree bad, and its fruit bad; for the tree is known by its fruit. You brood of vipers! how can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. The good man out of his good treasure brings forth good, and

the evil man out of his evil treasure brings forth evil. I tell you, on the day of judgment men will render account for every careless word they utter; for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.”

What's Jesus saying there? Well, it's pretty clear. If you're going to render an account for every careless word you utter on the last day, what do you think you have to pay for every foul word you utter on the last day? Moreover, why is foul language such a problem? Jesus gives us the principle, because out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks. So you can't have a dirty mouth and a clean heart, at least according to Jesus. If you have a dirty mouth, it's because you have a dirty heart. If you have a foul mouth, it's because your heart has been fouled, right? And so Christ wants his disciples to be good trees. He says, "Either make the tree good or make it bad." You can't have a good tree bringing forth bad fruit and vice versa. And here the image he's using is the image of the tree of the soul, and the fruit is the fruit of our lips, right? So if the tree, the heart, is good, it's going to bring forth good words, and if the heart is corrupt and if the heart is bad, it's going to bring forth bad words. And so the reason you're going to be judged on the last day for every word that you utter is because on the last day, what is going to be judged is your heart, and you can't draw a line between the heart and the mouth, “for out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.” And that’s why Paul says, in closing, “stop lying to one another and put away would talk from your mouth, because you have put off the old man and have put on the new nature, which is in Christ.”