

The Twenty-fourth Sunday of Ordinary Time
(Year C)

<i>First Reading</i>	Exodus 32:7-11, 13-14
<i>Response</i>	I will rise and go to my father.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 51:3-4, 12-13, 17, 19
<i>Second Reading</i>	1 Timothy 1:12-17
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.
<i>Gospel</i>	Luke 15:1-32

The 24th Sunday in Ordinary Time takes us to another category, a unique group of Pauline letters, and that are the letters known as the pastoral epistles, or the pastoral letters. Now, these letters are called pastoral, not because Paul's other letters are unpastoral, but rather because these letters stand out because they were written to pastors. Most of Paul's letters, like the Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Colossians, are written to entire communities. They're written to churches located in particular cities. They have a collective audience of a particular local church. The pastoral epistles by contrast are written to individuals, two individuals: Timothy (first and second Timothy are both written to a young pastor named Timothy) and then of course, Titus, is written to a young pastor named Titus. The pastoral of epistles could actually be called the personal epistles in some sense because they're written to individual persons.

Now with that said, I like the title pastoral epistles because they also do, in a sense, reveal a more personal tone of Paul. You see him acting and speaking and writing as one pastor to another, giving guidance to Timothy and guidance to Titus about how to be pastors to the faithful. How to shepherd their flocks, so to speak. These are extremely valuable epistles, especially for pastors. So for ordained ministers who are leading a flock, these short letters have lots of wisdom and lots of insight into what ordained ministry looked like in the first decades of the early Church. I can't recommend highly enough that priests regularly read these three letters: first and second Timothy and Titus from the apostle Paul. There's a lot of pastoral wisdom in them, especially for newly ordained priests and pastors.

With that in mind, let's look at the first epistle to Timothy. 1 Timothy 1:12-17 is the Church's selection from this letter for the 24th Sunday in Ordinary Time. In it, Paul gives us a beautiful self-portrait. It's a portrait of himself as a sinner who has been shown mercy by God. This is the picture of Paul the sinner. Here's what Paul says:

I thank him who has given me strength for this, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful by appointing me to his service, though I formerly blasphemed and persecuted and insulted him; but I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. And I am the foremost of sinners; but I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience for an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life. To the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen.¹

Beautiful, beautiful opening doxology and autobiographical statement of Paul in this first letter to Timothy. A couple of points about the selection for today's reading. The first thing is you see Paul reflecting back on the time when he was not Paul, the apostle, but Saul, the persecutor. When he says "I formerly blasphemed and persecuted and insulted him", notice the way he formulates this. He doesn't say I persecuted Christians or I persecuted the church or I insulted people. He says "I formerly blasphemed and persecuted and insulted him", meaning I insulted and persecuted Christ himself.

Here we find an interesting parallel with the account of Paul's conversion in the book of Acts. If you go back to the famous encounter between Saul and Christ on the road to Damascus in the book of Acts 9, you'll recall that it says these words about his conversion, his encounter. This is in Acts 9:3 and following:

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.

Now as he journeyed he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed about him. And he fell to the ground...

Notice there's no horse. Everybody says there's a horse, but Acts doesn't mention a horse. It just says he fell to the ground.

And he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting..." (Acts 9:3-5)

Now, as far as we know, Saul of Tarsus never met Jesus of Nazareth in his whole life. He certainly never persecuted him, and we have no evidence, no reason to believe whatsoever, that Paul was like a member of the Sanhedrin that executed Christ. Paul's a young man at the time of the early Church. What he's doing is going around and dragging off men and women and committing them to prison. He stands by and witnesses, acts as a formal witness, while Steven is stoned to death in Jerusalem. Yet when Jesus appears to Paul, he says why do you persecute me? We see an implicit revelation here of the mystery of the Church as Christ's mystical body, that when members of the Church are persecuted by Paul, what he is actually doing is persecuting Christ himself.

That same idea of the mystical body of Christ, which by the way, is one of the master keys to understanding Paul. It runs throughout all the Pauline letters. It undergirds everything Paul says about the mystery of the Church, about the mystery of life in Christ. It's not inconsequential that we see it from the very beginning of Paul's first encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus. But that idea of the mystical body of Christ is also present here in the pastoral epistles, where Paul says, "I formerly blasphemed and persecuted and insulted him; but I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief." This is a powerful point that Paul makes here. Even though he had done things that were dreadful, things that were evil, things that were wicked ... Even though he was persecuting the son of God himself through his persecution of the first Christians, God had mercy on him because of his ignorance, and even in his unbelief. He had not yet come to faith in Christ. He was acting in ignorance. There was some ignorance in what he was doing. Therefore, the grace of the Lord overflowed for him with faith and the love that are in Christ Jesus. There you see it again, the idea of being in Christ, being part of his mystical body. That is standard Pauline theology of

salvation. How are we saved? By being moved from being in the flesh or in the world to being in Christ, to becoming part of his mystical body. That's why he says:

The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.

That's his whole mission. And then Paul gives these beautiful words:

And I am the foremost of sinners

Pause here for a second. This is a very powerful point that Paul's making here, and you'll often see the saints say this. You'll see saints like Therese or others who clearly live lives of virtue say "I'm the worst of sinners." I would suggest to you, this is not just false humility, or this is not false humility at all, actually. What it is is a recognition among the saints of just how grave their sins really are, of just how awful it is to do anything against Christ, to blaspheme Christ, to insult Christ, to persecute members of Christ's body in the Church. What they're recognizing here is the magnitude of their sins. Paul here is being honest when he says I'm the foremost of sinners because he recognizes that in his persecution of the Church, and in some cases in participating in the execution of Christians, he was actually persecuting Christ himself.

For that reason, the mercy that Paul receives as a blasphemer and persecutor is that much more glorious. It's that much more stupendous. It's that much more staggering that for this reason, Paul receives mercy so that in him as the foremost of sinners, "Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience for an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life."

What does Paul mean here? Well, I would suggest to you that what he's saying in not so many words, in my words I'd rephrase it, is that it's one thing for Peter and James and John, the students of Jesus, the rabbi, who knew him during his earthly life, who lived with him and walked with him and studied with him. It's one thing for them to go around saying he's the Christ, the son of the living God. These guys are fishermen from Galilee. They are uneducated. The book of Acts says the Sanhedrin describes John and Peter as illiterate. Yes, they were students of Jesus, but they were not trained scribes. They weren't trained scholars of the law. They

weren't students of the great teachers in Jerusalem. They were fishermen from Galilee with a guy from Nazareth whose dad was a carpenter.

Paul, by contrast, was, as the book of Acts tells us in Acts 22, a student of rabbi Gamaliel, one of the greatest rabbis in the first century AD. Later rabbinic traditions say that when Gamaliel died, the glory of Pharisaism, and the glory of the great teachers died with him. He was a stupendous teacher, and Paul was his student. Not just his student, but also a known persecutor of the Church. It's one thing to take disciples of Jesus, friends of Jesus, and have them go around proclaiming the gospel that Jesus has risen, that he's the Messiah. It's a completely different witness to take one of the greatest students of the greatest rabbis and turn them from the greatest persecutor into the greatest apostle, because he becomes an example of the mercy of God to anyone else who has ever recognized in themselves the greatness of their sin, the seriousness of their sin.

Paul's basically saying it doesn't matter what you've done. I've done worse and Christ in his mercy made me...not only saved me, but made me an apostle to the nations. It's a beautiful, powerful passage. I love this passage from 1 Timothy. It's just a powerful witness to divine mercy, and that's why Paul ends it...you almost hear him being caught up with the beauty and the splendor of his own redemption, of his own salvation. Once he says that I become an example to others who would believe in order to have eternal life, he can't do anything except just praise the Lord and say:

To the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen.

He ends with this beautiful and powerful doxology. What can we draw from this reading for today? I'd like to close with a pastoral implication from one of the great pastors in the early Church and one of the great Pauline interpreters of all time. That is St. John Chrysostom. St. John Chrysostom, in his homilies, he says these words:

If you have sinned and God has pardoned your sin, receive your pardon and give thanks. But do not be forgetful of your sin. It is not that you should fret over the thought of it, but that you may school your soul not to grow lax or relapse again into the same snares. This is what Paul did, not hiding his

actions as a blasphemer, persecutor and injurer... For when you have learned who he was before, then you will be the more astonished at him. When you see what he came to be out of what he was, then you will commend him the more. *So if you have greatly sinned, you yourself upon being changed will hope all the more by seeing him. Such an example comforts those who are in despair and causes them again to stand tall.*²

Beautiful passage from John Chrysostom. What Chrysostom is saying here is to all those of you out there who may think, "Oh, my sins are too great to be forgiven. What I've done is so much worse than what anyone else has done," look to the example of Paul. Did you ever help execute the first Christian martyr? Did you pummel a man to death with stones simply for confessing Christ? Because Paul participated in the martyrdom of Steven. Paul dragged men and women off to prison. We can maybe infer some of them to be put to death for the sake of their faith in Jesus Christ as Lord, which turned out to be true. If Paul can receive the mercy of God, despite his sins, then whatever you've done, whatever you might have done, Chrysostom is saying here, God too can show you mercy. Take comfort in the example of Paul, but also take courage from the example of Paul, that just as Paul was given the grace to leave his life of sin behind and become an apostle to the Gentiles, so too, in his mercy, God can give you the grace to leave your sins behind and enter into a new life in Christ.

² John Chrysostom, Homilies Concerning the Statues 12.1; trans. NPNF 1.