

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

<i>First Reading</i>	Amos 8:4-7
<i>Response</i>	Praise the Lord who lifts up the poor.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 113:1-2, 4-6, 7-8
<i>Second Reading</i>	1 Timothy 2:1-8
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	Though our Lord Jesus Christ was rich, he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.
<i>Gospel</i>	Luke 16:1-13

The 25th Sunday in Ordinary Time for Year C brings us along in Paul's first letter to Timothy, to one of the most consequential christological and soteriological passages in the New Testament. Christology has to do with the theology of who Jesus is, who Christ is. Soteriology is the theology of how we are saved. And that is Paul's words in 1 Timothy 2:1-8, on God's desire for all people to be saved and on the fact that they are all saved through one mediator, namely Christ Jesus. So, let's listen to his words in 1 Timothy 2:1-8. Paul writes:

First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all men, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life, godly and respectful in every way. This is good, and it is acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all, the testimony to which was borne at the proper time. For this I was appointed a preacher and apostle (I am telling the truth, I am not lying), a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth. I desire then that in every place the men should pray, lifting holy hands without anger or quarreling.¹

And it goes on to say a number of other things, but the lectionary stops there. Okay, so what's going on in this passage? A couple of points we want to make.

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.

Number one, notice here, and this is very important, the context is Paul's exhortation to Timothy to offer universal intercession for all peoples. So, the context is Paul is instructing Timothy and telling him, "You can't be selective in who you pray for. You have to pray for everyone. So, I'm urging you that 'supplications, prayers, intercessions,' and interesting, 'thanksgivings,'" the Greek word here is *eucharistia* "be made for all men, for kings and all who are in high positions."

So pause there. Notice, Paul's instructing Timothy to offer universal intercession, and who in particular does he single out? Politicians. So he's saying, "You have to pray for everybody, including kings and those in high positions." In other words, you need to pray for those who are in power. Now in the first century AD, of course, who is in power? It's the pagans, it's the Romans, it's the emperor. It's the Caesars, many of whom in the first century are wicked people, like Gaius Caligula or Caesar Nero. These are not good people. And yet Paul says that supplications and intercessions and thanksgivings be offered on their behalf.

So we see very clearly here what I would argue is actually an implicitly liturgical context. Timothy is a young pastor. Paul's teaching him who to pray for, I would argue, in the context of the liturgy, in particular. And I think that one of the reasons this is liturgical is the final verse when Paul says, I "desire that in every place men should pray, lifting holy hands." This idea of consecrated hands being lifted up in prayer seems to suggest it's a congregational prayer that's being carried out here with Timothy as the leader, and Paul's teaching him to pray for the leaders of the world. And we see this today, for example, in the contemporary electionary, in the Prayers of the Faithful, which will often be offered for public leaders, for public servants, for government officials, because this is what the New Testament teaches Christians to do, to pray for their political leaders, whether those leaders are Christian or not, as they weren't in the first century AD.

So that's the first content point. The context is universal intercession. Now, in that context, Paul also enjoins Timothy and other Christians to lead a peaceable and godly life, to be respectable in every way. So he's urging them to live within the Greco-Roman pagan society of their day in a way that's peaceful and respectful in every way. And the reason he gives for this injunction for universal intercession is the universal salvific will of God. So a lot of times when people read this next verse, they'll lift it out of its context, but it's important for us to understand it in

context. So here Paul is basically giving the christological and soteriological reason, the grounding, for the universal intercession that Christians are called to engage in. Why should we pray for everybody? Why should we pray for the emperor when he's such a wicked or evil man? The reason is it is good and acceptable in the sight of God our savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

So pause there. Here we see two key aspects of Paul's theology of salvation. First, it's universal. Jesus Christ does not just die for some people to be saved. He doesn't just die, say for example, for the Jewish people to be saved. He dies so that all people can be saved. So God's will for salvation has a universal scope. There isn't anyone who's excluded from it. He even died for Nero. He even died for Caligula. He died for the most wicked pagan emperors there were, as well as for sinners like Saint Paul himself. It's a universal salvific will. Now, this is a little tricky in the Revised Standard Version here, it says, "Who desires all men to be saved?" The Greek word is *thelō*, so you also see it translated who "wills" all men to be saved. The word *thelō* can be translated in English as I want, I will, I wish, I desire. It expresses all those things. So God wills for all men to be saved. But notice this, not just to be saved, this is really crucial, but to come to a knowledge of the truth.

So important. Sometimes we tend to reduce salvation purely to eschatological life. In other words, am I going to make it to heaven or not? Do I go to heaven or do I go to hell? That's what salvation is. But for Paul, salvation is that, it is life in Christ as opposed to life outside of Christ, it is the bodily resurrection of the dead and all those things and escaping the punishment of Gehenna. But it's more than that, salvation involves knowledge of the truth. So Christ doesn't just die so that people might be saved. He dies so that people can know the truth. Because as Jesus says in the gospel of John, "You will know the truth and the truth shall set you free." Christ doesn't just want, God doesn't just want people to not go to hell, He wants them to be free, to have the freedom of the truth. Very important, I think, especially in our day of relativism where people say, "You have your truth. I have my truth." No, no, no, no. There's one truth, and that truth is a saving truth. And God desires not just that people should escape from separation from Him in damnation, but know the truth in Christ Jesus.

And here, Paul continues, you'll notice the next line is very powerful. Why? "For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ

Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all, the testimony to which was borne at the proper time." So pause here. This is interesting. One of the most fascinating things about Christianity is the paradox of its universal mission and its exclusive and absolute christology and theology. So on the one hand, there's only one God, and there's only one mediator between God and human beings, between God and humanity. And that one mediator is Christ Jesus. He's the sole mediator of salvation. And at the same time...so it's exclusive, it's absolute, it's unique, and at the same time it's also universal, because that one God and that one savior wills salvation be for all, not just for some. So that's one of the paradoxes of Christianity. It's both absolute and missionary at the same time. This is a puzzle, and people will tend to want to do one or the other. They'll want to either say it's about, they'll either want to tend toward universalism or exclusivism or absolutism without keeping both intentions, and Paul keeps them as always, both and, good Catholic both and here.

So, "There's one God, there's one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself," look at this, this is interesting, "as a ransom for all." So here we see very clearly Paul saying that Christ dies, He offers His life as a ransom for all. Now, you might be thinking here, "Well wait a second. I thought in the gospels, Jesus said He gave Himself as a ransom for many. And Paul says He gave himself as a ransom for all." Well, what do we make of that? In Matthew 20:28, Jesus says

the Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

And then at the Last Supper, He says:

this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.

And the short answer to that, I cover this in my book, *Jesus and the Last Supper* in a lot more depth, is that the difference between those two is a Semitic and a Greek context. So Jesus, in His words, is alluding to the suffering servant. And in the Hebrew Bible, in the book of Isaiah, if you go back and you look, the expression *rabim*, the multitude, it can be used to refer not just to a lot of people, but to all people. And you'll see that in Isaiah Chapter 53. If you go through, you'll see that

many is a kind of synonym for all, but it's a Semitic expression to describe the multitude, the many, which by the way, is an accurate description of all human beings who have ever lived. Are there a multitude of human beings that have ever lived since the beginning of time till the end? Yes. So there Christ uses a more Semitic expression. Here Paul, writing to Timothy, uses a little more precise Greek expression. And he says, "He gave himself as a ransom for all," just to make clear in context, this includes everyone, even the emperor, even the kings, even the politicians.

And if you have any doubt about that being the context, just look at the next line. He says:

the testimony to which was borne at the proper time. For this I was appointed a preacher and apostle (I am telling the truth, I am not lying), a teacher of

whom?

the Gentiles in faith and truth.

So recognize here that there are going to be some people, apparently, within the early church who think, "Well, yes, Christ is the Messiah, Jesus is the Messiah, He's the Savior of the Jews, but He's not the savior of that pagan king in Rome. He's not the savior of these Roman overlords, of these Roman oppressors, or of certain pagan peoples." And Paul is stressing in this context, "No, He's the savior of all because there's only one mediator between God and man, and that is the man, Christ Jesus." And He comes into the world precisely to save not just sinners like Paul, but to save everyone, and that Paul himself is going to be an apostle to the pagans, apostle to the Gentiles.

That's a basic overview of a very powerful, very important text. There's so much we could say about this text, but I'll end with a couple of basic points, basic theological points that are worth keeping in mind. Number one, some people may be troubled by Paul's statement here that God wills for all to be saved, because they might raise the question, "Well, wait, if God wills for all to be saved, then how can some not be saved? Mustn't this necessitate that if God wills all to be saved, and God is omnipotent, nothing can stand against Him, then therefore all will be saved

without remainder?" And so some people have interpreted this verse in order to support what is known as Universalism, the idea that every single person, and in some cases even including the angels, the wicked angels of Satan himself, will eventually all be saved, because it says all right here. "God desires all men to be saved."

And very early on in the early church, that reading of the text on that question, if God wills all to be saved, how can some not be saved, became a point of theological dispute. Now, it's way beyond the boundaries of this video to actually go through that debate in any kind of detail. But what I would prefer to do is just point you to one of the supreme witnesses of how to interpret this verse from Saint John Damascene or Saint John of Damascus. He's an Eighth Century Eastern church father who wrote a very famous, very widely read book called *On the Orthodox Faith*, which is basically an overview of all the basic articles of the Christian faith. It became a kind of catechism for Eastern Christians and was even widely read in the West for many centuries thereafter as an authoritative witness to the faith of the fathers of the Church in the early centuries of Christianity.

And in his book the Orthodox Faith, Chapter Two, he takes up this question of God's will and the universal salvation of all, and he answers it by making a distinction between God's antecedent will and His consequent, or permissive will. So you may have heard these distinctions before, but let's listen to where they come from. They come from St. John Damascene, Eighth Century AD, in the Orthodox Faith, and it's not a coincidence that he formulates this terminology in the context of interpreting our reading for today, 1 Timothy 2.

So here's a copy of this wonderful translation, Saint John of Damascus. It's got the exciting title *Writings*, but in this volume of the writings of Saint John of Damascus, you have his famous book *On The Orthodox Faith*, which is very clear, it's easy to read, it has some deep parts to it, but it's a wonderful overview if you want to know what did ancient Christians believe in the East and in the West? Saint John Damascene is a wonderful point of reference. He's a Doctor of the Church. He's not just one of the Fathers, he's a Doctor of the Church. So this is what Saint John Damascene says:

One should also bear in mind that God antecedently wills all to be saved and to attain to his kingdom [cf. 1 Tim 2:4]. For he did not form us to be chastised, but, because he is good, that we might share in his goodness.

All right, pause there. Notice Damascene's very different than say the later views of John Calvin. God doesn't create anyone to be damned. His antecedent will is for all to be saved. That's why He makes us. However, John continues, Saint John Damascene continues:

Yet, because he is just, he does wish to punish sinners. So, the first is called *antecedent will* and *approval*, and it has him as its cause; the second is called *consequent will* and *permission*, and it has ourselves as its cause. This last is twofold: that which is by dispensation and for our instruction and salvation, and that which is abandonment, as we have said. These, however, belong to those things which do not depend upon us. As to the things which do depend upon us, the good ones he wills antecedently and approves, whereas the evil, which are essentially bad, he neither wills antecedently nor consequentially, but permits them to the free will.²

We could go into a long debate and discussion and kind of unpack all these words in this, but to make a long story very short, what John of Damascus is basically saying is that you can make a distinction between God's antecedent will and His permissive will or His consequent will. So His antecedent will is that all would be saved. That's why He creates us, for example. However, because He gives us free will, and because He is just and sin has consequence, He also permits as a consequence, not of His antecedent will, but of our sin in action, for some people to be punished for their sins so that they are in fact not saved. So that distinction between the antecedent and consequent wills of God is permission of things that He allows through our free will, is a very ancient one, a very orthodox approach to the theological questions that are raised by texts like 1 Timothy 2. This is the way the Church has answered the question of the relationship between grace and free will and also the relationship between God's universal salvific will and the reality of some souls not being saved or some souls not receiving knowledge of the truth, how to reconcile those two apparently disparate realities.

² John Damascene, *On the Orthodox Faith* 2.29; trans. F. H. Chase.

Okay, so let's fast forward from the Eight Century to our contemporary context, with two final implications of 1 Timothy 2. The first implication I want to highlight is an important one in our day and time, and that's Paul's emphasis on the unique and absolute role that Christ plays as the one mediator between God and human beings. In our own day, as I'm sure you've encountered already, there's a widespread understanding of salvation that is relativistic, which is that basically everyone will be saved and each person's truth is their own truth, each religion is equal to every other religion, and we're all basically on the same path leading to God. And sometimes people will actually point to 1 Timothy 2 as a foundation for what we might call either a universalism or kind of relativism or indifferentism. There are different names for the idea that all people, no matter what path they're on, no matter what religion they belong to, whether they know Christ or not, whether they know the truth or not, whether they live in accordance with the truth or not, everyone is ultimately all on the same path heading to salvation and to heaven. And so in response to that widespread relativism and religious indifferentism and pluralism, in the year 2000, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith published this document on the unicity, nice title, on the unicity, it's a mouthful, *On The Unicity in Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church*. Now, as you can imagine with that title, not everyone rushed out to the bookstores to buy it and read it, but it's an extremely important document. The Latin title's nice and short, it's *Dominus Iesus*, the Lord Jesus. But in this text in Chapter Three, in response to relativism and a kind of religious universalism and pluralism, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, under Saint John Paul II, put out a document emphasizing that Christ is the sole mediator, the one way of salvation. And guess what passage it referred to? 1 Timothy 2. So let me just quote a couple of lines from *Dominus Iesus*. It says this:

the truth of Jesus Christ, Son of God, Lord and only Saviour, who through the event of his incarnation, death and resurrection has brought the history of salvation to fulfilment, and which has in him its fullness and centre, must be *firmly believed* as a constant element of the Church's faith.

I skip down and it continues.

In the New Testament, the universal salvific will of God is closely connected to the sole mediation of Christ:

And then it quotes 1 Timothy Chapter Two:

“[God] desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God; there is also one mediator between God and men, the man Jesus Christ...

If you skip down to paragraph 14, after quoting that, it says:

It must therefore be *firmly believed* as a truth of Catholic faith that the universal salvific will of the One and Triune God is offered and accomplished once for all in the mystery of the incarnation, death, and resurrection of the Son of God...

...In this sense, one can and must say that Jesus Christ has a significance and a value for the human race and its history, which are unique and singular, proper to him alone, exclusive, universal, and absolute.³

So you'll see there that what the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith is doing is it's using passages like 1 Timothy 2, as well as some others which I didn't get to quote, like Acts 4:

And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.

To emphasize that Christ is the exclusive, sole, absolute mediator between God and humanity. It's basically...what Paul is saying here, in other words, in 1 Timothy 2 is the same thing that Jesus says in the Gospel of John 14:

I am the way, and the truth, and the life

All definite articles:

³ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. *Dominus Iesus*. https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000806_dominus-iesus_en.html

I am *the* way, and *the* truth, and *the* life; no one comes to the Father, but by me.

Here, Paul tells the same thing to young Timothy in the context of exhorting him to pray for all people so that they might come to know the one savior, Jesus Christ. And that's why, in closing, the Catechism of the Catholic Church also takes this passage not just to emphasize the uniqueness, the absolute character of Jesus as the one savior of the world, but also the paradoxical universality that flows from that absolute reality, precisely because He's the one savior, the Church therefore has a universal mission to all people. It excludes no one from its mission of preaching the gospel. And I'll close with these words from the catechism to that effect:

It is from God's love for all men that the Church in every age receives both the obligation and the vigor of her missionary dynamism, "for the love of Christ urges us on." Indeed, God "desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" [1 Tim 2:4]; that is, God wills the salvation of everyone through the knowledge of the truth. Salvation is found in the truth. Those who obey the prompting of the Spirit of truth are already on the way of salvation. But the Church, to whom this truth has been entrusted, must go out to meet their desire, so as to bring them the truth. Because she believes in God's universal plan of salvation, the Church must be missionary. (CCC 851)

So in other words, in contrast to universalism, which would say, "Oh, look, God desires all men to be saved, therefore we don't need to do anything," the Church interprets the text precisely the opposite way. Because God wills all people to be saved and there's only one mediator between God and mankind, that's Christ Jesus the Lord, therefore, the Church's mission must be also universal. And that is what St. Paul is teaching young Timothy in his first letter to this young pastor.