

The Twenty-eighth Sunday of Ordinary Time

(Year C)

<i>First Reading</i>	2 Kings 5:14-17
<i>Response</i>	[The Lord] has revealed his vindication in the sight of the nations.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 98:1, 2-3, 3-4
<i>Second Reading</i>	2 Timothy 2:8-13
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	[G]ive thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.
<i>Gospel</i>	Luke 17:11-19

The 28th Sunday in Ordinary Time for Year C brings us to another brief passage from Paul's second Letter to Timothy, the second of his pastoral epistles. This one's from 2 Timothy 2:8-13 and it's about the importance of patience in the midst of suffering, patience in the midst of tribulation. Here's what it says, Paul writes:

Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, descended from David, as preached in my gospel, the gospel for which I am suffering and wearing fetters like a criminal. But the word of God is not fettered. Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation which in Christ Jesus goes with eternal glory. The saying is sure: If we have died with him, we shall also live with him;

if we endure, we shall also reign with him;
if we deny him, he also will deny us;
if we are faithless, he remains faithful—

for he cannot deny himself.¹

So a beautiful little vignette there, just a short passage from 2 Timothy, but it reveals a few things about St. Paul that are worth highlighting. The first one is of course, that this is another one of the prison epistles. So we see Paul writing to

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.

Timothy, as he puts it, while I am suffering and wearing fetters like a criminal. So this is the imagery of Paul in chains, and I think that's just a powerful image for us to reflect on for a minute. We'll get to the martyrdom of Paul eventually, but here we see that Paul was treated like a criminal even though he had done nothing except preach the gospel of Jesus Christ. He's wearing chains to bind him, to keep him from moving about, right? That's what the chains are for. But what he says is, although I'm wearing fetters, the word of God is not fettered. And you can actually see that in the very epistle of Second Timothy. The fact that Paul's able to write this letter is itself a testament to the fact that the word of God is not chained, even though Paul's physical body is chained. The technology, interestingly enough, of the epistle and of the mail system of the Roman Empire, enables Paul to still proclaim the word of God, to share the word of God, to write the apostolic preaching of the word and send it to Timothy in order to encourage him in his own sufferings, in his own trial, in his own tribulation.

Even though there's no evidence that Timothy himself is in prison, he's going through other forms of suffering. So the first point I just want to highlight here is this is a beautiful, powerful image, a rhetorical image here that Paul's using here of him being in chains and writing while he is in chains, but the word of God not being fettered, the word of God not being chained. And you'll see this over and over and over again in the history of the Church, where political authorities, secular authorities, worldly powers try to stop the spread of the gospel by either imprisoning or persecuting or intimidating or killing the apostles of the gospel, the ministers and Christian witnesses to the gospel, and instead of chaining the gospel by means of those acts, they actually set it loose. Ironically, it's precisely where the blood of the martyrs is spilled, that the gospel spreads. It's one of the paradoxes of suffering and martyrdom in the Church, that it's an agent for the spread of the gospel, rather than what the perpetrators intend, the suppression of the good news.

And the same thing's true here in Paul's second Letter to Timothy. He's in chains, but he's writing this letter, which think about it, still resounds to this day. This is going to be read on Sunday to this day. So the word that the Romans were trying to suppress when they put Paul in prison is still echoing throughout all of humanity, throughout the whole world every Sunday when this reading is read in the context of the liturgy, in the context of the Mass. So it's a powerful witness to the fact that the world can do everything it wants to do. It's not going to silence God. He can speak through any situation.

And so in that context, another point here is that Paul encourages Timothy to imitate him and recognize that Paul's enduring everything. Why? For the sake of

the elect, so that they can obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus. And they're another standard Pauline phrase, "Being in Christ." This is really the center of Paul's theology. If you had to pick a center, it's the notion of being in Christ and having everything that Paul does, every word that he speaks, every action that he takes, every situation he finds himself in is nothing less than him living out mystically the life of Christ in him. So Paul's not the first one to be in chains for the sake of the gospel. Christ himself is arrested and imprisoned before he's executed by the Romans. So the imprisonment of Christ is now playing itself out in his mystical body through the imprisonment of witnesses to Christ like the Apostle Paul himself.

And so in that context, Paul is encouraging Timothy not to be afraid, but to have courage and to recognize that this kind of suffering, this kind of tribulation is part of the gospel. It's part of the apostolic mission. And to that end, it's interesting, he quotes a saying, he says, "The saying is Sure." Now what saying is sure? Well, the one he is about to write here, but we don't know exactly where this comes from. This is one of those examples of what some scholars refer to as the pre-pauline hymns. In other words, there are certain parts of the letters of Paul, where the style of the Greek writing shifts from that of a prose exposition in an epistolary form, like writing a letter, to a more poetic or hymnic or rhythmic form that makes it sound as if Paul is quoting the words of a song or the words of a hymn of some early Christian singer, something that they would've sung together in the context of liturgy or the early Christian Eucharist, the Lord's Supper.

And I think in this case, this is one of the stronger examples. Some scholars will debate whether it's a pre-pauline hymn or whether Paul himself is just composing a kind of poetic or hymnic passage as part of his letter. But here when he says, "The saying is sure," he seems to be quoting some other saying that would be familiar perhaps to Timothy. Almost a kind of creedal profession or a creedal hymn, which says:

If we have died with him, we shall also live with him;

if we endure, we shall also reign with him;

if we deny him, he also will deny us;

if we are faithless, he remains faithful—

for he cannot deny himself.

And I would argue that the heart of that ... well, let's just break that down. Notice the first passage, "if we have died with him, we shall also live with him." Now you could think, "Oh, well, that's talking about martyrdom." If we die with him in martyrdom, we will live with him in the resurrection. But the past tense there actually suggests something different. When, according to Paul, do we die with Christ? It's when we're baptized, right? So Romans 6 is the best example. He says in chapter six, verse three:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.

So the death there that Paul's talking about is the baptismal death, the sacramental death that takes place when we are immersed in the waters of Baptism and rise up to new life. Back in 2 Timothy 2 we see a similar image. If we died with him in baptism, then we shall also live with him in the resurrection. And then for my money, the heart of this hymn is the next line. "If we endure, we shall also reign with him." And I think that's the heart of the hymn here, because the context is Paul is exhorting Timothy to have courage and to have patience in suffering. To be patient in the midst of his tribulation, not to give way to fear, not to give way to despair, not to give way to discouragement just because he's suffering for the sake of the gospel. Because Paul himself, as his chains bear witness, is suffering for the sake of the gospel. So he reminds Timothy that when you're suffering, when you are facing tribulation, when you are undergoing trials, just remember, if you've been baptized, you will reign with him. If you are patient, you will live with him in the resurrection. If you deny him, however, he will deny you.

And then there's this mysterious line here. "if we are faithless, he remains faithful — for he cannot deny himself." Now what does that mean? It seems at first to contradict the previous line, "If we deny him, he also will deny us." So what is he saying here? I would suggest that in context, although it might seem like a contradiction, it is actually not, because the third line in the hymn, "If we deny him, he will deny us," is something you'll see over and over again about the sin of apostasy. This will be a public denial of Christ. For example, if you go back to the Gospel of Matthew, you'll see in the gospel Matthew similar terminology. Matthew 10:32, for example:

So every one who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven; but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven.

So what Jesus is saying there is if you make a public confession of fidelity to me, then I'm going to publicly confess you as one of my own at the final judgment. But if you publicly deny me before others, then I'm going to publicly deny you at the final judgment. So that's what would come to be known as the sin of apostasy, where a person renounces the faith through fear of persecution or fear of death. And so Paul's encouraging him, if you endure, you're going to be saved. If you deny him, you'll be denied. Which basically that hymn is a kind of summary statement of what Jesus teaches in the gospel. But the last line, "If we're faithless, he remains faithful," I would suggest has less to do with apostasy than with faults and sins and mistakes being made by the person facing tribulation and persecution. So those who sometimes can fall into sins of weakness or other faults in the face of persecution, even though we remain sinners, Paul's saying he is faithful and he cannot deny himself. What does that mean? What Paul says there, what this hymn is saying is, as long as you remain in Christ, he cannot deny you. Certain sins can separate you from Christ like the sin of apostasy. And you'll see this play out elsewhere in the New Testament, a distinction between some sins that are deadly and other sins that are not deadly.

Here what Paul is saying is that although sometimes we might be faithless, we might fall, we might stumble. Like the book of Proverbs, the righteous man falls seven times a day. Christ never falls. He's always faithful. *Pistos* is the Greek word, it's very similar to the word *pistis* for faith. Why? Because he cannot deny himself. So as long as you remain in Christ, like he talks about earlier, being in Christ Jesus, and you endure suffering for the sake of the gospel, you too will one day live with him, and you too will one day reign with him.

So in closing, a couple of points from the living tradition here from the Church. I've quoted him over and over again, but I can't help myself. John Chrysostom in his homilies, a beautiful series of homilies on 2 Timothy, draws out some of the spiritual significance of Paul's exhortation and of this beautiful little pre-pauline hymn that's tucked away in 2 Timothy 2 when he writes these words:

But now God has made us such that nothing can subdue us. For our hands are bound but not our tongue, since nothing can bind the tongue but

cowardice and unbelief. Where these are not, though you fasten chains upon us, the preaching of the gospel is not bound.²

So once again, he's just emphasizing, you can persecute us, you can put us in chains, but the word itself is never going to be bound. And then again, another beautiful passage about patience and suffering. Listen to Chrysostom's words:

I beseech you, let us so perform all our actions that we may not fail to obtain such glory as this. To obtain it is by no means difficult, if we desire it, or arduous, if we apply ourselves to it. For, "if we endure, we shall also reign" [2 Tim 2:12]. *What is the meaning of "If we endure"? If we patiently bear tribulations and persecutions; if we walk the narrow path.* The narrow path is unattractive by nature but becomes easy when we choose to follow it, because of our hope for the future.³

Okay, so what's Chrysostom saying there? Basically what he's saying is we should expect tribulation. We should expect persecution. We should expect suffering to come. Why? Because Jesus in the gospels once again says that the road that leads to life is narrow and difficult. So don't be surprised when you start to suffer. Don't be surprised if you experience opposition. Don't be surprised if you experience persecution. This is part of the gospel. What needs to happen in response to that, though, is not despair at the suffering or trials or persecution that overcome us, but the virtue of endurance, of patience in the face of suffering. And how do we gain that patience, which is obviously not something natural. All of us want suffering to end as quickly as possible when it begins. That's a natural human response. Notice what Chrysostom says, "Because of our hope for the future." In other words, sorry for the big words, but this is important. Eschatology, our beliefs, the truth about what will happen at the end of time, the resurrection, the final judgment, the new creation, are what give us the hope to endure the sufferings of the present day, the sufferings of our present life.

And I think at least in my own experience, whenever tribulation or suffering comes and I start to lose heart, it's precisely because I've forgotten about the end. I'm not thinking about the life of the world to come. I'm not thinking about the resurrection. I'm not thinking about the joy and the beauty of the new heavens and the new earth. I get so focused on the present and the suffering and pain that I'm

² John Chrysostom, *Homilies on 2 Timothy 4*; trans. NPNF.

³ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on John 87.3*; trans. Sr. Thomas Aquinas Goggin, S.C.H.

experiencing in the present that I forget about the future. And so Paul is reminding Timothy that if you die with him, what? You'll live with him. So he points to the end. If you endure with him, you will what? You'll reign with him in the kingdom of heaven. So throughout the poem, he's pointing to the eschaton, he's pointing to the hope of the life of the world to come in order to give Timothy the strength to endure the sufferings of the present age. And the same thing is true for us today. And Chrysostom says it's true for the Christians in the late fourth century as well. If we want to cultivate that virtue of patience in the midst of tribulation, we need to keep our eyes not just on what Christ has already done on the cross, but on what he will do at the resurrection.