

The Twenty-ninth Sunday of Ordinary Time

(Year C)

<i>First Reading</i>	Exodus 17:8-13
<i>Response</i>	My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 121:1-2, 3-4, 5-6, 7-8
<i>Second Reading</i>	2 Timothy 3:14-4:2
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.
<i>Gospel</i>	Luke 18:1-8

The 29th Sunday in Ordinary Time for Year C continues our journey through the Second Letter of Paul to Timothy and brings us to one of the most momentous and consequential passages in all of Paul's letters. And that is the passage on the inspiration of Scripture, 2 Timothy 3:14-4:2. So let's read this together. Paul writes:

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings which are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word, be urgent in season and out of season, convince, rebuke, and exhort, be unfailing in patience and in teaching.¹

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, there is so much we could say about this particular passage, but I want to home in on the heart of it, which is really the statement about the inspiration of Scripture, but want to make sure we put it in context. Obviously, or it should be obvious, that this passage, this verse 16, "All scripture is inspired by God," is a foundational text for the doctrine of the inspiration of Sacred Scripture. But before we look at that in a little more detail, I want to make sure we look at the context. What's the context of this doctrinal declaration that Paul makes? He's writing a letter to the young leader in the church, Timothy, to give him encouragement in the face of some suffering and trials and opposition that he's undergoing as a young minister of the gospel, a young presbyter. And in that context, Paul reminds Timothy of the importance of Scripture in his life as a minister, and in his preaching and teaching of the gospel. And he does so by getting slightly biographical. He gives us a little window into Timothy's life here. He says:

as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings...

Now, pause there. This is really interesting. So apparently, Timothy comes from a family in which he was learning the Jewish Scriptures from his youth. That's very important. That's the first point. So we don't know much about that context, but it is clear here that he's been instructed in the Scriptures since his childhood. So this is not like some of the recent converts that Paul will write to in the Church of Corinth, who have just come from paganism into Christianity. They're still getting their bearings. No, Timothy has been instructed in the Scriptures since his childhood.

Now, when Paul says this, point number two, he is not referring to the Bible as we have it today. So Paul's writing this letter in the mid 1st century. Some of the writings of the New Testament haven't even been written...many of them haven't even been written yet, at this point. So when Paul refers to the sacred writings that Timothy has learned about since his youth, he would be referring here to the Jewish Scriptures, what we call the Old Testament, what the Jews called the Tanakh, or what in 1st century AD was simply called the sacred writings, the Scriptures. If you want an example of this, of what Paul's alluding to here, you can take a passage from Josephus. He was a 1st century Jewish historian. I mention him very often. But he has a really important passage in his treatise against Apion, where he actually talks about the canon of Jewish Scripture, what books the Jewish Scriptures contained in the 1st century AD.

And this is what Josephus says about the writings to which Paul is referring to here when he speaks to Timothy. Listen to what Josephus says about the canon of Jewish Scripture in the 1st century:

For we [meaning we Jews] have not an innumerable multitude of books among us, disagreeing and contradicting one another, but only twenty-two books, which contain the records of past times; which are justly believed to be divine...²

And then he goes on to list the books of Jewish Scripture. Now, pause for a second. Contemporary Jewish Bibles, if you look at them, the numbers are slightly different than what Josephus gives here. Contemporary Jewish Bibles have 24 books. Now, these books are substantially the same as the Protestant Old Testament, which has 39 books, but the Protestants and the Jews count them differently. What's the difference between Josephus' canon and the contemporary Jewish canon? It's debatable, so scholars will debate if his canon's a little smaller than the Jewish contemporary canon, and which books it might be missing that would lead to that slightly different enumeration. For our purposes here, the main point is just that by the late 1st century, when Josephus is writing, there's an established, agreed upon collection of books, some 22 in number, that would've been commonly accepted by the Jews of his day. So when Paul talks about Timothy having learned the sacred writings since his childhood, he can't be referring to the New Testament because the New Testament is still in the process of being written. He's referring to the Old Testament, or he's referring to, more properly, the Jewish Scriptures that Paul would've known as a rabbi and as a Pharisee. Now, what's fascinating about this, if you keep going in Josephus' quotation, Josephus says:

[N]o one has been so bold as either to add anything to them, or take anything from them, or to make any change in them; but it becomes natural to *all Jews, immediately and from their very birth, to esteem those books to contain divine doctrines*, and to persist in them, and, if occasion be, willingly to die for them.

So what does Josephus reveal here to us about Jewish Scriptures in the 1st century? Number one, he tells us there's a widely agreed upon collection of books. Number two, he tells us that these books were believed to be divine. In other words, not just

² Josephus, *Against Apion* 1.38, 41-42; trans. W. Whiston.

human, they are divine. And thirdly, he tells us that, from their very birth, Jews are instructed in the study of these holy Scriptures. Now, this would've been very different than other religions in the 1st century AD. If you go about and you look at the many different pagan religions, for example, they didn't have sacred books or sacred texts that they would study assiduously, week after week, like the Jews. The Jews were really unique for having a sacred collection of sacred books, which they took a day off every week in order to hear read from, and to study and hear explained by the learned, by the rabbis, by the preachers and teachers of the people. That's unique. In paganism, if you wanted to participate in a particular pagan cult, there weren't doctrines that you had to accept or sacred texts that you had to read and study and learn about. There were temples you had to participate in, cults you had to attend, sacrifices to offer, and festivals to celebrate. So it was primarily focused on praxis, not on doctrine, much less on the education in a particular text.

The Jews, however, said, "No, these books are divine. These books are of God. These books are sacred. And we're going to learn them from our very youth all the way up to this day. And we'll die for them if we have to because they're holy, because they're of God." That's the theology of Scripture that Paul is presupposing when he writes to Timothy. So when he's speaking to Timothy and he says, "All Scripture is inspired by God," he means the Jewish Scriptures, he means the Old Testament. And he's saying that these Scriptures, which in Greek... It's funny, in Greek the word Scripture is just *graphē*. It just means writings. So they call them the writings, but they're not just any writings, they're the sacred writings.

It's very similar to... Well, it's not identical to, but it used to be the case in the United States, in American parlance, people would talk about the Good Book. And the Book, meaning the Good Book, wasn't just any book, it was the Bible. It was a way of referring to the Bible. The Scriptures or the writings, with the emphasis on the definite article, means not just any writings, but the sacred writings that are considered divine. The Scriptures that are from God.

So Paul then is saying, "All of the Scriptures," all the Jewish Scriptures, "are inspired by God." You've been learning about them from your youth. And they're profitable for four things, for teaching, number one. For admonishment, in other words, reproving somebody, telling them that they're doing wrong. Number three, for correction, so telling them how to live rightly, so not just pointing out where they're wrong, but pointing out how to live well. And then, finally, for training and righteousness. And the Greek word here for training, *paideia*, is the kind of training you give to a child. Like a pedagogue is someone who teaches children, or it's just a teacher, but it means somebody who leads a child into deeper and deeper

knowledge. Anytime you hear the word *agogue*, it's from the Greek word *ago*. It means to lead. And so a *mystagogue* is someone who leads people into the mysteries. A *pedagogue* is someone who leads children into a deeper understanding of the truth, is an educator.

So the Scriptures are our *pedagogue* for training, not in learning our letters or learning how to read and write, but in holiness, in righteousness. They teach us how to be righteous, and they give us, he says, "So that the man of God may be complete and equipped for" good works, "for every good work." So there's a moral *telos* to the study of Scripture. There's a moral... Sorry for the technical terminology, *telos* is a Greek word meaning an end or an aim or a goal. So when we read Scripture, it isn't just to learn information, it's also to experience transformation, so that the man of God might be equipped to actually practice good works. Powerful, beautiful passage from St. Paul there about the importance of Scripture.

So what he's saying to Timothy here is, don't forget, you want to be a good pastor, you want to be a good minister, you want to lead other people to the gospel? Not only do you have to stir up the gift that you received when I laid hands on you, like at the beginning of the letter, you also have to pay attention to Scripture. You have to read the Scriptures. You have to immerse yourself in the Scriptures. Why? How are they different from any other book? Because of that single line, "All Scripture is inspired by God."

Now, that line, "Inspired by God," is very interesting. The Greek term there is *theopneustos*, *theopneustos*. It comes from two words, *theo* means God, and then *pneustos* is from the word *pneuma*, it's the word for spirit or breath or wind. So *theopneustos* means all Scripture is God-breathed. It comes over in the Latin as inspired. I like God-breathed, though, because it's just a very vivid, powerful image of describing the fact that when we talk about the Scriptures, we're describing books that are not just authored by human beings, but which have been breathed forth by God. They're inspired by God. They're authored by the Holy Spirit. And that passage is the foundational passage for the Church's teaching, its doctrinal teaching on the inspiration of Sacred Scripture. So this was given to us, although the Church has always believed in the inspiration of Scripture, the doctrinal definition, the defining and promulgation of the doctrine of inspiration, took place at the Second Vatican Council. In 1965, the Church promulgated the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, known as *Dei Verbum* in Latin, or the word of God. And it's all about the word of God, not just in tradition, but in Sacred Scripture.

And in that document, Vatican II, *Dei Verbum*, paragraph 11, the Church gives us her most authoritative teaching on the nature of inspiration. And I want you to listen to it and ask yourself, Is this how I think about the Bible? Listen to what the Church says:

The divinely revealed realities, which are contained and presented in the text of sacred Scripture, have been written down under *the inspiration of the Holy Spirit*. For Holy Mother Church relying on the faith of the apostolic age, accepts as sacred and canonical the books of the Old and the New Testaments, whole and entire, with all their parts, on the grounds that, written under the *inspiration of the Holy Spirit* (cf. Jn. 20:31; 2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:19–21; 3:15–16), *they have God as their author*, and have been handed on as such to the Church herself...

Since, therefore, all that the inspired authors, or sacred writers, affirm should be regarded as affirmed by the Holy Spirit, we must acknowledge that the books of Scripture, firmly, faithfully and without error, teach that truth which God, for the sake of our salvation, wished to see confided to the sacred Scriptures. *Thus “all Scripture is inspired by God, and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction and for training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work”* (2 Tim. 3:16–17, Gk. text).³

So this is a very consequential passage. Vatican II will often refer to passages of Scripture in parenthetical notes, but here it quotes the whole verse because this is the foundation for the Church's doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture.

So I asked you, as you were listening to that, to say, "Is this how you think about the Bible?" And the reason I asked you to think about that is because I'll never forget one time, I was teaching about the Scripture to a class of 30 or 40 people. And there was one of the students in the classroom... Well, we got to the topic of inspiration of Scripture. And I read this passage and I said, What Paul means here is that God is the author of Sacred Scripture. So when we talk about the inspiration of Scripture, we don't mean just that Scripture is really inspirational, like that I get inspired when I read the Scriptures, in a way that I don't when I read Dante's *Divine Comedy* or Shakespeare or something like that. It's very inspirational. We

³ Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum* 11; trans. A. Flannery.

don't mean that. We mean, when we say the Scripture is inspired, we mean that God is the author of Sacred Scripture, in a way that is completely unique to this book, or this library books, alone.

And I'll never forget, one of the students in the classroom, who was a cradle Catholic and a bright student, raised his hand and said, "Dr. Pitre, isn't that putting it a little strong to say God is the author of Sacred Scripture?" So I said, "Okay, well, maybe. Why don't you take out your Catechism of the Catholic Church, let's turn the section on Sacred Scripture where this passage is quoted from Vatican II and let's see." Now, paragraph 105 in the Catechism of the Catholic Church quotes the passage we just read from *Dei Verbum*, Vatican II, *Dei Verbum* 11, but it adds one line. Catechism of the Catholic church, paragraph 105, in italics, "*God is the author of sacred Scripture.*" So I said, "So I think that's probably not putting it too strongly." Because this is how the Church interprets Paul's words, not just in Vatican II, but in the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

And that, I would suggest to you, is a challenge to us. It's really important for us to remember that the reason that the only book that is read at Mass is Scripture, is because Scripture alone is not just inspirational or inspiring or even orthodox or true. Papal Encyclicals teach the truth. The Decrees of Ecumenical Councils teach the truth. They're authoritative. We don't read them at Mass. So we don't read the *Summa Theologica* at mass of St. Thomas Aquinas. We don't read the Decrees of Ecumenical Councils. We don't even read Papal Encyclicals. There's only one book we read at Mass, and the book that we read at mass is Sacred Scripture. Why? Because Sacred Scripture alone is *theopneustos*, God-breathed, inspired by the Holy Spirit, authored by God, in a way, mysteriously, that does not eradicate the human author. All the human authors acted fully and freely as true human authors, but in a mysterious way, God is the principal author of Sacred Scripture, working through the human authors, so as to give us the books of Scripture, which are not just, in a sense, fully human, they're also fully divine. There's a mysterious analogy to the incarnation itself. Christ, the word who becomes flesh is fully man, but also fully God, fully divine. And that's what sets Scripture apart.

And that's what St. Paul is trying to communicate to Timothy in the Second Letter to Timothy. And we're so blessed that he did because, through it, we've received the doctrine, the clearest expression of the doctrine of the inspiration of Sacred Scripture. So, if you're watching these videos, you probably already recognize that Scripture is inspired and have a devotion to it, but I would just encourage you to remember and reflect on Paul's words to Timothy here. And to ask yourself, "Okay, if I believe that Scripture is God-breathed, if I believe that it's inspired, if I believe

that it's authored by God, do I live that way? Do I read it every day? Do I treat it as an unending font, a source of my own spiritual life? Or is it gathering dust on the shelf?" Because it too, like Papal Encyclicals, can be a little difficult to read sometimes. Which of those is it? And I think Paul here, in encouraging Timothy, encourages all of us as well to remember that Scripture is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and ultimately, for training in righteousness.