

The Thirtieth Sunday of Ordinary Time

(Year C)

<i>First Reading</i>	Sirach 35:12-14, 16-18
<i>Response</i>	The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 34:2-3, 17-18, 19, 23
<i>Second Reading</i>	2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	[T]hat is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation
<i>Gospel</i>	Luke 18:9-14

The 30th Sunday in Ordinary Time brings us to 2 Timothy 4:6-8 and 16-18, toward the end of the letter, when Paul reflects on his future martyrdom. Most Christians, most Catholics, know that Paul ends his life as a martyr in Rome, and so it's very fitting that the Church gives us in the lectionary, one of the few moments in the letters of Paul where he actually anticipates his eventual end as a martyr for Christ. Remember that 2 Timothy is written by Paul while he's in prison, which is a context where you can easily imagine that he might anticipate ultimately being executed for his crimes. And so in that context at the end of the letter, he says these words to Timothy about his eventual martyrdom. Listen to what he says in 2 Timothy 4:6 and following. He writes:

For I am already on the point of being sacrificed; the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.

Now, the lectionary skips down to verse 16 here, but I'd like to just read the intervening verses if you don't mind, and even if you do, but just because they're an interesting window into the practical reality here. He continues:

Do your best to come to me soon. For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica; Crescens has gone to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia. Luke alone is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you; for he is very useful in serving me. Tychicus I have sent to Ephesus. When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, also the books, and above all the parchments. Alexander the coppersmith did me great harm; the Lord will requite him for his deeds. Beware of him yourself, for he strongly opposed our message.

Now here the lectionary picks up.

At my first defense no one took my part; all deserted me. May it not be charged against them! But the Lord stood by me and gave me strength to proclaim the word fully, that all the Gentiles might hear it. So I was rescued from the lion's mouth. The Lord will rescue me from every evil and save me for his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory for ever and ever. Amen.¹

Beautiful. Beautiful. So much good stuff here in this amazing conclusion to Paul's Second Letter to Timothy. Let me highlight a few elements. First, when Paul says he's already on the point of being sacrificed, the most natural interpretation of that is he anticipates that he's going to be martyred. That's the first point. And in that context then, he reflects on his accomplishments so far, and he makes this strong confession that he's fought the good fight. "I have finished the race, I have kept the faith." Here we see that athletic imagery, he's describing himself as a victor in the athletic contest of the fight for the faith. And therefore, like the athletes would receive a crown if they won the Olympic games, "So too, I will receive a crown," Paul says, but this crown is a "crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing." Again, we see Paul used this word appearing to refer to the second coming.

Although the lectionary skips down to the beautiful final verses, I love these intervening verses because they also show Paul's practical concerns. He's not just thinking about his death, he's also thinking about practical matters. He reflects on how he was deserted by some people, and he also gives us a fascinating window into where he might be when he writes this letter. He says, "Luke alone is with me.

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.

Get Mark and bring him with you.” Now, if you look at the Acts of the Apostles, the author of Acts, who is traditionally identified as Luke, because it's the same author as the Gospel of Luke, is clearly with Paul in the latter chapters of the book as Paul Journeys to Rome. So many interpreters have seen this as a clue that Paul's writing 2 Timothy from prison in Rome and that Luke is his companion in his imprisonment.

And it's interesting that he tells Timothy to get Mark and bring him with him because we also have it from ancient church histories that Mark was in Rome at the time of Peter's martyrdom. There's some debate about the exact years that he was in Rome., but it's not surprising here that Luke and Mark, two of the the evangelists, are actually mentioned by Paul if he is in prison in Rome in this particular context.

I love this section though too, because even in the midst of being in chains and in prison, Paul's still worried about getting his books. I just love this very practical, realistic...He says, "When you come Timothy, don't forget, bring my cloak." Maybe he's a little cold. Those prison cells can get cold, "And bring me something to read." But what's his most passionate desire? "Bring the parchments above all." Now, why does he want the parchments? It's because Paul is a letter writer. Paul preaches the Gospel when he is in chains through the power of his pen. So he asks Timothy to bring him the parchments, I presume, so that he might continue to write and proclaim the Word of God on paper if he can't do it orally. It's a beautiful, beautiful passage here. He concludes it by saying that the Lord will rescue him from every evil and save him for his heavenly kingdom.

Now, what eventually happens to Paul? Well there's some debate about this, about how to interpret this. Is Paul martyred right after he authors this epistle? Or is he released and then martyred later in the city of Rome? There are different interpretations, competing views of this that go back to ancient times. I'll share one of them with you from the Living Tradition, one of the most authoritative from St. Jerome. St. Jerome, 4th century Latin Father. Everybody knows him as the translator of the Bible into Latin, the famous Latin Vulgate. But what people often don't know is that Jerome was actually popular for his biographies. Jerome wrote biographies of certain saints, early Desert Fathers and others that were bestsellers. They were very popular works in the early Church. And one of the collections of biographies that Jerome wrote that he was very famous for was called the *Lives of Illustrious Men*. He was famous for this writing in particular because it's a series of short biographies — and by short I mean a page or two, or sometimes a paragraph — of all the major figures in the early Church, starting with the Apostles

themselves, the 12 Apostles, all the way down through the 2nd and the 3rd centuries, and then ending with a short biography of the most illustrious of them all, Jerome himself. So leave it to Jerome to write a book called *Lives of Illustrious Men* and finish it with a biography of himself. But it's a very valuable resource because it gives us biographical accounts of saints that otherwise we would have no information about how they lived and how they died. And in the fifth chapter of the *Lives of Illustrious Men*, Jerome has a long chapter on the Apostle Paul. And in this chapter he interprets the reading for today's scripture and he gives us a window into how 2 Timothy was interpreted by the Early Fathers who were familiar with the traditions about what happened to Paul after he was imprisoned and how he ultimately ended his life.

So as we reflect on the martyrdom of Paul in today's reading from 2 Timothy, let's listen to Jerome's testimony about how to interpret this passage and how Paul eventually met his death. This is what Jerome says, and I quote:

In the twenty-fifth year after our Lord's passion, that is the second of Nero, at the time when Festus Procurator of Judea succeeded Felix, [Paul] was sent bound to Rome, and remaining for two years in free custody, disputed daily with the Jews concerning the advent of Christ. It ought to be said that at the first defence, the power of Nero having not yet been confirmed, nor his wickedness broken forth to such a degree as the histories relate concerning him, Paul was dismissed by Nero, that the gospel of Christ might be preached also in the West.

Pause here. You may recall in Romans, Paul talks about when he's coming to Rome. His ultimate desire is to go to Spain, to go to the furthest western point in Europe and preach the Gospel there. So Jerome's saying that in the early decades when Paul was in prison, Nero hadn't yet completely lost his mind and persecuted the Church, and so he actually allowed Paul to be released and Paul continues on to preach the Gospel. Jerome continues.

As he himself writes in the second epistle to Timothy, at the time when he was about to be put to death dictating his epistle as he did while in chains; "At my first defence no one took my part, ...but the Lord stood by me and strengthened me..., and I was delivered out of the mouth of the lion" [4:16]

In other words, from the lions that would consume the Christians in their executions.

— clearly indicating Nero as lion on account of his cruelty.

He's playing on the imagery of the lions that were used in the amphitheaters and describing Nero here as the lion who would devour. Jerome continues:

And directly following he says “The Lord delivered me from the month of the lion” and again shortly “The Lord delivered me from every evil work and saved me unto his heavenly kingdom,” [4:18] *for indeed he felt within himself that his martyrdom was near at hand*, for in the same epistle he announced “for I am already being offered and the time of my departure is at hand” [4:6] *He then, in the fourteenth year of Nero on the same day with Peter, was beheaded at Rome for Christ’s sake and was buried in the Ostian way, the twenty-seventh year after our Lord’s passion.*²

In other words, what Jerome's saying here is that there were two imprisonments of Paul in Rome. The first one Paul alludes to in 2 Timothy 4, when he was allowed to escape and then go on to continue evangelizing. But the second imprisonment, he did not escape from. That imprisonment, he was in prison at the same time that Peter was, and then they were eventually both executed. Paul, by decapitation, because he was a Roman citizen, and Peter by crucifixion, because he was not, he was a slave, he was a Jew.

Jerome's interesting window into the martyrdom of Paul is a fitting monument from sacred tradition as to how to interpret this particular sacred text. When we take the scripture and the tradition together, we realize that not only did Paul anticipate being martyred, but he actually was martyred in the early Christian martyrdoms that took place in the '60s of the 1st century under the terrible and horrific Emperor Caesar Nero.

As we reflect in today's reading on Paul's martyrdom and on his willingness to be poured out, to be sacrificed, let us recall here, this is very crucial, that the way Paul describes his martyrdom is not merely as an execution, much less as a tragedy, as a kind of meaningless death, but as a liturgical sacrifice. Paul says, "I'm already on the point of being sacrificed. The time of my departure has come." And you might

² *Lives of Illustrious Men* 5; trans. NPNF.

think, "Hold on. How can he describe his death as a sacrifice? There's only one sacrifice, and that's a sacrifice of Jesus Christ." Well, remember, Paul sees himself as part of the mystical body of Christ. Christ is of course the one sacrifice, but because Paul is one of the members of Christ, his martyrdom isn't just a tragedy. His martyrdom isn't just an execution. His martyrdom is a sacrifice in which he pours out his life. He pours out his blood, he loses his head. This is a violent death that Paul suffers for the sake of the Gospel, so that the good news might be spread to the end of the earth, so that his suffering might also be redemptive through its union with the sufferings of Jesus Christ.

And so let us never forget that. Sometimes Paul gets a bad rap because some of the things he says are difficult, some of them are challenging. Sometime he could seem a little brash, a little brazen, and some people will say, "Oh, well I love Jesus, but Paul, I don't know about Paul." Well, remember, Paul did not just preach the Gospel. Paul lived the Gospel. Paul was willing to lay his head down on a block and have it cut off by a Roman soldier for the sake of his love for Christ, to be a martyr, to be a witness to the Gospel. Do you love the Gospel as much as he did? Do I love it as much as he did? Are we willing to lay down our lives like St. Paul, who wasn't just Paul the preacher, he wasn't just Paul the teacher, he wasn't even just Paul the Apostle, he was St. Paul the martyr.