

The Thirty-second Sunday of Ordinary Time

(Year C)

<i>First Reading</i>	2 Maccabees 7:1-2, 9-14
<i>Response</i>	[W]hen I awake, I shall be satisfied with beholding thy form.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 17:1, 5-6, 8, 15
<i>Second Reading</i>	2 Thessalonians 2:16-3:5
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	[A]nd from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the first-born of the dead, to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.
<i>Gospel</i>	Luke 20:27-38

The Thirty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time for Year C continues our journey through the Second Letter of Paul to the Thessalonians. And here the Church gives us another short excerpt from the letter that's a very beautiful excerpt, and I love it, but which can be a little hard to see in context. So I'm going to back up just one verse to 2 Thessalonians 2:15, which is an extremely important verse, and just give you the context of Paul's exhortations in a way that I think is actually helpful for understanding what he's exhorting the Thessalonians to do in the reading for today. So in 2 Thessalonians 2:15 we read these words:

So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by letter.

And this is where the lectionary picks up,

Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace, comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word.

Finally, brethren, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may speed on and triumph, as it did among you, and that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men; for not all have faith. But the Lord is faithful; he will strengthen you and guard you from evil. And we have confidence in the Lord about

you, that you are doing and will do the things which we command. May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ.¹

So you can see that, if you look at the verses that the Church gives us in the lectionary for today, the bulk of what they are referring to is a series of moral, spiritual, ethical exhortations that Paul is making to the Thessalonians. In a previous video, we looked at how the first issue that Paul was dealing with in the church of Thessalonica in this letter was confusion over eschatology, confusion about the end times, confusion about the coming of Christ. So Paul sets those things straight in chapter one and two of 2 Thessalonians, and then at the end of this chapter, he then now moves to his moral exhortations, encouraging the Thessalonians to live the Christian life and to draw on the grace of God, so that they might walk in a way that is in conformity to the will of God. And so you'll see he uses a few different words here in these exhortatory sections of his letters. He talks about how Jesus Christ and the God the Father loved us, gave us comfort and good hope through grace. He comforts the hearts of the Thessalonians and establishes them in every good work and word. So notice, this is a really important aspect of Paul's teaching, work and word. Paul is always focused both on the intellectual formation of his readers, them hearing and learning the word of God, but he also wants them to put that word and that intellectual formation into action through moral formation in the form of their good works.

He actually says in 2:17 that they are established in every good work. I emphasize it that way, because as you know, sometimes there are some Christians, especially since the Reformation, who will paint Paul as the opponent of good works, or as if he thinks good works are a bad thing, and that because we are justified by faith alone. That's the mantra that goes back to Martin Luther, and I don't have time to go in that in a bunch of depth right now, but suffice it to say that if you actually look at what St. Paul says about works, although he's absolutely clear that we are justified by faith apart from works of the law, salvation is a gift of grace, and that initial gift is pure gift, the gift of initial justification, at the same time, Paul is very clear that good works are an essential part of the Christian life. After that initial grace of justification, Christians are indeed empowered by God and required by God to keep the commandments and to live lives that bear fruits, the fruits of repentance through as he says here, "Every good work." So I just emphasize that

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.

Paul is not opposed to good works. He teaches the importance of good works over, and over, and over again.

And so he's reminding the Thessalonians that they not only have to have right doctrine about the end times, like in chapter one and two, but they also have to live right according to right actions. They have to live according to the works of God. And in that context, he also exhorts them to pray for him, and not just for him, but he says, "For us." You'll see this in the Thessalonian correspondence. Paul is not writing on his own. He's writing in the name of his two companions, Silvanus and Timothy, who are his co-workers in the ministry of the gospel. That's why you'll see him use the first person plural, we or us, whenever he's writing these letters, because he is speaking as part of a group, although he obviously is the head, and he's the leader of that.

So he asked them to pray for them that the word might triumph as it did among them, that they might be delivered from wicked and evil men. So there appears to be some persecution taking place. And then his final exhortation to the Thessalonians is to remind them of the fidelity of God, which is something that's easy to forget when you're being persecuted, or people are misunderstanding you like the Thessalonians were likely persecuted and misunderstood by their pagan contemporaries, the people that lived around them, their pagan neighbors who don't understand why they're leaving polytheism and paganism behind to worship this Jew from Nazareth called Jesus the Christ. And so Paul says, "Listen, the Lord is faithful. He will strengthen you. He will guard you from evil, He will protect you, and we have confidence that you're going to do, that you are doing, and you will do the things that we command."

But to that end, he makes this interesting exhortation. He says, "May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to endurance or steadfastness of Christ." Why is he telling them they need to have endurance? Why is he reminding them of fidelity? Why does he exhort them to stand fast in the love of Christ? I would suggest to you that one context of that is the fact that they are suffering from opposition and persecution, and you can see this if you go back and you look at the first letter to the Thessalonians, you'll see that in a little more detail. But I would also suggest that one of the things Paul was concerned about when he emphasizes their endurance or steadfastness, he's concerned about them falling away from the teachings that they've received, not just at the level of not living according to the moral commandments, but also abandoning the doctrines and the beliefs that they've heard from Paul, which is how he starts the letter.

So I actually would tag, I think I would tie in the last verse of our reading today, "May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God in the steadfastness of Christ," to the first verse that I read, but which isn't in the lectionary, where you see similar language, "So, brethren, stand firm, hold fast." To what? How are the Thessalonians supposed to endure? How are they supposed to keep that endurance and that steadfastness in the face of opposition? By holding fast to the traditions that they were taught by Paul, either by word of mouth or by letter. Now, what is that a reference to?

Well, we could do a whole study just on this verse, but I add it to the lectionary today, because it is an important verse especially for us as Catholics to be aware of, that in the letters of St. Paul, who is sometimes depicted as an opponent of good works, we see him affirming good works, and in the letters of St. Paul, who is sometimes depicted as an opponent of tradition, right? As somebody who's advocating for scripture alone rather than tradition, we also see Paul saying very clearly to his Thessalonian readers, "No, you actually need to stand fast. You need to hold firm to the traditions." The Greek word here is *paradosis*. It means something handed over, something handed down. *Didomi* means to give, *para* means to hand over or to give across to... It's hard to get it... to hand down. The same word can actually be used...like when Jesus is handed over to the authorities in the Gospels, it's the same verb. So a tradition is something that's been handed over or handed down from one person to another.

So Paul says, "Stand fast and hold firm to the traditions which you receive from us, whether by word of mouth," which would be the preaching of Paul and Silvanus and Timothy, "or by letter," which would be what? 2 Thessalonians, right? Or 1 Thessalonians would be obviously the primary referent here. And it's precisely these traditions, whether they're oral or written, that will enable the Thessalonians to have endurance in the face of opposition, right? To stand fast in the face of error, or confusion, or the kinds of errors that we see described earlier on in the letter. So I bring that verse up and I add it in for two reasons. The first reason is I actually think that Paul when he ends the section for the reading today, and he's talking about the steadfastness of Christ and the Lord directing their hearts to the love of God, he's picking up on the theme of them needing to hold fast in their hearts, so to speak, the traditions that they've learned from Paul. That's what will equip them to have endurance in the face of opposition.

The second reason I bring it up though is just to remind us as Catholics here of the fascinating point that Paul not only asserts and affirms the importance of keeping traditions, but he also reveals to us that tradition can take two forms. It isn't just

oral tradition, which is how we tend to think of it primarily. It can also be written tradition. In other words, the scriptures themselves are a kind of manifestation of tradition, right? In so far as they are the inscribed version of the oral preaching of the Apostles. Okay? So when Paul says, "Hold fast to the traditions you receive for us by word of mouth or by letter," what he means is I'm either giving you tradition when I was teaching you, when I was with you, or I'm giving you tradition when I was writing the letter to you, the letter of 1 Thessalonians. Either way, the tradition is nothing other than the Gospel that Christ gave to the Apostles, and then which the Apostles hand over or hand down to their congregations and to their readers in the Scriptures.

So that's a pretty fascinating text I think for us as Catholics, because it shows the problem of the idea of the erroneous version of sola scriptura, which has been so popular in many Christian circles for centuries, since the time of the reformation. That popular idea, although there are sophisticated versions of it, but the popular idea that, well, I believe in the Bible and not in the oral traditions or in the unwritten traditions of the Apostles. I just accept the Bible. Well, that's impossible to reconcile that with Paul's own understanding of tradition when he says that number one, tradition is something you have to hold fast to, but number two, it can also take multiple forms. It can be in an oral form or in a written form. So the point is that for Paul, authentic apostolic Christianity, as he's trying to hand it over to the Thessalonians, who are just a little baby congregation, they're just starting to learn the basic contours of the Gospel, already Paul is telling them that authentic apostolic Christianity means you hold fast to any tradition given by the Apostles and with the authority of the Apostles, whether it's written down, as in the Scriptures, or whether it's oral, as in the preaching and teaching of Paul and other leaders like him. So I just bring that up because it's an important corrective to an overly negative view of tradition that you sometimes see in certain Christian circles.

So, anyway, I'd like to close here just by way of illustration by referencing two fascinating early Church Fathers, who talk about this verse that we just heard from St. Paul, and about the importance not just of the written traditions and scriptures, but the unwritten traditions of the apostles as well. So the first one is from one of my favorite early Church Fathers, Basil the Great, and whenever you see a church father or a pope who has the name, "The Great," behind them, it's usually a good idea that you should read their writings. Okay? In other words, these figures tower above even the other great figures among the writings of the Fathers. And this is St. Basil's famous treatise on the Holy Spirit, and in his treatise on the Holy Spirit, he says this:

I hold it apostolic to abide also by the unwritten traditions.

and then he cites two verses from Paul in support of this:

“I praise you,” it is said, “that you remember me in all things and keep the ordinances as I delivered them to you” [1 Cor 11:2]...

He sees the same verb in Greek, *paradidomi*. "I handed them over to you," or literally, "As I traditioned them to you," and 2 Thessalonians 2:15, our verse from today:

and “Hold fast the traditions which you have been taught whether by word or by our epistle” [2 Thess 2:15].²

So that's just a good example of the fact that it's not just contemporary Catholic apologists, or something, who see in 2 Thessalonians Paul affirming unwritten apostolic tradition. It's also the ancient Church Fathers. This is how they read the text. And you might be thinking, "Okay, well, what kind of traditions are we talking about here? What kind of oral traditions do we have in mind?" Well, an illustration of this comes from Saint Cyril of Jerusalem, another early Church Father from the 4th Century. He was the bishop of Jerusalem. This is a little collection of his writings, and in his catechetical lectures that he delivered during what we would call the Lenten season, in preparation for Easter, he actually elaborates a little more on what that tradition entails, and he links it to something very crucial, which is the creed as an encapsulation of apostolic tradition. Listen to how Saint Cyril of Jerusalem describes this:

In learning and professing the faith...

he's speaking to catechumens here

embrace and guard that only which is now delivered to you by the church and confirmed by all the Scriptures. *For since not everyone has the education and leisure required to read and know the Scriptures, to prevent the soul from perishing from ignorance, we sum up the whole doctrine of the faith in a few lines...*

² Basil the Great, On the Holy Spirit 29.17; trans. NPNF.

Here he gives the lines of the creed

For the present, just listen and memorize the creed as I recite it, and you will receive in due course the testimony from Scripture of each of its propositions. For the articles of faith have not been composed to please human desire, but the most important points collected from the Scriptures make up one complete teaching of the faith. *And just as the mustard seen in a small grain contains in embryo many future branches, so also the creed embraces in a few words all the religious knowledge in both the Old and New Testament. Pay attention, therefore, brothers, and cling to the teachings which are now delivered to you, and "write them on the tablet of your heart" [Prov 7:3].*³

So you notice he's using the language there from 2 Thessalonians and from Proverbs to say to the catechumens, "How do I stand fast and hold firm to the traditions that I've received? By memorizing the words of the creed and writing it in your heart." Because what the creed is a summary of the Apostolic Tradition, and not just a summary of the Apostolic Tradition. According to Saint Cyril, it's a beautiful image. He says, "It's like a mustard seed that contains in embryo all of the branches of the tree, so too the creed embraces, in just a few words, all of the teachings of the Old and New Testaments." Beautiful image there, and that's one of the reasons why to this day, the way we hold fast to the tradition of the Apostles is to recite the creed together in the context of the liturgy, so that we might rehearse, remember, and write into our hearts that sum and summary of the apostolic faith.

³ Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures* 5.12; trans. in P. Gorday, p. 113