

## Fourth Sunday of Advent

(Year B)

<i>First Reading</i>	2 Samuel 7:1-5, 8B-12, 14A, 16
<i>Response</i>	I will sing of thy steadfast love, O Lord, for ever
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 89:2-3, 4-5, 27, 29
<i>Second Reading</i>	Romans 16:25-27
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.
<i>Gospel</i>	Luke 1:26-38

The fourth Sunday of Advent for year B brings us closer and closer to the celebration of the Nativity, the great feast of Christmas. And so on this fourth Sunday of Advent, the second reading that the Church gives us is from the letter of Paul and continues to focus on Pauline eschatology, on Paul's teaching about the end and in particular about the coming of Christ (His final advent).

But in this case, we see a very strategically selected passage from Paul's letter to the Romans. And we're going to read that passage, and then I'll unpack for you how it applies to this last week of Advent, as we're on the cusp of the celebration of Christmas. So it's from Romans chapter 16, verse 25-27, and Paul ends the letter. This is the end of the great letter to the Romans. So Paul's arguably—most people agree this is his most profound, his most theologically in-depth letter. This is his masterpiece out of all of the letters of Paul. It's the longest and the most theologically consequential. And this is how he ends the letter, so the Church gives us the completion, the finale, the ending of the letter when he writes these words:

Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery which was kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed and through the prophetic writings is made known to all nations, according to the command of the

eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith—to the only wise God be glory for evermore through Jesus Christ! Amen.<sup>1</sup>

Alright, so that's the ending of Romans. In this case, I just want to highlight a couple of points. First, notice that Paul talks about "my Gospel." So what is the Gospel for Paul? The Greek word "Gospel"—as I've said elsewhere—*euangelion* means "good message" or "good news."

And here it's interesting, because Paul will frequently use the word Gospel to speak about the good message of the passion, death, resurrection of the Messiah of Jesus Christ. It's the Good News of salvation. But in this case, Paul...commentators will know that Paul appears to be using the word Gospel almost as a synonym for "mystery." And that's a term that Paul will use elsewhere in his writings. He'll talk about the *mysterion*. So the English word "mystery" is just a transliteration of that Greek word, *mysterion*, which means "something hidden"—something concealed.

So if you like mystery novels, the appeal of a mystery novel is that there is something hidden, and then the novel will end with that hidden thing being revealed. If it's a whodunit, you have a crime, and the identity of the perpetrator is hidden...and then the novel will end with that being revealed. That idea of something hidden being revealed or unveiled is very much what Paul is talking about here when he talks about:

...according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery...

Now I pause on that though, because I don't think that most of us—or at least, speaking for myself—when we think about the Gospel, we don't think of it as a mystery. We don't think of it as something secret, something hidden that has been unveiled or revealed. We tend to think of the Gospel as primarily a message—"let me tell you about what happened" or "let me tell you about your salvation." And of

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

course that's part of it. Jesus Himself, when He begins to preach the Gospel at the beginning of Mark, for example, He says:

...repent, and believe in the gospel.

So the call to repentance—you know, the call to salvation—is an essential part of the Gospel. There's no evangelization without the call to repentance. But Paul is also saying something else. He's talking about...according to the Gospel and according to the mystery. So what is this mystery, this revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed?

The language of “revelation”—I've mentioned this elsewhere. *Apokalypsis*, unveiling, is the word we get apocalypse from. So again, we think of apocalypse as the end of the world, but apocalyptic writings and the apocalypse is the unveiling of the invisible glory that Jesus possesses now in a visible way at the end of time.

So what's Paul referring to here when he talks about:

...the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed and through the prophetic writings is made known to all nations...  
(Romans 16:25b-26a)

Well, the answer to that is simple. It's the mystery...is the identity and the mission of the Messiah. The identity and the mission of the Messiah is something that was spoken of in advance by the prophets, whether you're looking at Isaiah's prophecy:

For to us a child is born,  
to us a son is given;  
and the government will be upon his shoulder,  
and his name will be called  
“Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,  
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”  
Of the increase of his government and of peace  
there will be no end... (Isaiah 9:6-7a)

That's from Isaiah, chapter 9. It's also from Handel's "Messiah," since we're in Advent. Or Jeremiah's description of a new David who's going to come and restore the twelve tribes of Israel. Or Micah's prophecy, chapter 5, of one who would be born in Bethlehem, who would be a ruler of the nations.

These various prophecies from the Jewish Scriptures speak in advance of a king who is to come, but exactly who that king is and how he's going to accomplish the mission of restoring Israel and bringing the kingdom—there's a hidden element to that. There's a mysterious element to that. When you read the writings of the prophets, it's not exactly clear when this person's going to come, who he's going to be. Take for example that passage from Isaiah chapter 9. He's going to be a son that's born and yet he's also called Mighty God. So is He a king and the son of David? Or is He God? Is He human or is He divine? And the answer is, of course, yes. It's both of those.

But there's a mystery there. There's a hidden element to the identity and the mission of the Messiah. So the prophets also talk about the restoration of the kingdom, the ingathering of the lost tribes, the establishment of a new temple. That's the mission of the Messiah.

But what does that mission look like? Does that mean that the future king is going to come and defeat the earthly enemies of Israel and build a new temple out of stone and mortar and reestablish the earthly kingdom of David and bring back the lost tribes from Assyria that have been scattered throughout the visible earth? Are they going to come and pilgrimage to the earthly Promised Land? Or is His mission something more than that? See the difference?

So there's an element of mystery to the prophetic writings, and the only people who aren't aware that there's a mystery to the prophetic writings are people who haven't read the prophetic writings, which is unfortunately a lot of us. A lot of Christians...we just don't know the Old Testament very well. We don't know the prophets. The prophets are the hardest part—in my view—when you read through the Old Testament, at least the first time I read the Old Testament in its entirety. The law of the legal material in Leviticus, Numbers...most people...Exodus as

well...that's the stuff that they think, "Ah, that's some really difficult stuff to get through."

But the prophets are really difficult to read—Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel. They're long, they're so complex. But they're *essential* for understanding Christianity. And although, we modern day Christians might not be familiar with the prophetic writings, Paul was. Paul knew them by heart. He quotes them from memory over and over again, especially in the letter to the Romans. So the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed through the prophetic writings...it's made known not just to the Jews to whom the Scriptures belong, but now Paul says:

...to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith...

So think here about the Great Commission. Jesus says:

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you... (Matthew 28:19-20a)

So Paul...the mystery here is the divinity, Christ—I mean, that's not the only mystery. The divinity of the Christ and the transcendent nature of the salvation that He's going to bring is something that can be discerned from the prophets. But there is a hidden element to them. It's not clear until Christ comes and fulfills them, exactly who He's going to be and how this is all going to play out.

So Paul ends his famous letter to the Romans by hitting that drum, by driving that point home—that the Gospel is a mystery, but that this mystery is now revealed to those who are in Christ and to those who have come to faith.

Now, as soon as I say all that, there's one other element of this passage I want to highlight. It's interesting that in verse 25, when Paul says:

...according to the revelation of the mystery which was kept secret for long ages... (Romans 16:25b)

The actual word there in Greek, *sigāō*—it actually means “silent” for ages. So there is some kind of silent element to the mystery...to the hiddenness. And this is one of the times where Paul appears—we don’t know this for certain, there’s debate about—but there appears to show at least a link with one of the books of the Old Testament that’s only in the Catholic Bible, and that’s the Wisdom of Solomon.

In the Wisdom of Solomon chapter 18, there’s a description...it’s kind of walking through salvation history. And there’s a description of retelling the story of Passover and the story of the exodus from Egypt and of Passover night. And it describes the Passover very interestingly. In Wisdom of Solomon 18, verse 6, it talks about silence. Listen to this mystery. It’s describing Passover night:

For while gentle silence enveloped all things,  
and night in its swift course was now half gone,  
thy all-powerful word leaped from heaven, from the royal throne,  
into the midst of the land that was doomed... (Wisdom 18:14-15b)

Isn’t that fascinating? So already in this Jewish writing Wisdom (Wisdom of Solomon), you have an image of the *logos* coming down from heaven to break the silence—in the midst of silence, so to speak, speaking God’s word into the world. And I can’t help but wonder, although I can’t prove it, if Paul has at least that idea in mind—if not an allusion to Wisdom of Solomon—of the silence of God, the mystery, the hiddenness of God’s plan being broken, so to speak, by the coming of the Messiah and the revelation of Jesus’ identity and Jesus’ mission...which should only be fully known, really, when you begin to read the Gospel accounts of who He is and what He did in the light of the prophets from the Old Testament.

So as we’ve been journeying through the Advent season—especially if you’re going to daily Mass—one of the things you would have noticed is that that Old Testament readings for Advent are taken not exclusively from the prophet Isaiah but predominantly, they’re either from the prophet Isaiah or from the other writings of the prophets, like Zechariah or Micah. So there’s this preponderance of

prophetic writings during the Advent season, starting with the first Sunday of Advent and going all the way through til now.

Why is the Church doing that? It's because during the Advent season, She wants us in a sense (so to speak) to step back into the shoes of the Jewish people who are reading the prophets in an eager anticipation of their fulfillment and to place ourselves in the same spirit of expectation for the celebration of the Nativity of Advent of Christmas...as a way of preparing ourselves for the final advent of Christ at the end of time. So it's a dual purpose to the season of Advent.

And I'm not trying to beat up too much on Christians who don't read the Old Testament as much as they should—although, maybe a little—but it's important for us, and the Church clearly wants us, to have the same sense of urgency, eagerness, and anticipation...and curiosity and expectation...about the mysteries of the writings of the prophets. So the Jews at the time of Christ, far from being the most difficult or easily ignored section of the Old Testament, there was much fascination with and expectation surrounding the reading of the prophets.

And so I'd like to close by jumping off of that verse from Paul in Romans 16 (the reading for today) to two points: one about prophecy and one about silence.

In the late 19th century, the First Vatican Council, Vatican I—everybody talks about Vatican II but a lot of times people aren't as familiar with Vatican I. 1869-70, Vatican I was the first Ecumenical Council in hundreds of years since the Council of Trent. And in it, it was responding to the collapse of faith, especially in western culture and in Europe in the late 19th century, with a rise of rationalism and atheism and agnosticism. There was a widespread collapse of faith in the truth of Christianity.

And so one of the things that Vatican I did is was it highlighted some of the primary motives of credibility for believing that Christianity is not just some man made construct but a divinely revealed religion—the truth. And Vatican I pointed out that one of the primary motives for believing that the Christian faith is true is the motive of prophecy, the motive of credibility that comes from looking at how the prophetic writings anticipate Jesus' identity and mission...and then are ratified

and confirmed and fulfilled in His life, His actions, His words, His sayings, His deeds, and of course, His resurrection from the dead.

So let me just read this quote from Vatican I...and with Paul's quote from Romans in mind today, listen to this. And this is, by the way, from the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith*, chapter 3:

In order that the “obedience” of our faith should be “consonant with reason” [cf. Rom. 12:1], *God has willed that to the internal aids of the Holy Spirit there should be joined external proofs of His revelation, namely: divine facts, especially miracles and prophecies which, because they clearly show forth the omnipotence and infinite knowledge of God, are most certain signs of a divine revelation, and are suited to the intelligence of all.*

Wherefore, not only Moses and the prophets, but especially Christ the Lord Himself, produced many genuine miracles and prophecies; and we read concerning the apostles: “But they going forth preached everywhere: the Lord working withal and confirming the word with signs that followed” [Mark 16:20]. And again it is written: “And we have the more firm prophetic word: whereunto you do well to attend, as to a light that shineth in a dark place” [2 Pet. 1:19].<sup>2</sup>

In other words, what the Church is saying here is that in addition to the internal assistance of the Holy Spirit, God has given us external motives of credibility for believing in the truth of Christianity—two of the primary ones which are miracles and prophecy, both of which testify to the supernatural nature of the Christian faith to its divinely revealed nature. Because in order for a prophecy to be written down hundreds of years in advance and then for it to be fulfilled, there has to be an omnipotent intelligence that not only inspires the original writer but knows what's going to happen in the future—omnipotent and omniscient as well—who has the power not only to know what's going to happen but to guide events providentially to that fulfillment.

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<sup>2</sup> Vatican I, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith*, Chapter 3; trans. R. Deffarari



And this is something I've said before, but I think it's worth repeating...that Jesus Christ is the only founder of any major world religion who has ever preannounced. There's no prophecies of Buddha that Buddha fulfills. There are no prophecies of Muhammad that Muhammad fulfills. Jesus Christ alone has not just one, not just two, but dozens and dozens—even hundreds—of prophecies from the Jewish Scriptures that are fulfilled in His life, in His deeds, in His words, and in His passion, death, and resurrection...which give us motive of credibility for believing the claims that He makes about Himself in the Gospels themselves.

And so what Paul's saying in this is that that hidden mystery of the identity and mission of the Messiah is now revealed through the prophetic writings. So during this Advent season, go back to the prophets. Read the prophets, and listen to what they say and marvel, really, at the wonder of how they are fulfilled, especially in the birth of Jesus, which we're preparing to celebrate on the feast of the Nativity.

And so I'll close...the final point about the silence—the mystery of silence. One of my favorite quotes from Ignatius of Antioch, a great second century (early second century) Church Father in his letter to the Ephesians, talks about how the birth of Christ—which we celebrate at Christmas—was one of the mysteries of God that was accomplished in silence. No fanfare, just a quiet, humble, mysterious birth in which the Word—the *logos* of God—breaks into human history, and a king is born. So I'll end with this. St. Ignatius of Antioch wrote many, many centuries ago:

Now the virginity of Mary and her giving birth were hidden from the ruler of this age...

That's the devil.

...as was also the death of the Lord—three mysteries to be loudly proclaimed, yet which were accomplished in the silence of God.<sup>3</sup>

So as you're pondering and preparing for the mystery of Christmas, especially if you, like me, one of your favorite hymns is "Silent Night"...ponder that mystery,

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<sup>3</sup> Ignatius, *Ephesians* 19:1; trans. M. W. Holmes

the mystery that the redemption of the world, the birth of the Savior, is one of the mysteries of God that takes place in silence.