

Second Sunday of Lent (Year B)

<i>First Reading</i>	Genesis 22:1-2, 9a, 10-13, 15-18
<i>Response</i>	I walk before the Lord in the land of the living.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalms 116:10, 15, 16-17, 18-19
<i>Second Reading</i>	Romans 8:31b-34
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	[A] voice from the cloud said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.”
<i>Gospel</i>	Mark 9:2-10

On the second Sunday of Lent, the Church gives us for the second reading a beautiful passage from Romans 8:31-34. And again, the theme — which is how these passages are chosen during this season — is tied to Jesus’ Passion and Death, because that’s what we’re preparing for during Lent. So it’s a short passage but a very beautiful one, and this is what it says:

If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, will he not also give us all things with him? Who shall bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies; who is to condemn? Is it Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised from the dead, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us?¹

And this translation kind of ends there on a question mark. And you’ll see different translations translate this in different ways. Some translate them as a question, some translate it as a declaration. The reason that that’s the case is because in most ancient manuscripts, we don’t have question marks. There aren’t any periods or question marks or semicolons in ancient Greek. You’ll find them sometimes in modern editions but not in the most ancient manuscripts. So sometimes it’s not clear whether the form of the text is an interrogative (a question) or whether it’s a declaration, an assertion.

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.

So, in any case, either way, Paul is asserting something by way of question. So let's walk through this passage and kind of see what Paul is saying to us.

The first thing Paul is emphasizing here is just the omnipotence of God. He's starting by saying:

If God is for us, who is against us?

So he's trying to encourage his readers of the letter of Romans to recall that if God is on our side, then we really don't have anything to fear in this world — whether visible powers or invisible powers...whether the political authorities or angelic powers, because God is more powerful than them all. So if He's on our side, what have we to worry about?

But then as soon as he says that, he also pivots and says:

He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, will he not also give us all things with him?

So he pivots here from the omnipotence of God to the charity of God as manifested in the Passion of Christ. Because one of the things he's dealing with in this chapter of Romans — and one of the things we should be pondering over the season of Lent — is the mystery of suffering.

Later on in this chapter, Paul is going to say:

As it is written, "For thy sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered." (Romans 8:36)

So he's reflecting on the mystery of Christian martyrdom and the fact that Christians are being persecuted, Christians are dying. And some people might be tempted, in the face of martyrdom, to say God has abandoned us; God has forgotten us...or God's enemies are conquering. They're winning; we're losing. And in response to that, Paul says, "No, no, no":

If God is for us...

...which He is, that's the assumption. Then:

...who is against us?

And at the same time, though, if:

He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, will he not also give us all things with him?

In other words, yes, we might be suffering right now. But remember the cross. Remember the Crucifixion:

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16)

That's not Paul, but it's John — John 3:16. But here Paul is reflecting the same truth here, that if God didn't spare His own Son but gave Him up for us, then there's nothing that He will not also give to us.

So in the face of suffering, it's easy to feel like God has abandoned you or that you've been (so to speak) dispossessed. He's not treating you like a son or a daughter. Paul is saying, actually, no. If you look at the cross, God doesn't even spare His own Son, His natural Son, His eternal Son.

However, in doing that, the reason He doesn't spare Him is not because He didn't love Him. It was precisely because He *did* love us, so He offers His only Son for our sake and for our salvation. So he's highlighting here the omnipotence of God, as well as the charity of God the Father in offering His only Son.

Then he moves into the question of judgment. He says:

Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies; who is to condemn? (Romans 8:33-34a)

Now what does that mean? Well, remember...think about the context of persecution in the early Church. One of the things that would be happening would be that Christians would be brought before Roman tribunals, like Paul himself was. Or they'd be brought before a court of some kind or before the elders of the synagogue — whatever it might be — and they would have a trial or a hearing in which a judgment would be passed.

And so what Paul is saying here is, "Look, charges might be brought against God's elect, but at the end of the day, it's not earthly authorities who justify, who declare someone righteous or unrighteous." At the end of the day, in the final analysis, it's really only God's verdict that matters. So if a human being — if a Christian, for example, a man or a woman — is pronounced guilty by an earthly court or a Roman tribunal or a gathering of elders (like a local Sanhedrin, like Jesus was tried by the Jerusalem Sanhedrin), they might pass the verdict of guilty....guilty of false prophecy, guilty of leading people astray, guilty of sedition against the Empire or against the emperor. They might declare those negative judgments or verdicts of guilt, but at the end of the day, it's God who justifies.

And the Greek word that Paul uses here, *dikaioō*, is the exact same word that he uses in Galatians and earlier in Romans to talk about justification by faith — being justified, being declared righteous, being made righteous through grace and faith. That's the word he uses to describe what we would call "being saved." Sometimes they'll kind of appear as synonyms. But here you can see the juridical context, the legal context of that terminology:

It is God who justifies; who is to condemn?

So in other words, look: You might be condemned by every human court that exists in the world. But if at the final judgment God declares you innocent, God declares you righteous, all those other earthly verdicts are of no consequence. So there's no reason to lose hope, and there's no reason to lose heart in the face of suffering and in the face of death.

Then he moves into another point, meant to encourage. And the whole chapter of Romans 8 is really about the virtue of hope. It's about encouraging Christians in the face of suffering, in the face of persecution, in the face of death and martyrdom...to look beyond this world to the glory of the world to come. So he says:

Is it Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised from the dead, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us?

Now if the form of that is intended as a question, then obviously it's a kind of rhetorical question to which the implied answer is, "Yes! Yes, it is Christ Jesus who died. Yes, it is Christ Jesus who was raised. Yes, it is Christ Jesus who is at the right hand of God who intercedes for us." And with that line, we see (I suspect) one reason that this passage was chosen for the second Sunday of Lent. Notice, it's one of these passages in the writings of the Apostles (whether Peter, Paul, or John) that gives a summary statement, almost a kind of credal statement of the Paschal Mystery — the Paschal Mystery of Jesus' Passion, Death, Resurrection, *and* (don't forget it) the Ascension. Very important.

When we talk about the Paschal Mystery, it's easy to just reduce it to either Jesus' Passion and Death — which took place on Passover — or His Passion, Death, and Resurrection, because they're tightly joined in time over the course of the Triduum. It's very important to remember that according to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, traditional teaching, as well as according to the Scriptures...when you look at the teachings of the Apostles, they often will conjoin the Passion, Death, and Resurrection to the mystery of the Ascension, which takes place 40 days later. These things are all linked together as part of one great Paschal Mystery. The *Catechism* actually says that.

So we tend to forget that the Ascension of Jesus into Heaven is part of the Paschal Mystery. But Paul didn't forget it, and the early Church didn't forget it, and the *Catechism* doesn't forget it as well. And one reason it's important not to forget the Ascension is because of what Paul says here — that Christ who is at the right hand of God, intercedes for us. He intercedes on our behalf.

So we'll see the apostle John in 1 John say this in a different way. He'll say:

...we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ...

...who intercedes for us. So this emphasis on the intercession of Christ is meant to (again) encourage and give hope to the readers of Romans, that even in the face of suffering and death, even in the face of persecution, trials, being condemned by others, as members of the Body of Christ, Christians have a really great Advocate. They've got a really great lawyer. Their lawyer, who is going to intercede for them with the Judge (who is the Father), is Jesus Christ Himself...who died for them and for their salvation.

So imagine...just to kind of put the whole legal context of Paul's words here in mind, the implied juridical context...imagine that you were being brought to court, an earthly court to be tried for some crime of which you were innocent. And you've been brought before the judge and the jury, and you're led into the courtroom. And you're wondering, "Who's going to represent me? Who's going to be my lawyer? Who's going to be my advocate?" And in walks Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God, and sits beside you as your lawyer, as your advocate. You should rest easy, then, if Jesus Christ is your intercessor, if Jesus Christ is the one who is going to plead for you and who's going to make the case for you to be declared righteous rather than to be condemned...then you have nothing to fear. And that's the imagery that Paul here is using to describe the great Paschal Mystery.

So, short passage, but pretty rich. I would just encourage you to ponder that with a couple of quotes from the living tradition. Because if you look at how the Fathers and Doctors of the Church read this passage, one of the things they did with it is they paused and they pondered the mystery of something I think we don't think about as often as we should — namely, the mystery of the Ascension and the mystery of Jesus' role as our intercessor...Jesus' role as our intercessor.

Catholics are very comfortable and familiar with thinking of Mary as our intercessor, but according to the New Testament, Christ is the supreme intercessor

for us with the Father. And so here are a couple of quotes from the tradition that can kind of flesh this out.

The first is from St. John Chrysostom, my favorite. I love St. John. I love his homilies on Paul. They're just my favorite treatments of Paul in the tradition. And in his homily on Romans, this passage for today, St. John Chrysostom said this:

Christ did not merely die for us; he now intercedes on our behalf as well...
The only reason why Paul mentioned intercession was to show the warmth and vigor of God's love for us, for the Father is also represented as beseeching us to be reconciled to him.²

That's his homily on Romans, number 15. So notice that. What is Chrysostom emphasizing? We need to remember that Christ did not just die for us on the cross. He also intercedes for us now. He ascended into Heaven in order to be seated at the right hand of the Father and intercede for us. And both acts — His Passion on Good Friday and His Ascension on Ascension Thursday — they both reveal His charity. He dies for love of us, but He didn't just love us back then. He continues to love us now, in the present, as He sits at the right hand of the Father and intercedes for us out of charity. Powerful, beautiful, beautiful passage from St. John Chrysostom.

And then again, Pope Leo the Great. Pope Leo the Great, in one of his letters, mentions this passage and this mystery. And this is what he says:

If the true high priest does not atone for us, using the nature proper to us, and the true blood of the spotless Lamb does not cleanse us, then a true priesthood and true sacrifices do not exist in any other way in God's church, which is the body of Christ. *Although he is seated at the right hand of the Father, he performs the sacrament of the atonement in the same flesh which he assumed from the Virgin Mary.*³

² John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Romans* 15; trans. in NPNF1, 11:455

³ Leo the Great, *Letters* 80; trans. Edmund Hunt

Leo the Great, letter number 80. Now that is a fascinating passage, because what is it saying? Pope Leo is putting his finger on the fact that if we don't understand the mystery of the Ascension, that we won't understand the mystery of the sacraments either. And the reason is very simple. In the Ascension, what Jesus does is He takes the sacrifice that was performed out of charity, out of love, in time, on Calvary, and He brings that offering of Himself that takes place on Good Friday in time and space...He brings it into eternity. He enters into the eternal now of the Father, and He offers Himself to the Father on our behalf once and for all time. So that's what he means when he says:

...he performs the sacrament of the atonement in the same flesh which he assumed from the Virgin Mary.

So the Ascension of Jesus is essential. Sorry, I couldn't pass that up. The Ascension of Jesus is essential because it teaches two very important truths. First, that the Incarnation didn't stop with the Death and Resurrection of Jesus. When Jesus rises from the dead on Easter Sunday, the body that He has is the same body. That's why it's got the wounds. But it's in a glorified state, and He takes that flesh (that glorified flesh) into eternity and sits at the right hand of the Father *bodily*.

Before the Incarnation, the second Person of the Trinity, the Word, is pure spirit. He doesn't have a body. But after the Incarnation, He assumes a human nature. And after the Ascension, He takes that human nature, which is now glorified (that flesh), into eternity to sit at the right hand of the Father in the flesh. And therefore, the sacrifice that He accomplishes in the flesh on Good Friday is now being perpetually offered to the Father for all eternity.

And that's why we can refer to the Mass as a sacrifice. One of the reasons Martin Luther called the idea of the Mass as a sacrifice "blasphemous", was because he understood that to imply that we were re-sacrificing Jesus every time the Mass was offered...as if the death of Jesus on Calvary wasn't enough and it had to be repeated.

But what Luther didn't understand, but what Leo *does* understand, is that in the sacraments — in the Eucharist, for example — Christ is not being re-sacrificed.

There's only one sacrifice. That's the sacrifice of Calvary. But that one sacrifice has been brought out of time into eternity. And now every earthly offering of the Eucharist is a *participation* in the one sacrifice of Christ, which He continues to offer to the Father for all time in the heavenly sanctuary, in the heavenly tabernacle, in the heavenly temple.

So the Ascension is the essential link between the earthly Paschal Mystery and the heavenly reality in which we now participate in the sacraments. That's how the self-offering of Jesus that takes place on Good Friday can come to us today on every altar, in every Catholic Church throughout the world. What Leo is saying here is that...two things.

First, in the Ascension of Jesus into Heaven, the mystery of the Incarnation doesn't cease. That's what that reveals to us — that the eternal Word is still united with human nature right now. Jesus still has His human body, His flesh and bone. It's in a glorified state, a mysterious state to be sure, but it's the same body. That's why He has the wounds that He brings up into Heaven.

But it's not just the Incarnation that doesn't cease in the Ascension. It's not just that there's a perpetual Incarnation. It's that there's also a perpetual atonement. So the atonement that is inaugurating, consummated on Calvary, doesn't stop there. But Christ brings the atoning sacrifice into Heaven, so that there is a perpetual atonement taking place.

And one reason this is fascinating to me as a scholar of early Judaism, is that in the first century AD there was a sacrifice in the temple called the *tamid*, the perpetual sacrifice. Every morning, every evening, every morning, every evening, they would offer a sacrifice to God the Father as a renewal of the everlasting covenant.

So the Ascension reveals to us that (as Leo calls it) the mystery of the atonement is still being performed to this day. Now you might be thinking, "Well, hold on, Dr. Pitre. Are you suggesting Jesus suffers in Heaven?" No, no, no, no. The suffering ceases. Jesus ceased suffering when He gave up His spirit on Good Friday. So you can put it this way...Jesus is not still suffering, but He is still *offering* in Heaven.

Because He's still offering Himself to the Father in love. And He *will* offer Himself to the Father in love for all eternity, because that's what the Son does.

And so the mystery of the Ascension is the mystery of human nature being caught up into the eternal love of the Son for the Father and the eternal offering of Himself to the Father by the Son in the Spirit. So I got a lot out of those few verses there, but that's really what Paul is talking about. And that's why he's waxing so eloquent:

Is it Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised from the dead, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us? (Romans 8:34b)

He's not just our sacrifice; He's also our High Priest and our supreme intercessor. So there's no reason for fear. There's no reason to feel abandoned in the face of suffering. There's no reason to fear the judgments of this world. If it's God who justifies (as Paul says), then who can condemn?