

## The Seventh Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year B)

<i>First Reading</i>	Isaiah 43:18-19,21-22,24b-25
<i>Response</i>	Lord, Heal My Soul, for I Have Sinned Against You
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 41:2-5,13-14
<i>Second Reading</i>	2 Corinthians 1:18-22
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	The Word was made flesh and lived among us; to all who did accept him he gave power to become children of God
<i>Gospel</i>	Mark 2:1-12

The second reading for the 7th Sunday in Ordinary Time for Year B is from the beginning of St. Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians 1:18-22. It's a beautiful passage about how all the promises of God find their yes in Christ. So it's a short passage, but it's definitely worth reflecting on. 2 Corinthians 1:18-22 says this:

As surely as God is faithful, our word to you has not been Yes and No. For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we preached among you, Silvanus and Timothy and I, was not Yes and No; but in him it is always Yes. For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why we utter the Amen through him, to the glory of God. But it is God who establishes us with you in Christ, and has commissioned us; he has put his seal upon us and given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee.<sup>1</sup>

Okay, the context in 2 Corinthians 1 is that some people in the church of Corinth appear to have been accusing Paul of vacillating on whether he was going to visit them or not. So some people are upset because they thought he was going to come to them. Others said no, he's not going to come to them. So some people have been saying that he was both saying yes and no. As we say, he was speaking out of both sides of his mouth or he was being two-faced with them. And so part of the context here is Paul just defending himself. He is saying "listen, when we were among

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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.

you, Silva'nus and Timothy and I"—that's the triad of preachers — “our word to you wasn't yes and no; it was always yes.” And that accusation leads him to give this beautiful affirmation:

all the promises of God find their Yes in [Christ].

It's a powerful summary statement. I'm really thankful that these people were complaining about Paul so that he would be led to such a profound statement in the wake of such a kind of mundane accusation. Because what he's effectively saying there is that all of the promises of God in the Old Testament. Think here of, for example, the trim-fold promise to Abraham of a dynasty, descendants, of the land, that he would enter the promised land, that all of the nations of the world would be blessed through his descendants. Those three promises, as well as all the other promises God makes to his people in the Old Testament, and there are many, they all find the answer yes in the person of Jesus. Jesus' passion, death, resurrection and ascension into heaven is the answer to every promise that God made in the Old Testament and every prayer of God's people throughout the Old Covenant. So that although they might be accusing Paul of vacillating or saying yes and no, of saying one thing and doing another, the same accusation cannot be made of God. God is a God who keeps his promises, even when it appears that his promises have failed, even when it appears that his promises have not come to fruition, even when it appears that the prayers of his people have been ignored for centuries as they sat in exile and and as they were suffering under the oppression of the Greeks or the Romans or the Persians, whoever it might be at any given point. All those prayers, all those promises, they all find the answer, yes, in Christ. And that is why Paul says:

we utter the Amen through [Christ], to the glory of God.

Now this is a very interesting statement, “we utter the Amen”. It could here just mean a reference to the Amen. that was the standard way of ending a prayer, a Jewish prayer, and frankly the standard way of ending a Christian prayer to this day. When we pray, we say Amen, right? And if you grew up in the United States like me, you may have been tempted at some points to even say Amen at the end of the Pledge of Allegiance. You've ever heard anyone do this? People reciting the

pledge and at the end of the Pledge, people sometimes spontaneously say Amen because it's a way of ratifying some solemn word that's gone before it, and it means so be it, right? You will sometimes also see it translated as I believe. There are different ways to understand it, but it's a ratification of what proceeds before. So Paul here may be referring to individual prayers.

The definite article though, the Amen, makes it sound, and this is debated, but it's at least worth pondering. It makes it sound like he might be talking more though about communal prayer, like some kind of specific liturgical prayer, where as Christians they together utter the Amen. And it is interesting because that terminology will go on in later writings of the early Church Fathers, especially in the liturgy, as a way of referring to the Amen uttered by the congregation in the liturgy of the Eucharist, especially at the end of the Eucharistic prayer. So for example, even to this day the Eucharistic prayer will come to a climax with what's known as the *Per ipsum*: “Through Him, and with Him, and in Him, O God, almighty Father, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honor is yours, for ever and ever.” And then the congregation responds to that doxology with the word Amen., that there's a kind of ratification of the Eucharistic prayer that takes place. And it is at least possible that Paul here is referring to the Amen uttered in the Eucharistic assemblies of the early Church in the first century. So it's possible, we can't prove it, can't demonstrate it there, but it certainly draws a connection. What is clear is that it is drawing a connection with the prayer of those who are in Christ being made through Christ to God the Father, whose promises...when Paul talks about God, he always implicitly refers to God the Father...whose promises from the Old Testament have been answered in Christ.

The last aspect of this passage that's really interesting here is Paul's statement:

[I]t is God who establishes us with you in Christ, and has commissioned us; he has put his seal upon us and given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee.

Now on the one hand, in context, Paul appears to be describing his Apostolic commissioning, that they've been commissioned by God to bring the gospel to the people in the church at Corinth. But it is interesting to me that if you look once

again, I think the RSV here doesn't quite capture it, or at least translate it in such a way that misses something, because the Greek word here that's translated as commissioned is actually the word for anointed. It's *chriō* in Greek. He has anointed us and put his seal upon us. Now, *chriō* is a very important verb because it's going to be tied, it's the same root as the *Christos*. Christ is the anointed one, *Christianos* means a Christian, an anointed one. And then Chrism is going to be the anointing oil with which people are anointed. In the early Church it would be their baptism, they would be washed with water and then anointed with oil. So it's very interesting here to me that Paul's using the language of both anointing and having a seal set upon him by the Spirit. He's put his seal upon us and given us his spirit in our hearts as a guarantee. Because these two images, the image of the gift of the Spirit and the image of being anointed with a seal of God, are going to lay a foundation in the early Church that will be utilized in the context of talking about the sacramental anointing and the sacramental seal that is put on Christians in what we would call the Sacrament of Confirmation.

Okay, just a quick little background here. Although the Sacrament of Confirmation is going to develop in time, and it's going to take time to develop in both the East and the West in the early Church, we have evidence from the earliest times that when Christians, anointed ones, that's what that means. When Christians would be baptized, they were not only baptized with water, they would also be anointed with oil. In the East, that right of anointing is going to go on to be known as the rite of Chrismation, and in the West, it's going to go on to be known as the rite of Confirmation, by which a person is strengthened through the anointing with oil, which signifies and communicates a special anointing with the spirit of God that gives them the strength, confirms them in faith, and enables them to be strong enough to bear witness to the faith, both in their words and in their actions, even unto death. So in this case here, it's interesting to me that what Paul's doing is using the language to describe his own Apostolic ministry, his own Apostolic mission, using the language that the Church would later go on to use with reference to this sacramental anointing, this sacramental sealing of the Christian in the rites of initiation into the early Church.

By way of closing, for this particular explanation, I just want to show you that in the living tradition of the Church, that the fathers bear witness, that this passage is

a very important text for the theology of the Sacrament of Confirmation. So in the 4th century, St. Ambrose of Milan, in his famous work on the sacraments, uses this very passage and this imagery from 2 Corinthians to describe the anointing that his catechumens have received in the sacrament of what we call Confirmation. So this is a quote from St. Ambrose. He is speaking here in this context to catechumens who have been recently baptized and have received the sacrament of initiation. He says:

So recall that you have received *a spiritual seal*, “the spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the spirit of counsel and fortitude, the spirit of knowledge and of piety, the spirit of holy fear” [Isa 11:2-3], and preserve what you have received. *God the Father sealed you; Christ the Lord confirmed you, and gave a pledge, the Spirit, in your hearts*, as you have learned in the lesson of the Apostle [cf. 2 Cor 5:5]. (Ambrose, *The Mysteries* 7.42)<sup>2</sup>

That's means from one of the readings of Saint Paul, and the reading here is 2 Corinthians 5. so a little bit later in the letter he uses similar imagery. So this is one of the earliest uses of the term confirm to refer to what we call the Sacrament of Confirmation, to describe this anointing, this special anointing of the baptized as sealing the graces of the Holy Spirit that have been given to them and confirming them in their faith. And I think it's an important text, because what it shows is that Paul's language of being sealed and anointed is going to go on to inform the theology of Confirmation, both in the writings of Ambrose and in later Church Fathers, that in the Sacrament of Confirmation we have one of the sacraments, there are a few of them, that leave an indelible mark on the soul. That when a person is confirmed, one reason Confirmation, like Baptism and Holy Orders, can only be received once, is because when a person receives it, they are sealed, they receive an indelible, although invisible, spiritual marking that configures them to Christ and that gives them a unique gift of the grace of the Holy Spirit that can never be repeated. So out of the sacraments, a person can receive, obviously, communion more than once, you can receive penance more than once (thank God),

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<sup>2</sup> In Saint Ambrose of Milan, *Theological and Dogmatic Works* (trans. Roy J. Deferrari; Fathers of the Church 44; Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1963), 20.

you can even receive Holy Matrimony more than once. If a spouse dies a person can be married again and receive that sacrament more than once.

But certain sacraments can never be repeated. Baptism leaves an indelible seal upon the soul. It can't be repeated. Holy Orders, when a man is ordained to the priesthood, that priestly ordination cannot be repeated. It's an indelible mark sacrament. It leaves a seal on the soul. And then the other one is Confirmation, right? The anointing with the oil of confirmation indelibly marks the soul with an invisible spiritual character, a seal that gives the gift of the Holy Spirit, in this case, as St. Ambrose points out, the sevenfold gift of the Holy Spirit. The gift of wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety, and fear of the Lord. Those gifts of the Holy Spirit are something given indelibly to a person in the Sacrament of Confirmation. So in closing, this is just an important text from 2 Corinthians 1 that not only reveals the power of the promises of God coming to fruition in Christ, but also gives us some of the language of being sealed and anointed that will go on to play a really crucial role in the theology of the sacrament of being sealed with the Spirit, that is the Sacrament of Confirmation.