

The Eighteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time

(Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	Isaiah 55:1-3
<i>Response</i>	Thou openest thy hand, thou satisfiest the desire of every living thing.
<i>Psalms</i>	Psalms 145:8-9, 15-16, 17-18
<i>Second Reading</i>	Romans 8:35, 37-39
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.’
<i>Gospel</i>	Matthew 14:13-21

The eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time for year A continues our study of Romans chapter 8.—this extremely rich chapter in Paul’s masterpiece, his letter to the Romans. So the reading for today is from Romans 8, verse 35-39, and it touches on a topic that’s very controversial but that needs to be addressed. And that’s the whole question of what some Christians refer to as assurance of salvation—the idea that once I believe in Jesus and accept Him as Savior, Paul says:

...if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. (Romans 10:9)

And so some Christians will argue that what Paul means by that is, once a person believes and confesses, that they can’t do anything to lose salvation. There’s an absolute assurance of salvation or absolute certitude about salvation. And there are lots of different ways that this gets parsed out in various traditions that stem from the Protestant Reformation...that I’m not going to go into. But what is fairly common is that people who take that view of Paul’s idea of salvation is being—teaching a kind of absolute assurance of salvation—that nothing we can do can make us lose it once we truly believe in Jesus. And many people will point to the reading for today, Romans 8:35 and following, which says:

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?

And the answer is nothing. So I'm going to read through the text. I'm putting that idea first, because in my experience, that's the most common interpretation of the passage we're about to read. But I'm going to argue that it's totally wrong, and so I want you to have that in mind as we read through the text itself. So let's look at Romans 8:35 and following. Paul says this:

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?

And then the lectionary skips this verse, but I'm going to include it for the sake of context:

As it is written,

“For thy sake we are being killed all the day long;
we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.”

That's a quote from Psalm 44, verse 22. Now the lectionary picks up again in verse 37:

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.¹

Alright, so this passage that I've just read is very popular to read at funerals. There's a very famous Protestant biblical commentator I was just reading, who in his book on the afterlife, talks about how this passage is read at funerals. And rightly so, because it shows that nothing we can do can separate us from the love of Christ. So it's a beautiful passage about the hope—and not just the hope but the certainty—of salvation for those who truly believe.

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.

And many people when they read the text, that's how they hear it. And look, he just said:

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?

Nothing. Nothing...

...in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

And so some people will run with that to say, "It doesn't matter what I do once I believe, whether I commit adultery, whether I steal, whether I fall into some sin of some sort. Whatever might happen after coming to faith...nothing can separate me from the love of Christ."

Now, that has never been the traditional interpretation of this verse, certainly not among the Church Fathers and in the Catholic tradition...for a few reasons. Number one, and this is important: when Paul gives the list of things that can't separate us from the love of God, he lists sufferings, not sins. Let me say that again. When Paul lists what won't be able to separate us from the love of Christ, he lists sufferings, not sins. So notice, what does Paul say? Or actually, let me start by what he doesn't say, because people read this in the text.

Paul does not say, "What shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall fornication or adultery or theft or murder or blasphemy or idolatry or Sabbath breaking?" No, he doesn't say any of those things. Notice, he doesn't list violations of the Decalogue. He doesn't list sins.

Notice what Paul lists here: tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, the sword. These are all things that happen *to* us. That's different than sins that we commit, which would be things like blasphemy, adultery, fornication, theft, murder, so on and so forth. So that distinction is crucial here, because the context—this is important. The context of what Paul is actually speaking about...is he's addressing Christians living in Rome who may have experienced some

persecution, some ostracism, or who may be on the cusp of experiencing persecution or suffering or peril. Or he himself—think about it—was adrift at sea for a night and a day, was beaten in various synagogues, was brought before pagan governors and rulers. He's faced lots of opposition, lots of tribulation, lots of bad things that have happened *to* him. But none of that stuff can separate him—or can separate any Christian—from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

But he's not talking about sins that people commit. That's why he quotes Psalm 44 about:

“...we are being killed all the day long;
we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.”

He's not talking about sinners not being able to be separated from Christ because of their sins. He's talking about saints not being able to be separated from God because of their sufferings. He's talking about martyrs. In other words, it might look from the outside like a person who is being persecuted or who's being slaughtered for being a Christian...has been abandoned by God, has been separated from God, has been forsaken. But that's not true. That's not the reality. The reality is, Paul says:

No, in all these things...

...namely, in all these sufferings...

...we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. (Romans 8:37)

So what Paul is getting at is the fact that although suffering might make it look like you're defeated in this life, it's actually precisely through suffering that you become victorious, just as Christ did. Christ is the model here. On Calvary, on the cross, it looks like He failed. It looks like He was forsaken by God. It looks like He was abandoned. But it's actually precisely through the cross that He is victorious over death.

And it's fascinating, I was looking at the Greek text here when Paul says:

...in all these things we are more than conquerors...

The Greek is *hyper-nikaō*—literally, we are “super-victors.” *Hyper* means above or a super upon. And *nikaō* is where we get the Greek word...Nike, like Nike shoes, it means victory. *Niké* means victory in Greek. So *hyper-nikaō* is we are super-victors. So it’s actually precisely through tribulations and suffering that we become super victorious in a transcendent way. That’s the context of Paul’s words.

And look, you don’t have to take my word for it. Just listen to what Paul himself says, because although in Romans 8 he doesn’t list sins...when he does give a list of sins, go to Galatians 5 for a second—in Galatians 5, verse 19-21. When Paul does list sins, he actually does make it very clear that there are certain sins that *will* exclude you from the kingdom of God. So this is Galatians chapter 5, verse 19. Paul gives a list of sins. He says:

Now the works of the flesh are plain: [immorality]...

And the Greek word there is *porneia*, so it means sexual immorality. It’s sometimes translated fornication, but it’s broader than that. Sexual immorality...

...impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, party spirit...

...which doesn’t mean, like, partying. It actually means like schism, divisiveness. Parties mean divisions within the Body of the Church.

...envy, drunkenness, carousing...

Now there is where he’s talking about partying. The Greek word for carousing literally means a drinking bout...

...and the like. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God.

Now he's writing this to Christians. He's writing to the Galatians who are already baptized. They're already believers. And he's warning them that if you do these things—idolatry, drunkenness, sexual immorality, schism, envy, anger—those things *will* exclude you from the kingdom of God.

So it's very important here, that when you're assessing what Paul says about salvation, that you look at it in context. That's the key. When Paul's talking about grave sins, violations of the Decalogue, like idolatry...he's saying, those who do these things will not inherit the kingdom of God. But in Romans 8, when he's talking about sufferings, tribulation, distress, persecution, famine—things that happen to us, especially things like that that are out of our control—that cannot separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus. In fact, it's precisely through suffering that you become a super conqueror, a super victor in Christ, through the One who loved us.

And if you go back to Romans 8:38, you can see—if you keep going in context—that it's very clear, because he gives a second list of things that can't separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. And once again, notice he doesn't mention a single sin, but he mentions external powers and forces that are arrayed against us. So he's talking about spiritual warfare. Listen to what he says:

For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:38-39)

So notice what Paul is talking about there—death nor life. In other words, if you are martyred, that doesn't mean you've been abandoned by God. Neither angels nor principalities—both of those terms Paul uses to describe spiritual forces in the world. There are good angels, but then there are not good angels. There are wicked angels. There are principalities and powers that aren't seen but are actually enemies of the saints of God, according to Paul. So here he's talking about spiritual warfare. What he's saying is, none of those things in creation—see, these are created realities—has the power to separate you from Christ. So they can try as they might. They might persecute you, they might tempt you, they might attack you. They

might even destroy your mortal life, but as Jesus said to the Apostles, don't fear the one who can destroy the body. Because nothing in all of creation has the power to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

As Paul says elsewhere...he says our battle is not with flesh and blood, but with principalities and powers and the invisible forces of this present darkness. So Paul is giving two windows onto the Christian life that are really crucial. Number one, that whatever suffering or tribulation you might experience in this life, it doesn't mean that you've been separated from the love of God or that you've been abandoned by God. And then second, whatever spiritual battle you may have to fight, doesn't mean that you've been abandoned by God.

However powerful evil invisible forces of this present darkness might be, they are not powerful enough to separate you from Christ, because He is the ultimate conqueror. Precisely because of His victory on the cross, He is now given the power to do battle to His saints and to those who are in Christ.

...in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.
(Romans 8:37)

Which, by the way, it's still a great passage for a funeral, because it is—like the rest of Romans 8—it's about hope. That despite the way things might look in this world, where this is a lot of suffering and a lot of death and a lot of distress and famine and sickness and peril and warfare and bloodshed—the sword—and these things might make it look as if God has been defeated or as if Christ is not actually victorious. Paul's calling the Romans, the Christians in Rome, to look beyond appearances to the reality of the fact that Christ crucified is also Christ victorious. *Christus victor*. He truly is the One who has conquered not just sin but also conquered suffering and conquered death itself through the power of His resurrection.

So in closing, I'd just like to end with a little quote from Augustine, who in his short commentary on Romans, interprets the text exactly the way I am suggesting to you. He says this:

No one can separate the believer from God; not someone who threatens death, because he who believes in Christ shall live even if he dies... An angel cannot separate us... Nor can a principality, i.e., an opposing power, because Christ... has vanquished them in himself.²

That's from Augustine, *On Romans* 58. And if I had more time or more space—but we're going to stay focused on Romans here—I could show you how elsewhere in Paul's letter to the Romans, we don't tend to think of Jesus' crucifixion in this way nowadays. Most people nowadays think of the cross primarily—if they think of it in this way at all—as an act of atonement for human sin. And that's absolutely right. Jesus Himself talks about:

...the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. (Mark 10:45)

So that redemptive element of the cross is absolutely crucial. But another element of Pauline theology, in particular in Paul's teaching, is that when Christ went to the cross, He actually conquered the evil angels. He conquered the wicked forces and powers. It was a kind of spiritual warfare over the devil and the devil's angels, which Christ won the battle of in His crucifixion itself.

If you want an example of that, you can actually see this in Colossians chapter 2, verse 13:

...you, who were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, having canceled the bond which stood against us with its legal demands; this he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the principalities and powers and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in him.

You notice two aspects of the cross there in Colossians—one is redemption for human sin but the other is a kind of disarming of the principalities and the powers, the angelic forces, the wicked angels, by taking away from them their most

² Augustine, *On Romans* 58; trans. G. Bray

powerful weapon...which is the fear of suffering and death. Christ takes that away, that weapon. He disarms them, and He nails it to the cross and then enables His disciples, who—especially if you look at the martyrdoms in the first century—are like sheep led to the slaughter, as Paul says. And they have been throughout the centuries.

But it's precisely through His martyrs He continues to show the world that no matter what happens to those who are in Christ, in all these things—persecution, distress, famine, peril, nakedness, the sword—we are more than conquerors through the One who conquered the principalities and the powers and who conquered death itself on Calvary.