

The Eighteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year B)

<i>First Reading</i>	Exodus 16:2-4, 12-15
<i>Response</i>	...and he rained down upon them manna to eat, and gave them the grain of heaven.
<i>Psalms</i>	Psalms 78:3-4, 23-24, 25, 54
<i>Second Reading</i>	Ephesians 4:17, 20-24
<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>	John 6:24-35

The eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time for year B takes us with our second reading to Ephesians chapter 4, verse 17 and 20-24, a famous passage on being renewed in the spirit of our minds. So let's see what Paul says to the Ephesians here in these verses.

Now in this case, too, the lectionary is going to skip a couple of verses, but I'm going to read them just so you get the full context. I'll let you know what those are. Ephesians 4:17 says this:

Now this I affirm and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds.

And the lectionary skips down to verse 20, but I'll just read the intervening verses. He says:

...they are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart; they have become callous and have given themselves up to licentiousness, greedy to practice every kind of uncleanness.

You did not so learn Christ!

This is where the lectionary picks up.

— assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus. Put off your old nature which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and put on the new nature, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.¹

Okay, there's a lot going on here, so just a few points of background. First thing I want to emphasize here is that when Paul says to the Ephesians:

...that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do... (Ephesians 4:17b)

It's a little bit ironic, because he's speaking to Gentiles. So in the Church at Ephesus, there may have been a few Jews in the congregation — in fact, I don't doubt that because Paul's normal method is to go to the synagogue first and then to go to the Gentiles. So he goes to the Jews first and then the Greeks. You see this throughout the book of Acts. He only really goes to the Gentiles if he's been unsuccessful in the local Jewish synagogue.

So in the case of Ephesus, this is a predominantly Gentile congregation. So when he says:

...that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do... (Ephesians 4:17b)

Physically speaking, they are still Gentiles — ethnically, culturally. But sacramentally and spiritually, they are now in Christ. And it's an interesting thing for Paul to say it this way, because remember, Christ in his humanity is a Jew. He's fully Jewish. He's circumcised on the eighth day like every other Jew. He's descended from the people of Israel. He is a full blooded Israelite. And it's fascinating because when Gentiles become part of the Mystical Body of Christ, there's a sense in which — although physically and ethnically and genealogically

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.

they're still Gentiles — they are in fact no longer Gentiles, so that Paul can actually speak as if they're no longer Gentiles and exhort them saying, “Don't live as the Gentiles do”, as if the Gentiles are a different category of people.

And the reason Paul can say that is, of course, because Paul is speaking about morality. He's talking about the lives that the Gentiles lead. He's not interested in blood lines and ethnicity. He's speaking about morality. And as a Jewish author, Paul would have been very clear and very aware of the fact that Gentiles — for the most part, there are always some exceptions in some individuals and whatnot, but as a whole, taken as a whole — pagan culture in the first century AD was vastly more tolerant of immorality than Jewish culture was. In particular, that's true of sexual immorality. And that's why you see Paul refer to licentiousness and lust and that kind of thing.

So for example, with regard to marriage, the sanctity of the marriage bed, sanctity of holy marriage, there's a writing from Judaism in the first century known as the *Sibylline Oracles*. It's reflective of Jewish views in the first century AD — very popular writing. It's not in the Bible; it's an extra biblical text. But just for example, it draws a contrast between morality in Jewish circles with regard to marriage and wedlock and then morality within Gentile circles. So listen to this quote from the *Sibylline Oracles*. This is the first century AD:

They [the Jewish people] are mindful of holy wedlock, and they do not engage in impious intercourse... as do Phoenicians, Egyptians, and Romans, spacious Greece and many nations of others, Persians and Galatians and all Asia, transgressing the holy law of immortal God...²

That's from *Sibylline Oracles* book 3. So notice what it's saying there is that if you look at the commandments, like the commandment against adultery, the Jews as a people honor that. They hold it up in form. Marriage should be faithful and between one man and one woman. Fidelity within marriage is something the Jews held out as an ideal.

² *Sibylline Oracles* 3.595-600; trans. J. H. Charlesworth, OTP 1:375

This ideal was not honored by the nations listed here: Phoenicians, Egyptians, Romans, Greece, Persians, Galatians ... in other words, the whole Roman Empire. So this contrast between the way Gentiles treat questions of immorality, especially questions of marital relations and issues of sexual immorality, is dramatically different from the Jewish perspective on the holiness of marriage (matrimony) — the holiness of the human body, the creation of man and woman, and what man and woman are made for by God ... what we might even call Theology of the Body, like John Paul II did.

So Paul is taking up this question of morality, and he's saying to the Ephesians: You can't live like Gentiles do. The Gospel changes the way you live. You should look different than the pagans, because their intellects are darkened, they're ignorant of God's law, and they are known for their licentiousness and their lust. And this is just true. The vices that were rampant in the first century AD in pagan culture are the same vices that are rampant today in secular culture ... and I won't list them. They're everywhere for you to see.

So Paul here is getting to the moral component of Ephesians. He's dealt with some of the doctrinal and Christological issues, ecclesiological issues about the Church and Christ, faith and Baptism, and one and two. Now, what are the moral implications of that?

And this is so important. When Paul tells the Ephesians that they have to live lives of morality in Christ, they can't live like pagans when it comes to sexual immorality in particular, he doesn't just say, "Here's the list of rules. Don't break them." He'll give some rules, trust me, but notice the theological reason he gives for this is that they are part of the new creation. They've been made new in Christ. They're not the same people they were anymore. That's why he says to them:

You did not so learn Christ! Put off your old nature which belongs to your former manner of life... (Ephesians 4:20, 22a)

So Ephesians, the people that he's talking to, these Christians, they're not perfect. They would have lived the kinds of immorality that were rampant in paganism in

the first century AD. But now they are in Christ through faith in Baptism, and they need to:

... be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and put on the new nature, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. (Ephesians 4:23-24)

So here Paul once again has recourse to the image of the two circles that I've talked about, the old and the new creation. But here he uses it in the language of old and new nature. So before your Baptism, you belong to the old creation. You were in Adam, and you had the old sinful nature that you inherited from Adam. That's why the pagan and secular peoples of the world sin, because it's a fallen human nature. But now that you are in Christ, you need to put on the new nature and leave aside those lusts, leave aside those acts of immorality, and live a life worthy of the calling to holiness that you have as a baptized Christian in Christ. That's your vocation. Your vocation here, as Paul says, is to righteousness and holiness.

So Paul didn't have to wait for Vatican II to describe the universal call to holiness from *Lumen Gentium*, the document on the Church. He's teaching it right here in the Scriptures, in Ephesians chapter 4. And notice the image that he uses here is both of an old and new nature, like human nature, what it means to be a human being. But it's also an image of clothing. You took off the old nature like an old garment, a dirty garment, in Baptism. And now you've put on a new garment, a new nature now that you're in Christ. So don't live like the pagans live.

If your life doesn't look different from the secular people around you in the world who are not in Christ — or I should say, as Paul says to the Ephesians, if your life doesn't look different from the pagans who are living around you in Ephesus, whose lives are filled with immorality, who are not living according to the Ten Commandments, then you are not fulfilling your vocation as a member of the Mystical Body of Christ. Because you're called to righteousness, and you're called to holiness. You're not just called to be a member of the parish register of Ephesus, the Church at Ephesus. You're not just called to be a member of the local Church.

You are called to righteousness and holiness. You're called to become a new person to put on the new nature in Christ.

Alright, so how do we do that? There are two ways from the living tradition that I'd like to highlight here. Well, hold on, before I get to the living tradition, let's answer it with Paul's answer first. What does Paul say? It's not the answer we might think. He says:

... and be renewed in the spirit of your minds ...

The intellect. So why does he say that? Why doesn't he say, "Try really, really hard to be a really nice person"? No. What does he mean, "be renewed in the spirit of your minds"? He's talking about having our intellect be conformed to Christ through the study of His Word, through receiving the Word, through believing the Word, and then living according to the Word of God. This isn't emotionalism. This is Paul recognizing that the only antidote to ignorance — the ignorance that leads to sin, and frankly, let's be honest, many people sin because they don't know any better. A lot of times the "culture" — and this was true in Gentile culture — was so immoral that people just grew up with immorality as the default position and unaware. They never heard about the Ten Commandments. They don't know that's the law of the Jews, unaware that these things are destructive to the human person, destructive to human society and destructive to spiritual life.

So the only way to offset the ignorance that leads to sin is through the illumination of truth. So it's very important that Paul says that, because through the renewal of the intellect in the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit illuminate the mind, we can then live the lives where our will is conformed to righteousness. The only way to get to righteousness is to have the intellect know truth, because you can't do the good unless you know what is true. Truth and goodness go together. Intellect apprehends the truth, and the will chooses the good. And both those things have to go together. That's why Paul is saying "be renewed in the spirit of your minds" and put on "the likeness of God." That's an image from morality. To live like God lives is to live a life of holiness and righteousness. So it's intellect and will. It's both/and, not either/or.

That's Paul's answer here, and I just highlight it because sometimes people are ... modern Christians can be somewhat anti-intellectual, like all that matters is to do good. "I'm not really interested in studying anything. That's for academics." No, no, not according to Scripture. Every human being has a mind, and the mind is the way we know things. And you cannot love what you do not know. You can't. And so in order to do the good that God calls us to, we have to *know* the good, and we have to know who God is ... and that's what Paul is trying to remind these Ephesians.

So I just think it's a very powerful passage, because as the Church engages in what John Paul II calls the New Evangelization — where she's both evangelizing cultures that haven't heard the Gospel in their missionary effort, but also re-evangelizing cultures that have been historically Christian but now have become secular — we have to remember that there's an element of intellectual growth that has to take place, where people have to learn the truth before they can do it. If they've never heard it, and through ignorance they don't know it, they're not going to be able to live it. And Paul recognizes that with the Church at Ephesus. He's having to draw a distinction between their former life and the life that they now live through the light of Christ.

So that's Paul. Two quotes from the living tradition in conclusion. One is from St. John Chrysostom. He connects Paul's language here of putting on the new nature to the Sacrament of Baptism. This is really, really beautiful. In the ancient Church, a person would — especially in the early Church — part of the baptismal rite was to disrobe, be immersed in water, and then put on actual garments, a white garment to signify the new life in Christ. And so John Chrysostom, in his homily on the book of Ephesians as bishop of Constantinople (one of the major apostolic centers) says this:

John Chrysostom: When one is already clothed, how is it said that one must further "put on" a new nature? [Eph 4:24]. New clothing was once put on in baptism. The new clothing now being put on is the new way of life and

conduct that flows from baptism. There one is no longer clothed by deceitful desires but by God's own righteousness."³

This is a really beautiful image here, because what John is saying is that the sacramental symbol of being dressed in white after Baptism is a sign of the moral life that you should lead after you receive the graces of Baptism. It signified that we're called to this new way of life and conduct. It's why the baptismal garment is white.

In fact, to this day, at least in the ordinary form of the rite, the priest says something to the effect of: "Bring this garment unstained into the halls of Heaven"...or to the heavenly kingdom, something to that effect. And that always strikes me when I go to a Baptism — the call to avoid mortal sin, to avoid grave sin. Because what the sin does is it stains the new garment, the new nature that we receive at Baptism.

So that's the sacramental side of that renewal. The intellectual side we'll go to St. Jerome, who was, if anything, an intellectual — one of the greatest biblical scholars of the early Church after Origen of Alexandria. And so Origen is earlier; Jerome is in the late 4th, early 5th century and a Doctor of the Church. Jerome says this:

We are not being renewed in our thinking process apart from the renewal of our spirits. Nor are we renewed in our spirits without thinking.

Let me say that again:

Nor are we renewed in our spirits without thinking. We are being jointly renewed "in the spirit of our mind."...The renewal of "the spirit of our mind" means that when the thought is clear and pure... then the spirit is rightly joined to it. They are so coupled as if by a cohesive glue that we no longer speak simply of the spirit but of "the spirit of our mind."⁴

³ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Ephesians* 13.4.24; trans. Mark J. Edwards

⁴ Jerome, *Commentary on Ephesians* 2.4.23-24; trans. Mark J. Edwards

So I've actually got a copy of Jerome's commentary on St. Paul's official epistle to the Ephesians here, as well as Origen's, who I mentioned earlier. And in this commentary, Jerome is emphasizing basically that what Paul is saying here is that our thinking process cannot really be renewed without spiritual renewal. But ... and I think most people would agree with that. The spirit is important. We have to change the way we live. We have to change our hearts. But, he also says that our hearts cannot really be changed without transformation of our minds.

And I think that that's really important, because in modern Christianity, there can be a tendency to a kind of emotionalism, which focuses on how we feel — puts an overemphasis on whether we're feeling good or we're feeling bad, and an underemphasis on what we're thinking and what we're studying, what we know to be the truth. A lot more emphasis on what we feel subjectively than rather on what is true objectively.

And what Jerome is basically saying here is that you can't really renew the subject of heart of a person, the spirit of a person, without also renewing the mind. The two go together. They're glued together, he says there. Our intellects and wills work together. And so obviously, one implication of this is that it calls all Christians to study, in particular to study the Bible and the teachings of the Church ... to study the Word of God as it comes to us in Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition.

And if we don't do that, we can't be transformed. So if you're thinking, "Why haven't I changed? What's missing in my life?" Well, are you studying the Word of God? Are you allowing the Word of God to transform your mind so that it can also then transform your heart and transform the way you live? That's what Paul is calling the Ephesians to do, and that's what he's calling us to do when he exhorts us to be renewed in the spirit of our minds.