

## The Eighth Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	Isaiah 49:14-15
<i>Response</i>	Rest in God alone, my Soul
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalms 62:2-3, 6-7, 8-9
<i>Second Reading</i>	1 Corinthians 4:1-5
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	The word of God is living and effective; discerning reflections and thoughts of the heart.
<i>Gospel</i>	Matthew 6:24-34

The eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time for Year A brings us to the conclusion of our journey through the first few chapters of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. You might recall, at the beginning of this series, we talked about how Paul's first letter to the Corinthians is a little different than the other letters in the way that it's arranged in the lectionary cycle. So there's a three-year cycle of Year A, Year B, and Year C. And unlike the other letters of Paul, which are treated in their entirety in one of the given years, the Church separates 1 Corinthians into three parts.

We look at the first several chapters in Year A, then we continue at the beginning of Year B, and then we finish it at the end of Year C. So this year, for Year A, 1 Corinthians 4:1-5, the reading for today, is the conclusion of our journey through the first four chapters of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians.

So the passage for today that the Church gives us as the second reading is 1 Corinthians 4:1-5. Very important text from the letter of Paul. And before I read it, the context here is (you'll recall), in 1 Corinthians 3, Paul is talking about some division within the Church at Corinth over the status of Paul as the apostle who brought the Gospel to the Corinthians and the status of Apol'los, who is another evangelist who came from Alexandria in Egypt who's also been sharing the Gospel with the Corinthians and who's gained some standing among some of them...even led to some factionalism between certain people saying they belong to Paul, other people saying they belong to Apol'los. And some of the Corinthians have been

passing judgment on Paul and on his authenticity and on his authority as an apostle.

So in the context of that judgment being passed on Paul by some of the Corinthians, he responds to them with these words:

This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy. But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. I do not even judge myself. I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then every man will receive his commendation from God.<sup>1</sup>

Alright, that's the end of the reading there. So there are a few aspects of this passage that stand out as interesting and important. The first one is just the terminology that Paul uses to describe himself as a steward "of the mysteries of God." A steward is a person who would basically be like the overseer of a house. So if you had a lord of a large estate, he would hire a steward to govern his household, to rule over the house to keep things in order. And so Paul's describing himself as one of God's stewards, but in this case, the thing that he is organizing or leading or governing isn't the worldly affairs of an earthly household, but the mysteries of God. The Greek word there, *mysterion*, is an interesting term. It appears rather frequently in the letters of Paul. It's not always exactly clear what he means by it, but what's interesting about this term is that it would come in the early Church to be the term of choice that was used to describe what we (and what later Latin Christianity) would call the sacraments.

So for example, Baptism is a mystery. The Lord's Supper is a mystery, a *mysterion*. The laying on of hands would come to be considered a mystery, and so actually

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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'll see this is in western and eastern Christianity. In the western (the Latin speaking) Church, you'll have the seven sacraments. And in the eastern speaking Church (the Greek speaking Church), you'll talk about the mysteries instead of the sacraments.

So it's an interesting text, because it might be one of these times where Paul is obliquely alluding to his role as the steward of not just the mystery of the Gospel, but perhaps a particular mystery, like the Lord's Supper or Baptism. In any case, though, remember that for Paul, the great mystery (as you'll see in Ephesians 5) is the mystery of the cross—the mystery of Christ's love for the Church. Christ gave Himself for the Church. This is a great mystery, Ephesians 5 will say. And all the other mysteries, the mystery of Baptism (especially for Paul) and the mystery of the Lord's Supper, flow out of the mystery of the cross. So that's what Paul is doing. He's bringing the Good News of the cross and the resurrection, the mystery of Christ to the people in Corinth.

So first he asserts his identity as a steward of the mystery of God. But then he goes on to defend himself basically and say, "Look, it doesn't really matter to me if I'm being judged...

...by you or by any human court. I do not even judge myself.

And then Paul says something very interesting. He says here:

I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted.

Now this is a very important point on two counts. First, it's a very Jewish thing for Paul to say this, for him to look at his own conscience, to look at his own life and say, "I don't see any cause, any sin in my life that gives you grounds for judging me. However, that doesn't mean that I'm acquitted." And the reason that he would say that is because in the Jewish Scriptures—in the Psalter, in particular, the book of Psalms—it's very clear that of course there are sins that we can commit with full knowledge and deliberate consent. "Over the high hand" is the language you'll sometimes see. But there are also hidden sins. In other words, things that we do

that violate love of God or love of neighbor, but which we ourselves are not aware of. For example, if you look at Psalm 19:12, it says this:

...who can discern his errors?

And then the Psalmist says to God:

Clear thou me from hidden faults.

In other words, in Psalm 19, the Psalmist is praying to God, asking for the grace to avoid flagrant sin. But he also says, “I want you to cleanse me from all sin, even those hidden faults that I’m not even aware of.” Because what human being can be aware of every single fault and every single error that they have? So Paul here kind of reflects that Jewish idea that I’m not even aware myself of all of my sins, so I don’t judge myself.

The second thing that’s interesting about that verse is the translation here. So Paul says:

I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted.

Now that’s an interesting translation of the verb, because the verb in Greek here is *dikaioō*. It ordinarily when Paul used it—in fact, almost every time Paul uses this term, it ordinarily gets translated as “justified.” *Dikaioō* is to make righteous or to declare righteous. This is the famous verb that has become the center of so much debate since the time of the Protestant Reformation. How are we justified? How are we made righteous? How are we declared righteous in God’s sight? As Paul says, it’s going to be through faith apart from works of the law. But what does that mean? Does that mean faith alone? Do our works matter? What role do they play in justification? That’s a long standing debate between Protestants and Catholics since the time of the Reformation.

But what’s interesting here is Paul uses the term justify to refer to what in context is his final judgment, or what theologians will call final justification. So there’s an initial justification that takes place at the beginning of life in Christ, where God

declares a person righteous. Through faith and Baptism, they become a son of God. But there's also a final justification, a final declaration of righteousness that takes place at the final judgment. And Paul here in context is obviously talking about that. So if you translate it literally, what he says is:

I do not even judge myself. I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby [justified]. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes... (1 Corinthians 4:3b-5a)

So you see, there's your context...that the justification and the judgment that he's talking about is the final judgment that will take place at the *parousia*, at the second coming of Christ at the eschaton, the end of the age.

So what he's doing here is he's giving a little warning here. Only at the end of time, only at the final judgment will everything that is now hidden from human beings come to light when the Lord judges the hearts of each individual person. He's the only one that has the omniscience—knowing all things, the power to know all things. God is the only one who has the omniscience necessary to even pass judgment on a human being.

So Paul gives us a salutary warning here against two tendencies. The first one is to judge other people, to pronounce a judgment—a verdict of whether another person is justified or not, whether they are saved or damned. It is imprudent and really irrational for any human being to pronounce in a definitive way that kind of judgment on another human being, because only God can judge the human heart.

The second thing he wants to guard against is pronouncing a judgment on ourselves, on our own souls. Paul says:

I am not aware of anything...but I am not thereby [justified]. It is the Lord who judges me.

I don't get to be the judge of myself. Only at the final judgment will every person's reward or punishment be doled out to that individual. Now the reason this

particular text is, I think, very important in the context of contemporary Christianity—especially since the time of the Reformation—is that at the time of the Reformation, the idea began to spread among some of the Protestant reformers that a person who was in Christ, who was a believer who had been justified by faith, should be able to have absolute certainty that they were going to be saved. In fact, and if they didn't have certainty, then that person could be declared as not yet being justified or not being saved.

This takes contemporary form in the very common question—if you're a Catholic, especially if you're living in Europe or the United States where there's a heavy influence of churches that have come from the Protestant Reformation, you've probably been asked this question, “Are you saved?” Sometimes you'll hear it phrased in this way, “If you die tonight, do you know for certain that you would go to Heaven?” And Catholics who are cradle Catholics (who have grown up in the Church) are often stumped by those kinds of questions or it gives them pause. They have to think about...well, wait, how do I answer that? Because the Church doesn't talk about salvation in those specific terms, and those questions are really flowing out of a particular view of salvation that makes our justification in Christ contingent or dependent upon us having subjective certitude that if we died, we would go to Heaven and that we are saved.

So how does the Church respond to that kind of question? What does the Church teach about absolute assurance of salvation? How does she interpret Paul's words here in 1 Corinthians 4? In order to answer that question, I've given you a quote here. This is from the Council of Trent, the *Decree on Justification* that was promulgated by the Catholic Church in the mid 1500s, the year 1546. A very important, very famous decree where the Catholic Church—it's long, too, and detailed—gives an explicitly biblical description of how we understand the process of salvation and justification, the relationship between faith and works. And in that *Decree on Justification*, the Council of Trent says this about the whole idea of absolute assurance of salvation and also how to interpret Paul's words in the readings for today. So just listen to these words from the Council of Trent:

*[I]t must not be asserted that those who are truly justified should unhesitatingly determine within themselves that they are justified and that no*

*one is absolved from his sins and justified unless he believes with certainty that he is absolved and justified and that absolution and justification are brought about by this faith alone (Latin sola fide), as if whoever lacks this faith were doubting God's promises and the efficacy of Christ's death and Resurrection. For just as no devout man should doubt God's mercy, Christ's merit, and the power and efficacy of the sacraments; so also, whoever considers himself, his personal weakness, and his lack of disposition may fear and tremble about his own grace, since no one can know with a certitude of faith that cannot be subject to error that he has obtained God's grace...*

And then the Council goes on to declare a few paragraphs later:

[S]ince “we all offend in many things” [James 3:2], everyone ought to keep in mind not only God's mercy and goodness but also his severity and judgment. Neither should anyone pass judgment on himself, even if he is conscious of no wrong, because the entire life of man should be examined and judged, not by human judgment, but by the judgment of God, “who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then every man will receive his commendation from God” [1 Cor 4:4-5]...

So you see Trent there is quoting the very words from the reading for today, as it's articulating this teaching. And then it continues:

...who, as it is written, “Will render to every man according to his works” [Rom 2:6].<sup>2</sup>

That's from the Council of Trent's *Decree on Justification* chapter 9 and chapter 16. So let's pause there for a second. Notice a couple things that the Council of Trent is saying. First, that Catholics must not assert that you must have absolute subjective certitude of faith that you have been justified and receive the grace of salvation. That is not part of the Catholic teaching. And it's interesting there...you

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<sup>2</sup> Council of Trent, *Decree on Justification*, Chapter 9, 16; in DS nos. 11534, 1549

can even see the Church using the language of infallibility. Because what, effectively, what some of the reformers were saying is, you have to have infallible certitude of your salvation; otherwise, you're not saved. And the Church says that's too high a bar. The Church—the Scriptures—don't demand that of somebody, since even St. Paul himself in 1 Corinthians 4 says, "I'm not aware of anything against me, but that doesn't mean I'm justified." It's only God who gets to render the final verdict on whether a person is justified or not.

The second thing that the Council says there is at the same time, Catholics—no Christian—should doubt God's mercy or the power of the cross. So just because the Church doesn't endorse the idea of an absolute certitude of salvation on the part of an individual...at the same time, it doesn't mean that we're doubting His mercy or we're doubting the love of Christ or we're doubting the power of the cross. The only thing that we doubt is our own strength. The only thing we recognize is our own weakness. The only thing we can really be certain about is our own tendency to sin. And so we throw ourselves on the mercy of God. The disposition of the Catholic in this regard is not subjective certitude of our personal or our own individual justification of salvation, but certitude of faith that God loved me and gave Himself for me, as Paul says in Galatians 2.

So this is the Church's teaching from the Council of Trent. And there's another passage that I think exemplifies this perfectly if you want to get a sense of how a saint would approach—another saint, not St. Paul, but another saint, St. Joan of Arc. There's a great passage from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. It's in paragraph 2005, and I'll end with this quotation. In a much more recent articulation of this doctrine, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says this:

Since it belongs to the supernatural order, grace *escapes our experience* and cannot be known except by faith. We cannot therefore rely on our feelings or our works to conclude that we are justified and saved.

And if you go down to the footnote here, it's citing the Council of Trent—the paragraphs I just read to you.



However, according to the Lord's words—"Thus you will know them by their fruits"—reflection on God's blessings in our life and in the lives of the saints offers us a guarantee that grace is at work in us and spurs us on to an ever greater faith and an attitude of trustful poverty.

So in other words, the position of the Christian is one of humility and faith. My trust isn't in myself; my trust is in God. And they give a great story, the *Catechism*, to illustrate exactly what this looks like from the story of St. Joan of Arc as she was on trial before her judges. Listen to this:

A pleasing illustration of this attitude is found in the reply of St. Joan of Arc to a question posed as a trap by her ecclesiastical judges: "Asked if she knew that she was in God's grace, she replied: 'If I am not, may it please God to put me in it; if I am, may it please God to keep me there.'"<sup>3</sup>

So notice the humility of Joan of Arc. She doesn't pronounce any kind of final verdict on her own state of grace, on whether she's in a state of grace or not. What she expresses is her humility and her trust and her desire to be in it. So if I'm not in a state of grace, may the Lord put me there. And if I am, may He keep me there. Because everything, at the end of the day, is a matter of God's grace. And at the end of the last day (the final day), it's going to be God and God alone that judges. And that's really what St. Paul is reminding the Corinthians of in the second reading for today.

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<sup>3</sup> CCC 2005