

The Eighth Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year C)

<i>First Reading</i>	Sirach 27:4-7
<i>Response</i>	It is good to give thanks to the Lord
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 92:2-3, 13-14, 15-16
<i>Second Reading</i>	1 Corinthians 15:54-58
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	shine as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life
<i>Gospel</i>	Luke 6:39-45

The eighth Sunday for Ordinary Time in year C brings us, once again, back to the first letter to the Corinthians, and once again, back to 1 Corinthians 15. If you had any doubts about how important chapter 15 was in 1 Corinthians, the Church is going to leave you very clear about its significance in year C, because we're spending a lot of time working through this part of the letter.

In this case, the Church presents to us for this Sunday, the climactic verses from this climactic chapter in the overall letter to Corinth. It's 1 Corinthians 15:54-58. And here, the Church continues to bring before us Paul's teaching on the nature of the resurrection, with a particular emphasis on the resurrection as our victory over death. So this is what St. Paul says and what the Church gives to us. In 1 Corinthians 15:54-58, we read:

When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written:

“Death is swallowed up in victory.”

“O death, where is thy victory?

O death, where is thy sting?”

The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.¹

1 Corinthians 15:54-58. What is Paul saying here? Well, in order to unpack it, this is one of those passages where we have to kind of back up a little bit and put things in context, because the lectionary, as selections, sometimes has to take passages out of context. So if you don't know the context, it's a little unclear about exactly what Paul is referring to.

So in the first verse, the first thing we want to say is that when Paul says:

When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality...

Here he's alluding to his description of two kinds of bodies that he's given in the preceding verses. So in the preceding verses, Paul raised a question that the Corinthians had. Basically what they asked him is, they said, "What kind of body will we inhabit in the resurrection? What's it going to be like?"

So in order to answer their question, he gives a series of contrasts between the earthly body that we live in now (the fallen body), and then the glorified body that we will receive on the last day in the resurrection of the dead. So I'm not going to read those verses through in any depth, but I'll just give you some of the contrasts that he gave.

So for example, Paul described the old body, this fallen body, as earthly, perishable, dishonorable, weak, soulish — literally in Greek, *psychikos*, meaning animated by a natural human soul— of the dust, mortal, and from Adam. So those are some basic characteristics of our bodies. They're earthly, they're perishable — which means they can die. They're dishonorable, which means that we often sin in them; we bring shame to the body. They're weak — we can get sick, we can suffer.

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 are soulish, meaning they are animated by a human soul. And that they're from the dust and mortal, so eventually they die.

By contrast, he describes the resurrected body, the risen body with a series of characteristics. So here he says that the resurrected body is heavenly, so it's not from the earth... it's from heaven. It's imperishable, it's glorious. Glory here is an interesting word. Whenever we speak about glory, we can talk about the glory of God, which is His awesomeness, His power, His tremendousness, His beauty. And so the glory of the resurrected body is similar. It's going to be awe-inspiring, beautiful, and holy in such a way that it gives glory and praise to God. It's going to magnify the glory of God.

He also says the resurrected body will be powerful, as opposed to weak, spiritual as opposed to soulish — and here the Greek word is *pneumatikos*. It means just animated, not just by the human soul but by the Holy Spirit of God, suffused with the Spirit. It will be from Heaven, it will be immortal, and it will be from the last Adam, Christ, rather than from the first Adam.

So two of those characteristics — perishable vs imperishable and mortal vs immortal — are what Paul is picking up on on the first verse for this reading. So when he says:

When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality...

He's not talking in abstractions about perishability or immortality in some kind of... as some kind of mere idea. No, he's actually referring to what he just spoke of, so you can fill it in this way:

When the perishable [body] puts on the imperishable [body], and the mortal [body] puts on immortality [body], then shall come to pass the saying that is written:

“Death is swallowed up in victory.”

So he's speaking here about the final resurrection of the dead. And it's fascinating, because the image that he's using there for the resurrected body is he's comparing it to a garment that we can take off or put on. So what he's describing here when he talks about the resurrection is not just that our souls are separated from our bodies and then go on to live forever in Heaven — which is kind of how most people imagine that for everlasting life or immortality of the soul.

No, no, no. What he's saying here is that our perishable bodies will put on the garment of imperishability, and our mortal bodies will put on the garment of immortality, so that in this new and glorified state of the resurrection, not only will there be no more sin, not only will there be no more suffering, but ultimately, there will also be no more death. We will live on in our bodies, but in such a way that we can never die. That's why he says:

“O death, where is thy victory?
O death, where is thy sting?”

But thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Notice here the emphasis that Paul is placing on the fact that Christ's victory in the resurrection of His body on Easter Sunday wasn't just for Him. It wasn't just a vindication for Him, but it was a victory that He intended to share with all those who belong to His Mystical Body, i.e. to the Church. So this victory comes through our Lord Jesus Christ.

And again, I think that — at least from my own experience — a lot of Christians will think of Jesus' victory primarily in terms of His atonement for sin: “I'm a sinner; He's not. He suffered as the suffering servant for me; He atoned for my sin so that I might be reconciled to God, so that we might be reconciled to God... so that my soul might go to Heaven after I die, rather than being separated by God by going to Hell after I die.”

And that's all true, but it's an incomplete eschatology, because Christ doesn't just suffer on the cross in order to atone for sin. He also has a victory over death in the resurrection in order to share an imperishable, immortal, glorious body with all

those who belong to His Mystical Body in the Church. So salvation isn't just about forgiveness of sins; it's about victory over death.

And I don't know about you, but unfortunately I tend to be more afraid of death than I am of sin. It's interesting that when we talk about salvation, we tend to focus more on forgiveness of sins rather than victory over death, when in fact most of us are more afraid of death than we are of sin — although we should be afraid of sin, because what sin does is it brings about spiritual death.

But Paul's not there. Paul recognizes that the ultimate victory in the cross isn't just over sin, but it's the victory over what sin leads to, which is death itself. So, this is a powerful, beautiful, and hopeful vision of what the Good News of salvation is all about, and that's why Paul ends the reading for today by saying:

Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.
(1 Corinthians 15:58)

What does he mean? Well, I think what he's getting at here is that we can... because we live in this world, because we live in the old creation, because we suffer in our Adamic humanity, because we can feel the effects of the fall every single day, every single moment... it's easy for us to lose sight of the fact that we are striving toward and working toward the ultimate hope, which is the resurrection, which is life in the face of death, which is victory over death through the resurrection of the body.

And so when we see trials and tribulations or failures in this life, it's easy to give up. It's easy to not be steadfast, to not be immovable. And it's easy to want to just give up and quit doing the work of the Lord. And what's it all for? Look around. It looks like the world is going to Hell in a handbasket, as the saying goes. What's this all about? What's this all for?

And what Paul is saying is, "Keep your eyes on the prize." Keep your minds and hearts fixed on the glory of the victory of Jesus Christ in the resurrection, because *that* is what we're striving for, and *that* is what we're heading toward, providing

we remain faithful, provided we remain hopeful, and provided that we live the way of charity that he's just spoken about in 1 Corinthians 13. And if we do that, we'll one day realize that our labor is not ultimately for this world, but it's for the life of the world to come.

Alright, now there's a lot more that could be said here, but I just want to close with an emphasis on that first line from the reading for today, about the nature of our resurrected bodies as being imperishable and immortal.

I don't know about you, but that's hard to wrap my brain around. What does that mean? What does it look like? What would that be like? What would that experience be like?

And some people over the centuries have been tempted to spiritualize Paul's words. So for example, some interpreters — not just in ancient times but also to this day — will point to the fact that earlier in the chapter, Paul will say in 1 Corinthians 15:44, that:

It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body.

And they'll say, "Aha, look!" When Paul talks about the resurrection, he doesn't mean that we're going to actually have bodily existence. He's talking about a spiritual body — in other words, an immaterial body. We're just going to be spirits in the presence of God. We're not actually going to receive our physical bodies back.

Now part of this is just a translation issue. When Paul says that, he actually says what is sown (our first body) is a *psychikos* body, a soulish body. It doesn't say physical — it says soulish. But what is raised is a *pneumatikos* body, a spiritual body. In context, that *cannot* mean that Paul means an immaterial body, because his whole paradigm, the image of what the resurrected body is like, is Jesus Christ.

And if you look at the Gospel accounts of Jesus, it's very clear that although Jesus has a new body, although it's a different body, it is, nevertheless, a real body and actually also the *same* body in which He was crucified.

So in closing, I'll just end with this helpful corrective from St. Thomas Aquinas in his commentary on this passage from 1 Corinthians 15. He says this:

*“What we must not think, as some heretics say, is that flesh and blood will not rise according to substance, but rather that the whole body will be changed into spirit or air. This is heretical and false. For the Apostle says that our body will be conformed to his body of radiance. Therefore, since Christ after his resurrection, has body and blood, as it says in Luke: “See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself; handle me, and see; for a spirit has not flesh and bones as you see that I have” (Luke 24:39), it is certain that we too will have flesh and blood in the resurrection.”*²

Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on 1 Corinthians*, paragraph 1000.

In closing, I would just take what Thomas is saying here and really pray about it, meditate on that. Ponder the mystery of the fact that in our resurrection, we too will have flesh and blood just as real as Christ had on Easter Sunday, and that when that takes place, when the perishable puts on imperishability, when our mortal bodies put on immortality, then we too will be able to sing the song of St. Paul:

“O death, where is thy victory?
O death, where is thy sting?”

² Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on 1 Corinthians* no. 1000; trans. F. Larcher, O.P.