

The Eleventh Sunday of Ordinary Time

(Year B)

<i>First Reading</i>	Ezekiel 17:22-24
<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>	2 Corinthians 5:6-10
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	The seed is the word of God, Christ is the sower. All who come to him will live forever.
<i>Gospel</i>	Mark 4:26-34

The eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time for year B takes us to 2 Corinthians 5:6-10. This is another one of those short passages from the apostle Paul that are brief but very, very consequential for the Church's theology, and in this case, very significant for the Church's eschatology, its theology of the Last Things, especially the doctrine of the particular judgment — what happens to us when we die and how we're judged as individuals. So let's look at the reading for today with that in mind. 2 Corinthians 5:6-10 says this:

So we are always of good courage; we know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, for we walk by faith, not by sight. We are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive good or evil, according to what he has done in the body.¹

Now, what is Paul getting at here? What's he talking about? In order to understand exactly what Paul is saying here, it's actually helpful to have recourse to an image that I've used elsewhere in my lectures on Paul's writings — this image of two overlapping circles, the old creation and the new creation.

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.

Now when I ordinarily speak about the old creation and the new creation, I'll frequently do it in terms of two overlapping circles that are side by side — the old creation, then leading up to the new creation, and then in the middle they have “In Christ” where they overlap...based on the Jewish idea that there were two ages or two worlds, the old fallen world of sin and death that would eventually be replaced by the new creation of life and the bodily resurrection. And that one of the keys to understanding Paul's theology is recognizing that these two spheres of reality, these two circles overlap in Christ, so that those of us who are baptized and live in Christ, in a sense, live with our feet in two worlds. We live in between worlds in this kind of liminal realm, where visibly we belong to the fallen world (the old creation), but invisibly, we belong to the world to come — the resurrection, the life, and the glory.

However, you can also conceptualize the image of the old and new creation (the two circles) as two circles that are on top of one another, that overlap — in other words, not horizontal, but kind of have a vertical access ... with the old creation being on the bottom, and then the new creation above, and then being in Christ as overlapping the two. And that seems to be how Paul here is describing his desire to be at home with the risen Lord, who has ascended into Heaven, rather than in the body — namely, here on Earth. So it's a kind of inversion of the old and new creation in terms of this world below and the heavenly world above. So that's just a basic orientation if you want to kind of get a visual idea for what Paul is describing here.

With that context in mind, he says something really striking. He says that:

...we are always of good courage; we know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord... (2 Corinthians 5:6)

Now what does that mean? Let me start by saying what it doesn't mean. Paul doesn't mean here that Christ has abandoned us on Earth. So it's not an absolute separation of Jesus from believers. In fact, Paul, more than anyone else, is very clear that if you believe in Jesus Christ and you've been baptized, then you are

actually a member of the Body of Christ. You are united to Him through the power of the Holy Spirit.

He'll say this elsewhere, for example, in 1 Corinthians 6. He tells the Corinthians that they can't engage in prostitution, because he who becomes one with a harlot becomes one with her:

But he who is united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him. (1 Corinthians 6:17)

So he says, don't you know that your bodies are members of Christ? So he's very clear that the union between a Christian and Christ is very real. However, he's also equally clear that the body of Jesus, the resurrected body of Jesus, is not still on this Earth but has ascended into Heaven. So Paul is presupposing here the mystery of the Ascension, which we don't think about as often as we should, and we tend to forget that the mystery of the Ascension is not just that Jesus goes to Heaven, like maybe you think your grandma went to Heaven or some saintly person went to Heaven. When we talk about someone going to Heaven, we mean that the person's soul and body are separated at death, and then that their soul is now in Heaven with God.

But the Ascension is not just about what happened to Jesus's soul; it's about what happened to His body. And so when Paul says that while we are at home in the body — in other words, while we are living in this life, in this world, the old creation — we are away from the Lord, because we are not with Him in His resurrected and glorified body, which sits at the right hand of God the Father. Therefore we walk by faith, Paul says, and not by sight.

Because if you look around ... look around right now. Do you see the resurrected Jesus anywhere? Do you see His risen body? Now you might say, "Well, what about in the Blessed Sacrament?" Well, of course He's there, fully present in the Blessed Sacrament. But He's still hidden. He looks like bread. He looks like wine. He even tastes like bread and tastes like wine. The sensible apprehension of Jesus is not accessible to us in the ordinary life of a Christian.

So while we're at home in this body, we're away from the Lord, and we have to walk by faith. We have to trust in His resurrection and His glorification. We have to trust in that which we are unable to see just yet. In the resurrection, we'll see Him face to face. For now, Paul says, we see as in a mirror, dimly.

So he expresses something very powerful here. He says:

We are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. (2 Corinthians 5:8)

When I read those verses, I tend to think to Paul, "Speak for yourself." Because in order for us to be away from the body and at home with the Lord, we have to die first. So Paul here is expressing something you will see in all the saints, that although they recognize the goodness of this world, they recognize the goodness of this life, there's a real desire for death in the sense of a desire to depart and to be united with Christ. To no longer walk by faith but to walk by sight, to be at home with the Lord. But he says:

So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. (2 Corinthians 5:9)

So he says whatever our state or condition, our role is to please Him. And then he ends with this verse here that I'd like to dwell on for just a minute. He says:

For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive good or evil, according to what he has done in the body. (2 Corinthians 5:10)

Now notice there ... although Paul doesn't use the language of the Ascension (he doesn't refer to it specifically), he alludes to it when he speaks of the seat of Christ, because every time the Ascension is referred to in the New Testament (or almost every time, virtually every time), there's the image of Christ taking His seat at the right hand of God — the image of the heavenly throne and of the heavenly throne room. And it's precisely this image that would have made sense in a biblical Jewish

context to describe the Judgment Day. You would go before a king or a judge, and they would sit on a throne to render a verdict, to render judgment.

And so what Paul is saying here is that every single one of us, when we do depart from this body, is going to appear before the judgment seat of Christ to receive good or evil according to what we've done in the body during our lifetime.

Now this verse, 2 Corinthians 5:10, is one of the most foundational verses in the New Testament on the doctrine of what the Church refers to as the particular judgment. So some of you who are a bit older than me, when you were in Catechism, might have learned about the Four Last Things — death, judgment, Heaven, and Hell. Well, the doctrine of judgment (the expectation of judgment) is twofold. The Church teaches that there will be two judgments. There is the particular judgment that takes place at the hour of each individual's death, and then there's the general judgment or the final judgment that takes place at the resurrection of the dead at the end of time when all of humanity will be judged.

So here Paul is describing in a very interesting way the particular judgment, and he's revealing some things about the particular judgment. I'm going to highlight them and just kind of walk through the implications of his word. So first of all, this judgment is going to be universal, in the sense that every single person is going to have to do it or be judged. Paul says:

For we must all appear... (2 Corinthians 5:10a)

So it's not just some people who will be judged. *Everyone* will be judged. It's universal.

Second, it's going to be a judgment in which Christ will render a verdict. That's what he means by the image of the judgment seat of Christ. Because to this day, judges will render their verdicts sitting down from the chair. It's an image of authority that goes back all the way to ancient times. So every person — it's universal — is going to experience a judgment.

Third, and this is important... it's also going to be an individual judgment. Paul says:

...so that each one may receive good or evil... (2 Corinthians 5:10b)

So it's not just a kind of collective condemnation or collective approbation of the human race as a whole or society as a whole or this nation or that nation as a whole, but it is an individual judgment. This is where the Church gets the language of a particular judgment. We will each have to appear before the judgment seat of Christ so that He might render a verdict.

Fourth and fifth, there are two outcomes. You can receive either a reward (Paul says that you may receive good) or a punishment (Paul says that you might receive evil). So that's what he means by good or evil — eschatological rewards and eschatological punishments.

Sixth and finally, what is the criterion for this judgment? Well, in this case, Paul says something that might be shocking to readers of Paul who emphasize justification, *Sola Fide*, by faith alone, all that matters is faith. It is true, Paul puts a supreme price on faith. Faith is the sine qua non of justification. There's absolutely no doubt about that. But notice here that although Paul will describe our initial redemption as being justified by faith, he's very clear that our final verdict is going to be according to works. What does Paul say? Each person will be judged:

.... according to what he has done in the body. (2 Corinthians 5:10c)

So notice, that last little line there, “according to what he has done” when? In the body. So in other words, each human individual will be judged by what they've done in this life, in this world. Not after they die, but what they've done in the body.

Alright, why do I bring this up? Well, I bring it up because it's in the lectionary, but why am I focusing on the particular judgment? Well, because for me, I think this is one of those doctrines that has fallen on hard times. I think there's kind of a collective lack of awareness, lack of attention to the significance of the fact that

when we die, we're going to be judged by Christ according to every single thing we've done during our earthly life while we are in the body.

And so I think it's helpful when you come across these doctrines that are a little blurry for people, or maybe even they don't think that this is true. They don't like the idea of a judgmental God or the idea of a judgment. To just reiterate what the Church teaches about this in particular. To be very specific, if you would like to look into this, the *Catechism* paragraph 1021-1022 cites the reading for today — 2 Corinthians 5:8 — in its doctrine of particular judgment. So listen to Church's teaching on this. It says this, the particular judgment:

Death puts an end to human life as the time open to either accepting or rejecting the divine grace manifested in Christ. The New Testament speaks of judgment primarily in its aspect of the final encounter with Christ in his second coming, but also repeatedly affirms that each will be rewarded immediately after death in accordance with his works and faith. The parable of the poor man Lazarus and the words of Christ on the cross to the good thief, as well as other New Testament texts speak of a final destiny of the soul -- a destiny which can be different for some and for others.

And there in the footnote, the *Catechism* cites (among other texts) 2 Corinthians 5:8. It continues:

Each man receives his eternal retribution in his immortal soul at the very moment of his death, in a particular judgment that refers his life to Christ: either entrance into the blessedness of heaven—through a purification or immediately—or immediate and everlasting damnation...

And then it quotes St. John of the Cross:

“At the evening of life, we shall be judged on our love.”²

² *Catechism of the Catholic Church* par 1021-22, citing John of the Cross, *Dichos* 64

So a couple things stand out to me in the way the *Catechism* is interpreting 2 Corinthians 5:8 and the New Testament doctrine of the particular judgment. First, notice it says:

Death puts an end to human life as the time open to either accepting or rejecting the divine grace...

That's really important. A lot of people will sometimes be under the mistaken understanding that, for example, purgatory, is like a halfway house or a second chance place. There are no second chances after death. According to the Church's doctrine, death puts an end to the time open to either accepting or rejecting the grace of Christ. This flows right out of Paul's statements that we will be judged for what we have done while we're in the body — not what happens after, but while we're in the body. It's human life that is decisive for how we'll spend eternity.

The second thing... the *Catechism* says that we will be rewarded immediately after death. So the particular judgment, in contrast to the final judgment, takes place at the moment of our death, immediately after our death, for each one of us. The general judgment is going to take place at the same time. We would all experience that together at the end of time, but the particular judgment happens immediately after death.

Third, and this is really important, it says:

Each man receives his eternal retribution in his immortal soul at the very moment of his death, in a particular judgment that refers his life to Christ: either entrance into the blessedness of heaven—through a purification or immediately—or immediate and everlasting damnation...

Now before you get to Heaven, it says you might have to go through a purification. That would be what we call purgatory. But the eternal judgment is rendered at the particular judgment. This is very important. Sometimes people wonder, "Well, wait... in the general judgment, the final judgment, is God going to reverse the verdict that He gave at the particular judgment? Will He kind of reconsider things at the final judgment, and maybe some people who were sent to Hell will then go

to Heaven, or vice versa? Can you lose your spot in Heaven at the final judgment?” Why do we have a final judgment and a particular judgment? Are they at odds with one another?”

The answer is no, they’re not at odds with one another. The *Catechism* is really clear, that the eternal retribution each individual will receive — whether they’re going to be blessed or whether they’re going to be damned — is decided at the moment of the particular judgment. And if I had more time, I could show you texts in the New Testament that make clear what the general judgment is going to do is reveal each particular judgment to the whole world and will also judge the consequences of all of our actions and how they played out through all of human history. It’s a very powerful, mysterious thing.

But I bring this up because it shows just how critical that moment of our death is. So in the Catholic tradition, we pray repeatedly — for example, in the Hail Mary — “pray for us sinners now *and at the hour of our death*”.

And I remember one of my teachers, either my Catechism teacher or my mother, said the most important moment of your life is the moment of your death. And I remember thinking as a child that was a little morbid ... although I don’t think I knew the word “morbid” at the time. It seemed a little dark. But it’s just realistic. It’s just true. If the moment of our death and the moment of particular judgment is what decides our fate for all eternity — which is what the *Catechism* says here — then that is the most important hour of our lives. It’s the one where we most need the grace of God.

And so on this eleventh Sunday of Ordinary Time, where the Church gives us the words of St. Paul, we should be thankful, because this verse (2 Corinthians 5:10) in this passage, really helps us to understand the truth of the fact that although we are at home in the body now, our real home, our ultimate home is to be away from the body with the Lord — at least, until the resurrection of the body. And then second, that the most important hour of our life really is the hour of our death, because that is the hour when we will each stand before the judgment seat of Jesus Christ.