

The Fifteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	Isaiah 55:10-11
<i>Response</i>	And some fell into good soil and grew, and yielded a hundredfold.
<i>Psalms</i>	Psalms 65:10, 11, 12-13, 14
<i>Second Reading</i>	Romans 8:18-23
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	The seed is the word of God, Christ is the sower. All who come to him will have life forever.
<i>Gospel</i>	Matthew 13:1-23

The fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time continues our journey through Paul's letter to the Romans. And it continues to focus on the very profound and eschatological chapter in Romans 8. So eschatological refers to the Last Things, refers to the hope of final judgment, the new creation, the second coming of Christ and that kind of thing. And in Romans 8:18-23, which is the reading for today, we encounter what is one of my favorite passages in all of Paul's letters.

I've said before that Romans 8 is one of my favorite chapters in Paul's letters, but this passage in particular has always been a favorite of mine. It's a very profound chapter, because in it Paul talks about the relationship between the salvation of humanity and the fate of the cosmos, the fate of the universe, the fate of all creation—not just human beings but the whole created world. And this tags into the eschatological teaching of the New Testament about the new creation, the new heavens and the new earth. And this is one of Paul's most detailed descriptions of what's going to happen to creation at the end of time.

So let's read through it together and then we'll back up and try to unpack some of the implications of what Paul is saying here about Christian eschatology and about the hope for the future. So Romans 8:18 says this:

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager

longing for the revealing of the sons of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.¹

Alright, so there is the passage for today—beautiful, poetic, and profound text. In order to understand what Paul’s getting at here, there are a few points we want to make. First and foremost, once again, Paul is presupposing and employing the ancient Jewish distinction between two spheres of reality, two worlds known as the old creation and the new creation....or in later Hebrew rabbinic language, the “this age” (*ha olam hazeh*) and “the age to come” (*ha olam habah*)...or “this world” and “the world to come.” And as I’ve mentioned before, whereas in other ancient Jewish writings, there was a kind of sequential understanding of these two worlds. You have the old world of sin and death—this world, the present age—that will one day come to an end. And there will be a new creation, a new world to follow it—the world to come.

For Paul, those two spheres of reality are overlapping in Christ, and Christ Himself is both the end of the old world that He put to death on the cross and then the beginning of the new world that He brought to life in His resurrection from the dead. And so with that framework in mind, Paul here is using the language of ancient Jewish eschatology when he says “this present time.” That’s a technical way of referring to the old creation. And when he says “the glory to be revealed”, that’s a technical way of referring to the world to come, which is going to be a world of glory and life and resurrection.

And so what Paul is saying here is, “Look, I know you’re suffering right now. But you need to understand that the sufferings of the old creation, of this present world, are nothing compared to the glory of the world to come.” And then he goes on to

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.

explain why. He says because creation—and by creation he means the whole created universe:

...waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God.

Now the Greek word there for creation is *ktisis*. It means all created things, the whole visible universe. And here Paul is personifying the universe as a person who's waiting for something to happen. He's not describing it as an inanimate collection of atoms and molecules and inanimate matter. He's describing it and personifying it, saying all of creation is waiting for the revealing of the sons of God.

Now the Greek word there for revealing is *apokalypsis*. We get the word apocalypse from that in English. So when you and I talk about the apocalypse, we probably refer to the cataclysmic end of the universe. That's what most people mean when they say apocalypse. They usually mean something bad. But Paul here is using it positively, because the Greek word *apokalypsis* literally means “unveiling” or “revealing.”

So when Paul talks about the apocalypse, he's talking about the unveiling of the sons of God that will happen in the resurrection of the righteous on the last day. So he is referring to the end of the world, but it's something he's looking forward to. In fact, Paul is saying not only is he looking forward to the end of the world, but the world itself is looking forward to the end of the world, because the world is waiting for the apocalypse of the sons of God—for the revelation of the righteous and for the resurrection of the righteous on the last day. And the reason the universe is looking forward to the end of the universe is because according to the Paul, at the end of the universe, the universe itself is going to actually have a share in the resurrection of the righteous on the last day. The cosmos itself is actually going to participate in the resurrection of humanity.

Now that's a profound assertion on Paul's part to make. Because I would venture to guess that many Christians, especially in the west, tend to think of salvation primarily in anthropocentric terms—in other words, human terms. We think primarily of the salvation of human souls and maybe of the resurrection of human

bodies, but we don't tend to think of all of the universe as somehow sharing in the resurrection of the dead. But according to Paul, that's exactly what's going to happen. According to Paul, salvation in other words, isn't just something for humanity. Salvation is something that involves the whole universe, the whole cosmos.

And so he's saying that creation itself is going to be set free, because creation itself was subjected to bondage, the bondage of decay. Now what is that referring to? Here Paul is reflecting the ancient Jewish notion that when the first sin is committed by Adam and Eve in Genesis 2 and 3, it doesn't just affect them. It's not something that just affects their souls or even their bodies, but rather that the first sin affects the whole world...that all of creation becomes subject to decay and death because of the sin of man and woman. And because that's the case, Paul says conversely, that all of creation will also be subject to life and be set free from decay in the glory of the resurrection on the last day.

Notice he actually goes on to depict creation as a woman. So sometimes pagans will talk about—well, not just pagans, but people will talk about “mother earth”...kind of a feminine personification of the created world. Paul does something similar here when he says:

...creation has been groaning in travail...

So it's the image of a woman in birth pangs. She's...

...groaning in travail until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.

So what he's saying there is that all of creation is like a woman, and she feels the pains of childbirth coming on. And she's groaning inwardly in the expectation of the birth that's going to take place. But in this case, the birth that's going to happen is the birth of the resurrection of the sons of God—the resurrection of the righteous on the last day. So it's a powerful image for the final judgment and the new creation. Most of us when we think about the final judgment, we kind of think of

terror, darkness, despair...you know. But Paul's view is very different. It's very positive. He says the final judgment and the resurrection of the body—that's our hope. That's what we're waiting for. That's what Christ died to give us. So just like creation is looking forward to the end of the world—because it's not going to be the ultimate end, it'll be a new creation—so too we groan inwardly as we await the resurrection and the redemption of our bodies.

I don't know about you, but after reading this passage, thinking about it for a long time...one of the things I notice now is that as beautiful as creation is—and it is, it is beautiful—it is subject to decay. It is still fallen. So if you go into a beautiful forest, for example, you're going to see the glory of the trees and the wood and the leaves, but if you pay close attention, you'll also see that some of them are dead. Some are dying, some are fallen over, some of them are injured. If you look at the waters of the sea, they're beautiful. But they also have corpses in them and dead bodies and dead animals and pollution—those kinds of things. In other words, creation itself, it's beautiful...but it's marred. It's subject to decay. There's a certain futility that suffuses...even the most beautiful places on Earth aren't untouched by death or decay.

And what Paul is saying here is that in the new creation, that's all over. The cosmos itself is waiting for the resurrection of the dead and its participation and sharing the life of the world to come—its sharing in the glory of the risen Christ. This, according to Paul, is our Christian hope—not just the immortality of soul, but the resurrection of the body and the renewal of all creation.

Now over the years as I've taught about the hope for the new creation, a lot of times it comes as news to students. "Wow, I hadn't heard that before." But the reality of the fact is that this is just the tradition of the Church. This is the teaching of Scripture and the tradition of the Church. One of my favorite articulations of this comes from the official *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which has a beautiful section on the new creation.

I talk about this in one of my Bible studies called *Life After Death: A Bible Study on 7 Last Things*. Traditionally in Catholic catechesis in the west, you would have eschatology taught through the 4 Last Things: Death, Judgment, Heaven, and Hell.

But in that Bible study, I point out that according to Scripture, there are more than just 4 Last Things. There's not just Death, Judgment, Heaven, and Hell. But there's also Resurrection of the Body, which goes beyond Heaven. It's the restoration to life and bodily eternal life and the new creation—the restoration of the universe. So if you want a little more on that, you can check out that Bible study, *Life After Death: A Bible Study on 7 Last Things*.

But in that Bible study, I call your attention to what the *Catechism* says about this new creation. So if you're wondering what is the Church's teaching on this, just listen to these words, because the *Catechism* here quotes and comments on the very passage from Romans that we're reading today for the fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time. And this is what it says:

For the cosmos, Revelation affirms the profound common destiny of the material world and man: “For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God ...” [quotes Romans 8:19-23].

And then it goes on to give the full passage. I'm not going to read it here, because we just read it. Then the *Catechism* picks up and it says this, explains Romans 8 with these words:

The visible universe, then, is itself destined to be transformed, “so that the world itself, restored to its original state, facing no further obstacles, should be at the service of the just,” sharing their glorification in the risen Jesus Christ. “We know neither the moment of the consummation of the earth and of man, nor the way in which the universe will be transformed. The form of this world, distorted by sin, is passing away, and we are taught that God is preparing a new dwelling and a new earth in which righteousness dwells, in which happiness will fill and surpass all the desires of peace arising in the hearts of men.²

Beautiful passage there. So notice...what the *Catechism* is saying here that when it comes to salvation, Scripture affirms the common destiny not just of man or human

² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, par 1046-1048

beings but of the material world...and that the whole visible universe is destined to be transformed on the final day, on the last day, on the day of the resurrection. It's going to be transformed and restored to its original state, the *Catechism* says, where there's not going to be any decay or any further obstacles. No more sin, no more death. All of the universe is going to share in the glorification of the risen Jesus Christ.

Now of course the question we ask is, "What does that look like? How is that going to be? What exactly do you mean?" And the *Catechism* qualifies this, says we neither know the moment that that's going to happen (the consummation of Earth) and we don't know the way in which the universe is going to be transformed. We don't know the how here. But what we do know is the form of the world, which has been distorted by sin, is passing away. And God is preparing a new dwelling place, a new Heaven and a new Earth in which righteousness will dwell. And human beings and creation itself are going to share in the perfect happiness of the risen and glorified Christ.

So I don't know about you, but that's something to look forward to. That's good news. And as Paul says in Romans 8, that is the hope that we as Christians share in. We're all waiting—not just humanity but the world itself—for the apocalypse of the sons of God and the redemption of our bodies.