

The Fifth Sunday of Lent

(Year C)

<i>First Reading</i>	Isaiah 43:16-21
<i>Response</i>	The Lord has done great things for us; we are glad.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 126:1-2, 2-3, 4-5, 6
<i>Second Reading</i>	Philippians 3:8-14
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful
<i>Gospel</i>	John 8:1-11

The fifth Sunday of Lent for year C continues the Church's sampling of the letters of St. Paul, in particularly famous and beautiful passages from his letters that are fitting for the Lenten season and the preparation of Easter. And here the Church gives us another section from Philippians — chapter 3, verse 8-14. Very famous passage on Paul, in which Paul reflects on the splendor and the beauty of what it means to him to be in Christ and to know Christ Jesus. So let's look at this passage together and try to unpack it. It begins in verse 8 where Paul is giving one of these autobiographical reflections on his life before he was in Christ, versus his life now that he *is* in Christ. And this is what he says:

Indeed I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as refuse, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own, based on law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith; that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that if possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brethren, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but one thing I do, forgetting what

lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.¹

Beautiful passage. Okay, so a couple things that are going on here. In this section in Philippians, Paul is reflecting on his past — his life as a Hebrew, a Pharisee. With regard to the law, he was a zealot. And he's taking pride in those things, because there are some opponents — apparently either in the Church at Philippi or influencing the Church at Philippi — against his apostleship. They appear to be opponents who are advocating for circumcision and kind of challenging Paul's credentials as a Jew.

And so he says, “Look, I’ve got all the credentials you’ve got. I was a Hebrew, born of Hebrews. I’m of the tribe of Benjamin. I’m of the people of Israel. I was circumcised on the eighth day. I was a Pharisee” — which were widely known and respected as the most faithful keepers of the law among the Jewish people.

In these striking words that weren't in the lectionary for today, he actually says:

... as to zeal a persecutor of the church, as to righteousness under the law blameless. (Philippians 3:6)

So his credentials are fine in terms of his Jewish background. But he says:

But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ.

And the lectionary picks up today in that next verse:

Indeed I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. (Philippians 3:7-8a)

In other words, all that stuff that I just listed — being a Hebrew of Hebrews, being circumcised, being a member of the tribe of Benjamin, being a zealous Pharisee,

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.

being blameless under the law — he says, “It’s nothing compared to knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.” There’s no comparison between the two.

And there he actually goes on to give a very striking graphic imagery here, when he says:

For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as refuse...
(Philippians 3:8b)

The Greek word there — *skybala* in Greek — it means “excrement”. It’s a very concrete term, where he’s trying to just draw out the contrast between how valuable Christ is in comparison with all other things. And why is that so? It’s not because any of those things Paul listed aren’t good. It’s just because relatively speaking, they’re nothing compared to what Christ has given, which is the righteousness that comes through Christ:

... in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him...

So once again, this image in Paul of being in Christ is just central. It’s absolutely central. For Paul, the Gospel — the Good News of salvation — is not just that we’re saved from sin, but that through faith in Baptism, we are incorporated into the Body of Christ. We become members of His Mystical Body. We are “found in him” as he says. And therefore:

...not having a righteousness of my own, based on law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith...

And that comes from God. So it’s grace and faith, all of that together, and that leads towards knowing Him and the power of His resurrection. So for Paul — this is so crucial to understand this. Sometimes when people read Paul, they will think he sounds anti-Jewish or — which of course is absurd because he himself was a Jew. But sometimes people will read him in this way. They’ll say, “Well, look, he just listed circumcision and being part of the people of Israel and a Hebrew of Hebrews and as to the law, a Pharisee and all those things.” And he’ll say, “Well, that’s all *nothing* compared to Jesus.”

How could Paul, as a devout Jew, as a Pharisee, describe his past in this way? And this is one of the things that scholars have wrestled with. What's the relationship between Paul the Jew and Paul the Christian? He never calls himself Christian. He never says that term about himself. He always, always speaks to himself as continuing to be a Jew, continuing to be Hebrew. And yet at the same time, he relegates, he relativizes all those aspects of his identity, and he puts them aside compared to the importance of being in Christ.

And so the question is how can Paul, as a devout Jew, speak about his past and his identity in this way? And I found helpful the insight of this one scholar, E.P. Sanders and his book on Paul. He says this, listen to this quote for a minute:

[R]ighteousness by the law, which is possible and is a good thing in and of itself... does not lead to becoming one... with Christ and thus sharing resurrection. The shortcoming of the law is that following it can never result in union with Christ, which alone provides salvation.... The old dispensation was good, but it is worthless in comparison with the new dispensation²

It's from E.P. Sanders' book on Paul, *The Apostle's Life, Letters, and Thought*. He's a Protestant scholar who I find often very insightful. And in this case, I think he's right. When Paul says all of this stuff, and he says, "I count it as refuse," he's not saying the law was evil. He's not saying his past was evil — although obviously his persecution, he would regard that as sinful — but what he's saying is, as good as the law is, its main shortcoming is it doesn't lead to union with Christ. It can't make you one with Christ. It can't... there's no keeping of the Ten Commandments that can place you in the sphere of being "in Christ." And for Paul, being in Christ is equivalent to salvation. That's *what* salvation is.

So, as good as all those other things were, they're *nothing* compared to being in Christ, because it's only by being in Christ that one can receive the gift of justification, the righteousness that is not a righteousness of Paul's own, but a righteousness that comes from God, through faith in Christ.

² Sanders, *Paul: The Apostle's Life, Letters, and Thought*, 610, 611.

So this is a very powerful understanding of salvation. It's very... this passage is a very key window into how Paul conceptualizes salvation. For Paul, salvation is not just the forgiveness of sins. For Paul, salvation is, above all, mystical union with Christ... union with Christ.

And I think that in our day and time — I'm getting ahead of myself here, because there are a few more things I want to say about interpretation. But let me just say this. In our day and time, you'll often hear people say as a kind of corrective to an external Christianity, just nominal, they'll ask people, for example, "Do you have a personal relationship with Christ?" And what that's really trying to get at in its best form is the idea that it's not enough to just be sacramentalized, to be baptized. Or it's not enough to just belong to a particular Church or belong to a parish. But you really should have some kind of personal relationship with Christ. There needs to be an interior element and an interpersonal element to the Christian faith.

And that's good as far as it goes. But you'll notice, Paul goes further than just a relationship *with* Christ. He describes salvation as being *in* Christ — not just with Christ... *in* Christ. So there's not just relationship with, there is union with Christ for Paul. It goes deeper than just being with Him. It goes to being *in* Him. And what does that mean? What does this mystical union look like? Well, Paul spells it out in the next verse. Verse 10, he says:

... that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that if possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead. (Philippians 3:10-11)

So this is good. Union with Christ sounds really attractive and really great until you realize, "Oh wait, by union with Christ, Paul also means union with Christ crucified."

The Greek here for "becoming like" Christ is *symmorphizō*. I need to be morphed into Christ. I need to be transformed into Christ, and that means becoming like Him not just in His resurrection — which is very attractive, to become like Christ in resurrection means to live in glory for all eternity — but to become like Him, to

symmorphizō, to become like Him also in His death and His sufferings... by sharing in His sufferings, so that if possible, I might share in His resurrection.

So... what does that mean? It means that for Paul, salvation is essentially union with Christ and that the way this union is manifested in this world for sure is through suffering, is through suffering with Christ. If you want to be conformed to Christ, then you should expect to suffer *with* Christ and suffer *in* Christ, so that on the other side of that suffering, you might be *raised* with Christ and raised in Christ.

So, that's the foundation that Paul lays there, and then he goes on immediately and qualified: "I'm not there yet." It's very encouraging to me to hear Paul say, "Hey, look, I'm not there yet." He says:

Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect...

So the resurrection hasn't happened yet. Paul is still living in this vale of tears. He's still living in his own weak flesh, but:

... but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.

Notice here, in addition to the language of union, Paul uses almost nuptial language here, which he'll use elsewhere. He'll describe Christ as the bridegroom and the Church as His bride. That seems to be what he's implying here too, that in other words, Paul as a member of the Body of Christ, belongs to Christ like a spouse belongs to her husband. Paul will say elsewhere:

You are not your own...

So just as the bride belongs to the bridegroom, so too Paul belongs to Christ. Christ has made me His own. He says:

Brethren, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind...

So he's not worried about his past. He's not looking at how great of a Hebrew he was or how great of a Pharisee he was. I'm not looking back, but I'm pressing on:

... forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

So what does that mean? Paul is saying all of his focus is on the resurrection. His whole ministry, his whole apostolic life is pressing forward to the goal of sharing in the resurrection of Christ. But in order to do that — here's the catch. In order to do that, he has to also be conformed to Christ crucified. I have to:

... share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that if possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

And that, I think, is a very challenging vision of the Christian faith. A lot of us would like to be baptized, have faith, and have a quiet, peaceful, nice little life until we give up the ghost, and we get to share in the heavenly glory and wait for the resurrection.

But if you're a Christian, and you've been baptized and you've come to faith and you have the righteousness from God through faith in Christ, that's not really what you signed up for. Paul is a lot more realistic, a lot more clear about union with Christ, what it means and what it looks like. And because Christ isn't just Christ resurrected, He's also Christ crucified. Then union with Christ, the outflowing of our baptismal identity, is going to manifest itself in suffering.

It's not just inevitable; it's the point. Because only through suffering can we be configured to Him fully, because only in suffering is it really that we will learn how to love like Christ loved. And that's what He comes to do. He comes to manifest His love for the world. He does that through His suffering and death, and so to the extent that Paul is an ambassador for Christ who is going to make that Good News apparent — He's not just going to say it in His words; He's going to manifest it in His life. He's going to live it out, because Christ has made him His

own. And it's the only way to the resurrection. You don't get to Easter Sunday except through Good Friday.

And I think that's probably one of the reasons this passage is chosen during the Lenten season. We're in the fifth Sunday of Lent now. We're coming close to the end. It's time to look at the cross and not just the role that the cross plays in the life of Christ, but the role that the cross plays in our own life... but always in such a way that we don't forget the resurrection. Paul always give the cross and the resurrection together:

... becoming like him in his death, that if possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

In closing, just a little quote from the tradition here. I want to recommend a book I haven't recommended before but would like to recommend now, and that's another Carmelite, St. Elizabeth of the Trinity. These are her complete — well, this is volume one of the complete works.

So Elizabeth of the Trinity is a late 19th, early 20th century saint. So she dies in France in 1906, and she's a Carmelite nun. And she's not as prolific as St. Teresa of Avila or St. Catherine of Siena. She didn't write all kinds of long books. But what she did was not long before she died, she wrote a retreat, like reflections, meditations for a retreat. And what's fascinating about them is almost all of them are basically reflections on the letters and the writings of Paul.

And so she had a profound love for St. Paul and a profound insight into the letters of Paul... and of course, as a saint, lived a life of suffering as well, but a deeply biblical spirituality. So I just want to end with a quote from St. Elizabeth of the Trinity, who I highly recommend you take a look at, especially if you like Paul. If you like the apostle Paul but you want to read him through the lens of not just Paul the apostle or Paul the founder of churches, but Paul the mystic — St. Paul's mysticism, the spirituality of St. Paul. St. Elizabeth of the Trinity gets this, and she gets it very profoundly. She understands that St. Paul was a mystic, focused on union with Christ. And this is how she interprets our reading for today, for this

Sunday in Lent. So she comes to the section of Philippians 3, and St. Elizabeth writes:

“All is loss since I have known the excelling knowledge of my Lord Jesus Christ...”

And she quotes all of Philippians 3:8-14. She quotes the exact text that we’re reading today for the lectionary. She says:

That is: I want only to be identified with Him: “Mihi vivere Christus est,” “Christ is my life!”

Or... “for me to live, is Christ.” She continues:

All the intensity of St. Paul’s soul is poured out in these lines. The object of this retreat is to make us more like our adored Master, and even more, to become so one with Him that we may say: “I live no longer, but He lives in me. And the life that I now live in this body of death, I live in the faith of the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me.”

That’s Galatians 2:20. St. Elizabeth continues:

Oh! Let us study this divine Model: His knowledge, the Apostle tells us, is so “excelling.”³

So notice, the part there that I wanted to highlight — there are two things. First, that the goal of St. Paul and the goal of any Christian really is to be identified with Christ, to be an *alter Christus*, to be another Christ, to be a *christianos*, a little Christ... so that our whole lives become a kind of vivid, living, visible manifestation of Christ in the world today.

And then the second thing that she says that’s really striking is that the ultimate goal is not just to become like the master. It’s not just imitation of the master; it’s

³ Elizabeth of the Trinity, *Heaven in Faith*, 8th day; trans. Sr. Aletheia Kane, O.C.D.

to become *one* with the master, to become one with Christ. So imitation of Christ *and* union with Christ. And where does St. Elizabeth of the Trinity get this idea that this is the very heart of things, to imitate Christ and to be one with Him? She gets it from St. Paul.

So as you continue to read through St. Paul and during this particular Lenten season, I would encourage you not just to read the letters of Paul and read the passages the Church presents to us during the Lenten season, but to meditate on the letters of Paul... and in particular, to meditate on what Paul means when he speaks about being one with Christ. What does it mean in your life and in my life to not just know *of* Christ but to *know* Him and to share His sufferings, to become like Him so that if possible, we too might attain the resurrection from the dead?