

The Fifth Sunday of Ordinary Time

(Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	Isaiah 58:7-10
<i>Response</i>	Light rises in the darkness for the upright
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 112:4-5, 6-7, 8-9
<i>Second Reading</i>	1 Corinthians 2:1-5
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, “I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”
<i>Gospel</i>	Matthew 5:13-16

The fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time continues our study of the opening chapters of Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians. Today the reading is from 1 Corinthians 2:1-5. We’re still in the opening sections of the letter, where Paul’s continuing to contrast his preaching of the Gospel with those who might use words of lofty wisdom or worldly wisdom. And so in chapter 2:1-5, Paul says his famous statement about preaching nothing but Christ and Him crucified. So let’s read through that text and see what Paul’s saying here to the Corinthians today. Chapter 2, verse 1:

When I came to you, brethren, I did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in much fear and trembling; and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.¹

Alright, that’s our reading today—very short reading, but there are a few points in it that I think are worth highlighting. The first one is just Paul’s continued emphasis on wisdom. You can see here that Paul is preaching the Gospel,

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.

remember, to a Church in Corinth which is a Greek city. And the Greeks had, historically, a great love for and veneration of wisdom. The Greek word for wisdom is *sophia*. And so Paul here is having to adapt his message of the Gospel to his audience. And if you've ever taught before, you'll know that different audiences have different expectations. So if you're teaching children as opposed to adults, you can have one set of expectations. If you're teaching in a church setting as opposed to a university setting, there's going to be another set of expectations.

And so Paul here is speaking to the Corinthians and is trying to make clear to them that he didn't come to them, perhaps, speaking words of wisdom that they would be accustomed to hear from philosophers, from Greek philosophers...but rather, he preached among them Jesus Christ and Him crucified. In other words, Paul's proclamation of the Gospel to the Corinthians is focused on the cross and focused on the person of Jesus Christ. And I think this is a really fascinating window into Paul's evangelistic activity. Because as you know, if you've ever tried to share the Gospel, if you've ever tried to share your faith with somebody, there are lots of different ways to approach sharing your faith or approach sharing the Good News about Jesus.

Sometimes you might want to start with reason and focus on reasons for faith. You can do this through historical apologetics or philosophical apologetics, giving arguments and reasons for why it's reasonable to believe that God exists, why it's reasonable to believe that He's omnipotent and omniscient and that He has sent His Son into the world to redeem the world. You might use arguments primarily from reason. But you can also begin just with faith and with testifying—bearing witness to—what God has done in the person of Christ, what God has done in salvation history, and how that salvation history's come to its fulfillment in Christ. So you can go from the angle of faith, you can go from the angle of reason, you can do a combination. There are all kinds of ways to share the Gospel.

And what Paul's saying here, I think, is that his approach with the Corinthians was not to try to impress them with lofty words or philosophical wisdom, or the kind of teaching that they might expect from philosophers—say Plato or Aristotle—but rather, to bring to them the Good News, the *kerygma*, the proclamation of what

God has done...not just through the incarnation, but in a specific way through the cross of Jesus Christ. That's what Paul means when he said:

...I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. (1 Corinthians 2:2)

It doesn't mean that Paul only ever talked about the crucifixion. We know that not only from the book of Acts, but we know that from Paul's own letters. The letter to the Corinthians itself is not going to focus exclusively on the cross and nothing else. In fact, Corinthians doesn't talk about the crucifixion as much as other letters of Paul...say Philippians 2 or Romans, for example, chapters 2 and 3...or Galatians 2 and 3.

But what Paul means there is that my focus, the heart of what I was proclaiming to you, Corinthians, was Jesus Christ and Him crucified—the Good News of the redemption that was brought through the cross of Jesus Christ.

He then goes on to elaborate this. Notice, however, it isn't just the message of crucifixion, because he goes on to say:

...I was with you in weakness and in much fear and trembling; and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power... (1 Corinthians 2:3-4)

What does that mean? Well, this is interesting. It seems like what Paul is saying here is, I didn't try to impress you with arguments that would give you rational motives of credibility for believing the Gospel. Instead, what I did is I preached the fact of Christ crucified, and then I gave you motives of credibility for believing that Jesus Christ had come and that He had been crucified for your redemption through demonstrations of the Spirit and power. What does that mean? Probably means that he accompanied his preaching with the working of miracles. And this is something we tend to forget.

If you go back, for example...let's turn to the book of Acts. The Church doesn't have this in the lectionary for today, but it's one of those parallels that's helpful for

us to remember. Although many of us are quite familiar—from reading the Gospels over and over and over again—that Jesus was a miracle worker...that Jesus was a wonder worker...that one of the things Jesus does in the Gospels in order to move people to believe His message is that He verifies and validates the message He’s proclaiming by performing supernatural actions, by performing extraordinary signs and extraordinary wonders...or performing miracles, as we would call them today, to move people to believe His message. So it’s one thing to say, trust me, believe me, I’m telling you the truth. I was sent by God. I’ve got a message from God. It’s another thing to proclaim a message from God and also, by the way, validate it by performing extraordinary signs and wonders that can only be carried out through supernatural power or supernatural intervention...through divine power.

This is one of the motives of credibility for believing Jesus...was precisely His performance of miracles. And sometimes we tend to forget that not only—according to the Gospels—is Jesus a wonder worker, but according to the Acts of the Apostles, so are the apostles...and not just the Twelve, but also Paul himself. So for example, in Acts 18, we have the account of Paul traveling to Corinth and beginning to evangelize there. But in Acts 19, after Paul leaves Corinth and he comes to Ephesus, we hear about Paul’s activities as a miracle worker. In Acts 19:11 and following, for example, it says this:

...God did extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul, so that handkerchiefs or aprons were carried away from his body to the sick, and diseases left them and the evil spirits came out of them.

And then it goes on to give a famous story here:

Then some of the itinerant Jewish exorcists [this is in the city of Ephesus] undertook to pronounce the name of the Lord Jesus over those who had evil spirits, saying, “I adjure you by the Jesus whom Paul preaches.” Seven sons of a Jewish high priest named Sceva were doing this. But the evil spirit answered them, “Jesus I know, and Paul I know; but who are you?” And the man in whom the evil spirit was leaped on them, mastered all of them, and overpowered them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded.

And this became known to all residents of Ephesus, both Jews and Greeks; and fear fell upon them all; and the name of the Lord Jesus was extolled. Many also of those who were now believers came, confessing and divulging their practices. And a number of those who practiced magic arts brought their books together and burned them in the sight of all; and they counted the value of them and found it came to fifty thousand pieces of silver.

That is a lot of money.

So the word of the Lord grew and prevailed mightily.

Alright, so notice. What is Acts describing there? It's a factor that we sometimes forget about in the missionary activity of Paul. Paul's missionary activity, according to Acts, is never just...he's a really good preacher, he's really persuasive, and so he goes around converting Jews and Greeks to believe that Jesus is the Messiah. Acts tells us over and over again that not only does Paul preach persuasively, not only does Paul preach using the Scriptures, showing prophecy and fulfillment in the life of Jesus, but he also performs signs and wonders to back up his preaching. He performs miracles that testify to the truth of his preaching.

And it's fascinating that in Acts 19, notice here, it says that Paul himself performed miracles by his hands. But it also says that they would touch handkerchiefs or pieces of cloth to Paul—they would touch them to his body—carry them away to the sick, and diseases would leave the sick, and evil spirits would come out of the possessed.

So in other words, both healings and exorcisms were performed simply by taking a piece of cloth and touching it to Paul and then bringing it to someone who was sick or bringing it to someone who was possessed. So the portrait of Paul in Acts is that he is so filled with the Holy Spirit, he's so filled with the power of God, that an object—a material object like a cloth or a piece of linen—could be touched to his body so that the holiness and power of Paul is communicable...and then can be brought to someone who is possessed or someone who is sick and perform exorcisms or healing.

Now you can imagine why, if that's taking place, especially among Greeks, who are very open to the supernatural—I mean, it's a polytheistic context. It's not like a secular context today. In the ancient world, most people believe in the existence of visible powers, whether it be gods or goddesses, demons, or spirits—whatever it might be. They're completely open to the supernatural. The question is just...which supernatural, invisible power do you serve? Who are you in covenant with? Who do you sacrifice to? Who do you offer prayers to? And that kind of thing. That's really what the question is...with whom is my allegiance? Not, do these powers exist? I mean, there were some skeptics who argue that.

The vast majority of people—common people—in the Greco-Roman world accepted the reality of the supernatural. So when Paul brings the message of the Gospel, he doesn't just say hey, take my word for it. He accompanies the proclamation of the Gospel with miracles of healing and with exorcisms like we see in the book of Acts.

So when he's writing to Corinth—if you turn back to 1 Corinthians there in chapter 2—he's...and he's telling them, look, I didn't come to you with philosophical wisdom. I don't have a PhD from the University of Alexandria. What I brought to you was the message of Christ crucified for your redemption. And I also demonstrated to you through the Spirit and through power, so:

...that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God. (1 Corinthians 2:5)

So ultimately, the faith that Paul brings to the Corinthians is not a human opinion. It doesn't rest on the power of Paul's reason. It doesn't rest on the power of Paul's intellect—how smart he is. It rests on the power of God, which is manifest both in the preaching and in the signs and wonders that he's performed through the Spirit and through the power of God.

And this is precisely, for example, what St. John Chrysostom brought out. So in his fourth century *Homilies* on the first letter to the Corinthians (that I've mentioned before), St. John Chrysostom, preaching, says this about the passage. The very

passage we were reading today was preached over a thousand years ago in Constantinople, and this is what Chrysostom said:

And to me it seems that he [Paul] speaks to them in a lower tone even than to any others, in order to repress their pride. Thus, the expression, “I determined to know nothing,” was spoken in contradistinction to the wisdom which is without. “For I came not weaving syllogisms nor sophisms, nor saying unto you anything else than” Christ was crucified.” They indeed have ten thousand things to say...

They meaning the philosophers...

...framing arguments and syllogisms, compounding sophisms without end. But I came unto you saying no other thing than “Christ was crucified,” and all of them I outstripped: which is a sign such as no words can express of the power of Him whom I preach.”²

That’s John Chrysostom’s *Homilies on 1 Corinthians* 6, paragraph 1. So notice what Chrysostom’s doing there. He’s kind of speaking in the voice of Paul. What he’s saying is, at the end of the day, the power of Paul, the fact that Paul’s message was more powerful than the philosophers—the ultimate verification of that was the fact of the conversion of the Corinthians. The fact that he persuaded them without all that eloquence, persuaded them without all that sophistry, but by the very power of the message of the cross, he was able to bring them to faith in Christ and to bring them to salvation.

And whenever I hear those words of Chrysostom or whenever I read this passage from Paul in 1 Corinthians 2, it always reminds me of a saying of Blessed Fulton Sheen. Fulton Sheen was an American evangelist. He was a priest in the United States and was an Archbishop as well. And he was very, very popular in the mid-20th century as a preacher and a teacher. He went all over giving retreats, giving lectures. And he was frequently invited to universities. And one of his final retreats before he died, Blessed Sheen said that whenever he would go to give a

² John Chrysostom, *Homilies on 1 Corinthians* 6.1; in NPNF1 12.29

lecture, whenever he was invited to give a lecture at a major university, the more secular the context—the more secular the university—the more focused he would be on simply preaching the crucifixion, preaching the message of the cross.

Because there comes a point at which the power of human arguments, especially in a secular context, in a context where there's not necessarily an openness to faith, sometimes we think, well, the best thing to do in that kind of context would be to bring the most persuasive arguments from reasoning—you know, the strongest philosophical arguments for the truth of the Christian faith. And Sheen's experience was exactly the opposite, that the more skeptical, the more secular the context, the more necessary it was to get right to the heart of the Gospel and to preach the mystery of the cross. Because at the end of the day, the mystery of the cross is the mystery of God's love for humanity...the mystery of the fact that God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son so that whoever believes in Him might have eternal life.

And it's at the end of the day, that mystery of divine love that's manifested through the cross, is a kind of miracle. It's able to miraculously move even the hardest heart and open people up to faith, the very faith that Paul preached to the people of Corinth centuries ago.

So in closing, just on a more personal note, I would just encourage you in your own life as you struggle to be a witness, to share the faith with those around you, especially the people it's often most difficult to share our faith with — our friends and family — people we're close to who may not share that faith. Remember that sometimes it's important just to cut through all the argumentation and get down to the heart of it—to be a witness. Simply testify to what God has done through His cross and what God has revealed to us through His cross. Sometimes people just need to hear that simple message, that God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, so that whoever believes in Him might have eternal life. That's the mystery of just preaching, as Paul said, being a witness to nothing but Jesus Christ and Him crucified.