

## The Fifth Sunday of Ordinary Time

(Year C)

<i>First Reading</i>	Isaiah 6:1-2a, 3-8
<i>Response</i>	...before the gods I sing thy praise...
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 138:1-2, 2-3, 4-5, 7-8
<i>Second Reading</i>	1 Corinthians 15:1-11
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	“Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.”
<i>Gospel</i>	Luke 5:1-11

The fifth Sunday of Ordinary Time for year C continues the Church’s journey through the first letter of St. Paul to the Corinthians. And here we come to the final — one of the final chapters in the letter to the Corinthians... second to last, chapter 15, in which Paul turns to an issue that the Church of Corinth is facing. Namely, the fact that many Corinthians are raising doubts about the resurrection of the body at the end of the time — not meaning Christ’s resurrection on Easter Sunday, but the resurrection of the rest of humanity for the final judgment.

So in order to respond to that crisis of faith, Paul begins this fifteenth chapter of the letter with these words. He says:

Now I would remind you, brethren, in what terms I preached to you the gospel, which you received, in which you stand, by which you are saved, if you hold it fast—unless you believed in vain.

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was

not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God which is with me. Whether then it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed.<sup>1</sup>

There are a few aspects of this very famous passage that are worth highlighting. The first point is that when Paul refers to “the Gospel” (using a definite article), he clearly means one message of the Good News — the *euaggelion* in Greek — of salvation. So Paul sees himself not just as a great thinker or a great rabbi who has lots of ideas and a great teacher who wants to share them with his congregation and with his readers. No, he sees himself as one who has been sent — he’s an apostle — by God to preach *the* Gospel.

In other words, a message of Good News that has an objective content that exists apart from Paul himself and apart from Paul’s own opinions and apart from the opinions of the Corinthians. There’s a specific objective content to “the Gospel.” And you can see this, where he says:

... I preached to you the gospel, which you received, in which you stand...

Interesting imagery there of the Gospel as like a sphere of reality in which the Corinthians stand — a kind of foundation upon which they stand, so to speak.

...by which you are saved, if you hold it fast—unless you believed in vain.

So the Gospel isn’t something just to be believed. It’s something to be clung to, to hold on fast to. It’s something to live within. So there are all these different beautiful aspects to the mystery of what Paul means by “the Gospel.” Now he’s going to go on to elaborate a little more concretely exactly what the content of this Gospel is in the next line when he says:

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received...

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

Alright, so pause here again. Very important point here. Paul here basically equates the Gospel with tradition. It's very interesting. So when Paul says "I delivered" or "I handed over to you what I had received", the Greek word there is *paradidōmi* — to give over or to hand over. And it's the verbal form of the noun *paradosis*, which literally means "that which has been handed down" or "that which is handed over" or (the most common translation of *paradosis* is) tradition... tradition.

So you can translate Paul's words here:

For I [traditioned] to you as of first importance what I also received...

So you see, tradition exists also (like the Gospel) apart from Paul.. It's something he receives, and then it's something he hands over. He doesn't just get to pick and choose what he thinks is the tradition, what he might not like as the tradition. No. The tradition is the Gospel, and the Gospel is a tradition. It's meant to be received and then handed down.

So what is this Gospel? What is this tradition? What is the thing that Paul received as being of first importance? Well, he says it:

... that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.

Now when you hear those four articles:

- Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures
- Christ was buried
- Christ was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and
- Christ appeared to the apostles

... that *should* ring a bell, because it sounds like the articles of faith in the Apostles' Creed:

I believe in God, the Father almighty,  
creator of heaven and earth.

And it goes on:

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,  
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit  
and born of the virgin Mary.  
He suffered under Pontius Pilate,  
was crucified, died, and was buried;  
he descended to hell.  
The third day he rose again from the dead.

So on and so forth. That Creed exists in multiple forms. The one I was quoting is the traditional form known as the Apostles' Creed, but the Apostles' Creed — which is a kind of summary of tradition — itself finds a precedent in these articles of faith that are outlined by St. Paul in 1 Corinthians 15.

So in fact, some scholars have actually suggested here, that when Paul writes these lines, that he's actually echoing early credal formula that are already beginning to circulate in the Church as professions of faith, especially by newly baptized people, saying, "I believe in God the Father. I believe in Jesus Christ His Son. I believe that He was buried, that He rose on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, that He appeared to the apostles."

So for Paul, in other words — this is so crucial — the Gospel is tradition. The tradition is the Gospel, and both the Gospel and the tradition (in terms of their form) find expression in these articles of faith that are substantially identical to what we possess in the Creed.

Notice here, as I say that... notice here that the Good News and the tradition that Paul is particularly highlighting have their emphasis — what does he emphasize

the most? The resurrection. So he not only says that Christ appeared to Cephas, that he appeared to the Twelve, but that he goes on to narrate these other appearances of the risen Christ to five hundred brethren at one time. This is the only reference we have to that event anywhere in the New Testament. We don't know what Paul is referring to exactly here. The appearance to James, to all of the apostles, and then he says last of all:

... he appeared also to me.

Now pause there for a second. Why is Paul, in a sense, taking the article of the Creed regarding the Resurrection and like stretching it out and giving all of these details? Well, the obvious answer is because this is the article of faith that the Corinthians are wrestling with the most. As you'll see later in 1 Corinthians 15, Paul is going to say to the Corinthians:

Now if Christ is preached as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?

That's going to be in 1 Corinthians 15:12. So obviously what's happening here is that some of the people in the Church at Corinth are denying the Resurrection. So in order to remind them of its truth and importance, Paul goes back to the basic articles of faith — the basic summary of faith, the basic Gospel and the basic tradition — that Christ died in accordance with the Scriptures, and that He rose on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that He appeared not just to one person or to two people or even to the twelve apostles, but to hundreds of people and even to Paul himself as witnesses to the truth of the bodily resurrection of Christ.

Now, I love the fact that in the context of making this statement about the resurrection of Christ to himself, Paul for one thing gives us his own primary evidence to the fact that he encountered the risen Jesus. We see accounts of this in the Acts of the Apostles, where Luke describes it. But here, Paul tells us himself about the fact that he encountered the risen Christ in a singular way.

But I also love that in the very moment that he's deprecating himself as least of the apostles, he also makes sure to point out to the Corinthians that he worked harder than any of the other apostles. Listen to the rhetoric here; it's just beautiful. It's humorous. It's beautiful, but it's also humorous, because he says:

Last of all, as to one untimely born...

And the image there is actually of a miscarriage, of a child who's born too soon, so they don't live. It's a very, very graphic image, in fact. So:

... as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.

You hear the remorse in Paul's words here, for his time of persecution of the Church. And he says:

For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But...

And then he turns it:

... by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary...

I love this:

... I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God which is with me.

The reason Paul's doing this here... some people might think, "Wow, that's kind of egotistical or a little self-centered." But remember, the reason Paul is doing this is because there are some people at the Church in Corinth who are challenging Paul's apostolic credentials.

So if you go back to the beginning of the letter, some people are saying, "I belong to Peter", "I belong to Apollos", "I belong to Paul". There are these factions within

the Church at Corinth, and there are also some people questioning whether Paul is a true apostle, because he didn't walk with Jesus. He wasn't like Peter or James, who spent time with Jesus during his earthly life. He actually persecuted the Church.

So as soon as he gives his witness to having encountered the risen Christ, he also has to, in a sense, stave off any potential criticisms that might be made of him about being an apostle by on the one hand recognizing that he's unfit to be called an apostle. He *is* different than the other twelve. He *didn't* see Jesus while he was during his earthly life. He *only* saw the risen Christ.

At the same time, Paul emphasizes that he is the apostle who's worked harder than any of them. And if you think about it, think about Paul's three missionary journeys. Paul is traveling all over the Roman empire. We have stories of other apostles going to one place or to this place or that place — a couple different places. Paul travels the Mediterranean. He traverses the Roman empire, bringing the Gospel to as many different people as possible. So he's emphasizing here his apostolic commitment to the Gospel, and at the same time, says... admitting:

... it was not I, but the grace of God which is with me.

So I think this is a fascinating passage too, because sometimes people will say, "Paul... he puts all his emphasis on being saved by grace alone, through faith alone. It's not human effort, it's not human works." And there is some truth to that, in the sense that Paul makes really clear that we are saved by grace through faith, and that the initial gift of justification isn't earned by any good works that we do, although Paul does say we will be judged by works.

But here we see Paul always strikes a balance between divine grace and human free will. On the level of grace, Paul can recognize that everything that he has accomplished, everything that he has done, is all the grace of God. It's not for him to boast it. At the same time, he recognizes that as a human being, his free will and his effort is essential. And so he says:

... I worked harder than any of them...

So it's a great example of how both grace and works go together in Paul. Both divine grace (divine providence) and human free will, work together in the proclamation of the Gospel in this case, and in the process and the growth of salvation, as Paul will say elsewhere:

... work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for God is at work in you...

So it's not an either/or; it's both/and.

With that in mind, in closing, I just want to go back to the issue of these articles of faith that Paul gives in the Creed and just reflect for a moment on how this passage played a role in the living tradition of the Church.

So as far as we know, in the first century AD, we have some basic summaries or formula of the Gospel, articles of faith, elements of tradition that are being taught and passed on. But over the centuries, eventually there grows... these summaries grow into creedal formulas that become very, very central in the life of the Church. And we start to actually see them utilized in professions of faith that are made by catechumens who are receiving the Sacrament of Baptism.

And so by the time we get to the 4th century AD, there's an excellent...excellent? There's a holy and great Church Father named Cyril of Jerusalem. He's the 4th century bishop of Jerusalem. And is his... he has these catechetical lectures on the sacraments but also on the various articles of faith in the Creed that he actually delivered to catechumens who were preparing to be baptized at the Easter liturgy in the Church of Jerusalem in the 4th century.

So you'll sometimes see them — they have different names. Sometimes you'll hear them called the Catechetical Lectures. Sometimes you'll hear them called the Mystagogical Catechesis or the Mystagogical Lectures. There are a number of names for them, but they're basically the Catechetical Lectures of St. Cyril of Jerusalem. And he focuses in them on two different things. One series of lectures is on the mysteries of the Sacraments of Baptism and Anointing and Confirmation

and the Eucharist. But the earlier set that often gets ignored by some reason — they're not as popular — is on the articles of faith in the Creed.

So I'd just like to give you a little quote from St. Cyril of Jerusalem on how the articles of faith that St. Paul expresses in 1 Corinthians 15, that eventually are summarized in the Apostles' Creed — how important those were in the life of early Christians. So listen to these words of St. Cyril of Jerusalem to these 4th century Christians who are about to be baptized, on the importance of the Creed:

In learning and professing the faith, embrace and guard that only which is now delivered to you by the Church, and confirmed by all the Scriptures. For since not everyone has both the education and the leisure required to read and know the Scriptures, to prevent the soul from perishing from ignorance, *we sum up the whole doctrine of the faith in a few lines. This summary I wish you to commit to memory, word for word, and to repeat it among yourselves with all zeal, not writing it on paper, but engraving it by memory on the heart.*

And then he says something interesting. He says:

Only take care, in rehearsing it, that no catechumen chance to overhear what has been delivered to you. Keep it as a provision for the way throughout the whole course of your life... For the present, just listen and memorize the creed as I recite it, and you will receive in due course the proof from Scripture for each of its propositions. *For not according to men's pleasure have the articles of faith been composed, but the most important points collected from the Scriptures make up one complete teaching of the faith.* And just as the mustard seed in a small grain contains in embryo many future branches, so also the creed embraces in a few words all the religious knowledge in both the Old and New Testaments. Take heed, therefore, brethren, and hold fast to the teachings which are now delivered to you [2 Thess 2:15]...

That's the same verb Paul uses.

... and 'write them on the tablet of your heart' [Prov 7:3].<sup>2</sup>

Fascinating. Notice what St. Cyril is doing. He is handing over the Creed to be memorized by these new Christians. And he says to them that basically what the Creed is, is a summary of the faith in just a few lines. So just as Paul summarized in a few articles four basic assertions the essence of the Gospel for the Corinthians, so too Cyril of Jerusalem is using the Creed to summarize the faith for these new Christians. And he tells them, "I don't want you to just write it down. I want you to memorize it and to write it on your heart." And the reason he gives there is because he recognizes not everyone is going to have the leisure or ability to read the entire Bible.

So what is the Creed? The Creed is nothing less than a summary not just of the Gospel and not just of tradition but of the Scriptures themselves. It's the essential truths of the faith.

Now, in the 4th century, another aspect of this — it's interesting — is that he tells them not to tell it to the unbaptized. So the Creed... this is what's called the *disciplina arcani* in the early Church — the "discipline of the secret". So in the early Church, the discipline of the secret meant that Christians would not talk freely about the mysteries of the sacraments or the mysteries of the faith with unbelievers or with pagans or with those who had not yet been instructed in the faith.

You still see vestiges of this to this day in RCIA, the Rites of Christian Initiation for Adults. But for example, those who are preparing for Baptism will leave the Mass before the celebration of the mystery of the Eucharist. This is kind of a vestige of this distinction between those who are still being catechized and those who have been brought into the mysteries of the faith through receiving the sacraments.

And so the Creed was actually considered sacred and not something that you would say or tell to anyone who hadn't received the graces of the sacraments in

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<sup>2</sup> Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures* 5.13 (trans. Leo P. McCauley, S.J.)

order to understand the mysteries of the faith. So very powerful, very interesting aspect of the early Christian life.

And then finally, notice what he says — he wants them to recite the Creed, to memorize it, because at the end of the day, the Creed is not something that just comes from human beings but that it is basically a summary of the inspired Scriptures. And he compares it to kind of a mustard seed that grows into a great tree. So just as a mustard seed grows into a tree with all these many branches, so too the Creed is like a summary form of the faith from which flow all the branches from all the various doctrines and articles of faith that we men come to believe.

So you see actually here a kind of anticipation of what St. John Henry Neuman will later go on to use as an image for the development of doctrine... that you have the... everything is in the acorn that eventually becomes an oak tree, but it's still in a nucleus form. It's still in an embryonic form. It takes time for it to grow and develop and to branch out and to spread out the implications of these truths of faith which we'll see in the living tradition of the Church.

So there's so much here we could talk about, but I just wanted to emphasize that, because at least in my own experience, I don't know that I've always appreciated the sanctity and the holiness of the Creed — whether the Apostles' Creed or the Nicene Creed that we profess at Mass.

Sometimes the Creed, especially in Mass, can be something we just kind of rattle off without thinking about it. But that's not how ancient Christians understood it, and that's certainly not how St. Paul understood what he was doing. Rather, this summary of faith that we have memorized is the encapsulation of all Scripture, and it is a kind of perfect presentation of the holy tradition that we have received and that we are called to hand on to others.

So let us not take the faith of the Creed and the Good News of the Creed for granted, but let us kind of renew our efforts here to do what St. Cyril says — to write the words of the Creed on our heart and then also to hand it on to others just as it has been handed on to us by the tradition of the Church.