

The Fourth Sunday of Advent

(Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	Isaiah 7:10-14
<i>Response</i>	[T]he king of glory may come in; he is the king of glory.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 24:1-2, 3-4, 5-6
<i>Second Reading</i>	Romans 1:1-7
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emman'u-el
<i>Gospel</i>	Matthew 1:18-24

The second reading for the Fourth Sunday of Advent takes us back once again to Paul's letter to the Romans. In this case, though, the Church gives us the very beginning of the letter, Romans 1:1-7. So let's read through that passage and then we'll try to unpack both its meaning and its original context, but then also why the Church has chosen this for the Fourth Sunday of Advent, and then what we can glean from it for our own spiritual lives. Romans 1:1-7 says this:

Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and designated Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations, including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ;

To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.¹

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.

Okay, so the context of this passage is it's the opening to what is perhaps, arguably, St. Paul's most famous letter—his letter to the Church at Rome, which was written to a congregation that he did not found himself, but to which he eventually traveled and at which he was eventually martyred actually, in the context of the persecution of the Christians in Rome, under Caesar Nero in the 60s of the first century AD. Very powerful letter. There are a few elements of the letter that are worth highlighting, both to understand its original meaning but also why the Church has chosen this for today.

The first one is just Paul's emphasis on the Gospel. So verse 1, right there, he says that he was "called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God." And the Greek word there, *euangelion*, literally means "good news" or "good message." And it was a term that was associated in Jewish contexts with the book of Isaiah. If you go back to Isaiah 40 and you read through, there's one chapter in the Old Testament where the expression "good news" occurs several times. And the context of that chapter is the good news of the coming of God. So, I would encourage you to read the whole chapter if you want more background on that, but I'll at least just read a couple of verses.

So if you were a first century Jew and you reading Paul's letter, and he talks about the good news or the Gospel, and you thought about the Old Testament, you would remember these words from Isaiah 40:9-10:

Get you up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good tidings;

...literally in Hebrew, "good news."

lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,
lift it up, fear not;
say to the cities of Judah,
"Behold your God!"
Behold, the Lord God comes with might,
and his arm rules for him;

behold, his reward is with him,
and his recompense before him.

So, pause there. Notice then, in a Jewish context, if you're alluding to Isaiah and you're talking about the good news (or the Gospel), well...what is the good news? It's the good news of the coming of God—very powerful. So Paul is then called and set apart for the good news of the coming of God.

Second, the expression *euangelion* or good news (good message) also had a meaning in an ancient pagan context as well. I've mentioned this in another video before, but I still think it's worth highlighting here just because it's so fascinating. In the 20th century, an ancient inscription from Priene was discovered. This inscription was from around the year 9 BC—so not long before Jesus Himself was born. It was an inscription celebrating the birth of Caesar Augustus, the emperor. And it's fascinating that this inscription uses the expression “good news” (*euangelion*) or “gospel” to celebrate the birth of Caesar as the divine savior of the Roman empire. So listen to these words from the Priene Inscription:

Since the Providence which has ordered all things is deeply interested in our life has set in most perfect order by giving us *Augustus*, whom she filled with virtue that he might benefit mankind, *sending him as a savior*, both for us and for our descendants, that he might end war and arrange all things, and since he, Caesar, by his appearance (Greek *epiphanein*), surpassing all previous benefactors, and not even leaving to posterity any hope of surpassing what he has done, and since the birthday of the god (Greek *theos*) Augustus was the beginning of the world of the good tidings (Greek *euangeliōn*) that came by reason of him.”²

The reason I bring this up is: to whom is Paul writing? He's writing to the Church at Rome, right? So we found inscriptions from the ancient Roman empire that used the expression “good news” to refer to the birth of Caesar Augustus as a divine emperor and the savior of the world. So I can't help but imagine here being a Gentile reader of Paul's letter in the Roman Church, when you hear the “good

² Translation in M. Eugene Borin, Klaus Berger, and Carsten Colpe, *Hellenistic Commentary on the New Testament* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1995), 169

news of God”—there being a kind of second meaning. On the one hand, he’s referring to the fulfillment of Scriptures. He’s referring to the fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah—the good news of the coming of God in Jesus Christ.

But on another level, there’s also a kind of implicit contrast between the good news of the birth of Jesus, who is God made flesh and Savior of the world; and Caesar, who the pagans claimed to be a god and the savior of the world through the establishment of the Roman empire. So I’m not the first person to point this out. Pope Benedict XVI in his three-volume set, *Jesus of Nazareth*, actually points to this same inscription as one of the connotations that the word “Gospel” would have in a first century setting. So it’s very fitting—you can already see why we would use this—that during the Advent season, the Church highlight Paul’s most famous proclamation of the good news of the birth of the true Savior of the world, Jesus Christ.

In other words, even the expression “good news” could be taken to mean “Jesus Christ is Lord, and Caesar is not.” There’s a kind of contrast there between the kingdom of Caesar and the kingdom of God, and Paul is beginning this letter to the Church of Rome emphasizing the “gospel of God.” Now with that said, he roots his use of the language of course not in some inscription but in the prophets in the Old Testament. That’s the primary meaning for Paul, in which he says:

...[the good news] which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and designated Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead...(Romans 1:2-4)

So you see there Paul talking about, or highlighting two key moments in the good news. First, it’s the good news of His birth. Second, there’s the good news of His resurrection. Now the good news of His birth is that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah who was descended from David, according to the flesh. I’ve mentioned in other videos the fact that if you go back to the Old Testament (2 Samuel 7), God makes a promise to David, through Nathan the prophet, that one day God would raise up the seed of David and establish his throne and his kingdom forever and ever and ever—that it would never, that it would never fall. And of course, what

ends up happening is, just a couple hundred years after David is dead, his kingdom has fallen apart with the Assyrian Exile, and then it's completely obliterated with the Babylonian Exile in 587 BC.

So what Paul's talking about here is the good news of the fact that—against all odds—the heir to the throne of David has in fact come in the person of Jesus Christ, who was not only born, but who was also established or designated or singled out as son of God, above all through His resurrection from the dead in which He was vindicated as not just the Christ but also the Lord, and through whom—through this resurrected Christ—Paul has received grace and the commissioning (notice this):

...to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all nations...(Romans 1:5)

What does that mean? Remember, Paul is called to be the apostle to the Gentiles. It's absolutely true that if you look at the life of Paul, for example in the book of Acts, he always begins with the synagogue. He always goes to the synagogue whenever he goes to the city. He always brings the good news first to the Jews, first to the people of Israel. At the same time, in the letter to the Galatians, Paul refers himself as having the kind of special vocation to bring the Gospel to the nations of the world, to bring the Gospel (the good news) to the Gentiles.

And there's no city that's more Gentile than Rome. Rome is the capital of the empire, and lots of scholars have speculated as to why Peter and Paul both went to Rome, how they ended up in Rome; but it's not too far a leap of imagination to suggest that both Paul and Peter had a special desire to evangelize Rome, because it was the capital of the empire. And if you convert the capital of the empire, what happens to the rest of the empire? It would come in as well into the Church.

So this powerful imagery being used here of Paul being sent to the nations to bring this Gospel, not of Caesar establishing an earthly empire through Rome, but rather of the divine Son of God restoring and transfiguring the kingdom of David through His passion, death, resurrection, and ascension into Heaven, and then His call to all people—both Israel and the Gentiles—in verse 7, to be practicing Catholics. Wait,

no, I'm sorry. That's not what it says. It doesn't say that. It says "called to be saints." Very important.

Sorry, a little dig there at that expression. Frequently you'll hear people say, "Well, I'm a practicing Catholic." And that's good. It's good to practice, but you'll notice that's a far cry from the language that Paul uses in his letters. And we'll come back to this when we look at his letter to the Corinthians, who are anything but saints, but who are definitely called to be saints. Paul's favorite term to refer to those who are in Christ is not Christian. Paul never uses the term *Christianus*—not once in all of his letters to refer to those who believe. And he certainly doesn't use the term "practicing Catholic" or "practicing Christian." He uses the term *hagios*, which means "holy one," which means "saint"—you can translate that as "saint."

So as we'll see when we work through the letters of Paul, for Paul, saints aren't a select group of individuals who've been canonized by the official Church and have died and gone to Heaven and practice heroic virtue. Saints are the baptized. Saints are what all those who are in Christ are called to be by virtue of the vocation of their Baptism alone. They're called to holiness—being set apart from sin and set apart for God.

The final aspect of this passage that I'd like to highlight is a little expression there that I hopped over a little quickly, but is worth pondering. It's this language of the obedience of faith. Paul begins his letter to the Romans using this expression. And anyone familiar with his letter to the Romans will be aware of the fact that justification by faith is a central theme of this letter. He's going to talk about Abraham as our father in faith, as our model of faith, as someone who puts his trust in the Lord. But it's fascinating that he begins this letter with this particular expression "obedience of faith." What does that mean? Well, in order to grasp Paul's meaning, two points need to be made. First, what does the word obedience mean? And what does the word faith mean?

So let's start with obedience. The word obedience in Greek is *hypakoē*. It literally means "to listen to", or "to listen under" is a literal demontation there. And it simply means to obey. It means to obey instructions that have been heard. So if you want an example of this, you can look at Romans 6:16-18. A little later on in the

letter, Paul uses the exact same word, but he uses it in the context of slaves and their masters. Listen to this:

Do you not know that if you yield yourselves to any one as obedient slaves...

And the Greek word there for obedient is *hypakoē*.

...you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness?

Or literally, which leads to *dikaioῦν*, same word for justification.

But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness.

So notice, this is a really fascinating passage. Yes, Paul talks about *dikaioῦν*, being justified, or *dikaioō*, being justified by faith...being made righteous by faith, being declared righteous by faith. There was a whole different debate about that—we won't get into that right now. You can read my book on Paul if you want to go into that.

Yes, that's absolutely true, but he also, in the very same letter, inextricably intertwines faith with obedience and with righteousness. So in this passage, notice what he's saying. What does obedience mean? It means the kind of obedience that a slave shows to his master. Now if you go look at first century AD, when a master says something, a slave has to do it. A slave doesn't get to pick and choose which commands of the master they are going to obey and which ones they won't. So when Paul talks about being obedient slaves, he's talking about slaves who do everything their master says. So in light of that, when he talks about obedience which leads to righteousness, he's talking about obedience, a kind of absolute complete obedience to the commandments of God that lead us to righteousness. So

the obedience that Paul's using here, *hypakoē*, is an absolute obedience. It's not selective, okay? That's the first point.

The second word Paul uses is (if you go back to the beginning) is obedience of faith. So what kind of obedience are we talking about here? Whew. We could do a whole video just on faith and Paul. For our purposes here, we only need to highlight the fact that for Paul, the Greek word for faith, *pistis*, has a range of meanings. It is true that it can mean belief in the way that we tend to think of faith, namely, I assent intellectually to something being true. That's what we mean when we say, "I have faith." A lot of times people say, "I have faith" or "I'm a believer." They're saying, "I assent to the truth of some teaching of Christ or teaching of the Church." That's absolutely correct. But the word *pistis* for Paul has a broader meaning than that. It doesn't just mean intellectual assent to something. It can also mean trust in the one to whom you are assenting, confidence, and even faithfulness or fidelity. Fidelity—the word fidelity actually has the Latin root for faith, *fides*, in the words. The English word for fidelity comes from the word *fides*, which means "faith" or "trust." And so someone who is faithful can be described as or shown as having fidelity. So when you look at faith this way, Paul will use it with these multiple connotations, for example, when he's describing Abraham. In Romans 4:19, Paul says this:

[Abraham] did not weaken in faith [*pistis*] when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead because he was about a hundred years old, or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.

So notice there, Abraham's faith isn't just him believing; it's him trusting that God would carry out exactly what he had promised to do. So belief, trust, fidelity—those are all part of the connotation of *pistis* in Greek. Now with that in mind, go back. What is Paul's mission? It's to bring about the obedience of faith among all of the pagan peoples of the world, among all of the Gentiles.

So I bring this up just in closing, because sometimes you're going to hear Christians who will talk about justification by faith alone—*sola fide*. And what they mean by that is that all you have to do is believe in Jesus and accept Him as Savior, and it doesn't matter how you live or it doesn't matter what you do. And that interpretation of *sola fide*—and there are many different interpretations, so it's not one size fits all on it. There are many different Protestant ways of looking at *sola fide*. But that view of it that says all I have to do is believe, and it doesn't matter how I live—that view is clean contrary to Paul's meaning here, and we can actually see that by putting Paul's teaching on justification by faith in the context of the letter to the Romans as a whole. Because if he were to mean that when he got to the discussion of justification by faith later in Romans, he never would have begun the letter by referring to the obedience of faith.

In other words, for Paul, faith and obedience aren't opposed to one another. They're two ways of talking about the same reality—our response to the good news of the coming of the Savior. It should call forth in us not just belief and trust, but also fidelity and obedience to the commandments of God. And you don't have to take my word for it. You can listen to the words of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, in closing. In paragraph 142-143, the *Catechism* says this about faith:

By his Revelation, “the invisible God, from the fullness of his love, addresses men as his friends, and moves among them, in order to invite and receive them into his own company.” The adequate response to this invitation is faith. By faith, man completely submits his intellect and his will to God. With his whole being man gives his assent to God the revealer. Sacred Scripture calls this human response to God, the author of revelation, “the obedience of faith.” (Rom 1:5)³

So notice what the *Catechism* says. Faith involves not just the intellect, but the will. I don't just believe what God says, I also choose to do what He commands. So as we prepare for the celebration of the great feast of Christmas, let us give thanks for the good news of the Son of God, who in stark contrast to Caesar

³ CCC 142-43

Augustus of old, has actually come into this world to be the Savior of the world, to set up a kingdom that will never end, and to lead us to life everlasting.