

## The Fourth Sunday of Lent

(Year C)

<i>First Reading</i>	Joshua 5:9a, 10-12
<i>Response</i>	O taste and see that the Lord is good!
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 34:2-3, 4-5, 6-7
<i>Second Reading</i>	2 Corinthians 5:17-21
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you...
<i>Gospel</i>	Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

The fourth Sunday of Lent continues our journey through the letters of St. Paul, looking at famous key passages in the Church’s tradition that are fitting for the season of Lent and for the preparation of the celebration of Easter and the Easter sacraments, in particular.

And here the Church gives us another very consequential passage. This time it’s from 2 Corinthians 5:17-21 — this famous text about Christ who knew no sin being *made* sin for our sake. So you’ve probably wondered about this passage before. Let’s read it. Let’s see if we can interpret it and explain it. 2 Corinthians 5:17 says this:

Therefore, if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. So we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.<sup>1</sup>

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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.

Beautiful, powerful passage. Let's unpack a few elements of it. First thing you'll notice, Paul's emphasis on:

Therefore, if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation...

This is extremely important in the writings of Paul. I mention this on other videos, that one of the central concepts in Paul's thought — if not *the* central concept — is the idea of being “in Christ”, *en christo* in Greek. The idea that we belong to Christ, we're part of His Mystical Body... that those who believe in Jesus, confess Him as Lord and Savior, and are baptized, that have faith... become a member of His Mystical Body. They're not just members of an institution known as the Church; they actually are in a new sphere of reality. They are in Christ.

And for Paul, what he's saying is, when that happens — when a person through faith in Baptism is in Christ, is incorporated into Christ — he actually becomes “a new creation.” There's an ontological change, so to speak, that takes place invisibly. You don't see the difference, but there's a real change that takes place so that the old has passed away and the new has come.

And this is a very powerful and important point that Paul is going to make over and over again throughout his letters. I've mentioned it elsewhere, where Paul thinks of all of reality as two spheres. You have the old creation and the new creation. And in Jewish Scripture, it was very clear that one day, the old creation — this sinful, fallen world — was going to pass away. It was going to be dissolved. It was going to come to an end, and it would be replaced by a new heavens and a new earth — Isaiah chapter 64-66 talks about this — this new creation where righteousness would dwell, and there'd be no more crying, and there'd be no more suffering, and there'd be no more sin anymore.

And according to ancient Jewish eschatology, there would be a sequential element here. So you'd have the old creation, it would pass away, and then it would be replaced by the new creation. But according to Paul, something unexpected happened. In Christ, these two spheres of reality overlap, so that when Christ died,

was buried, and rose again, He was the beginning — in His own person — of the new creation. He inaugurated the new creation in His own resurrected body.

And so what happens is, after Christ ascends into Heaven, everyone who on this world believes in Him and is baptized into Him, actually becomes invisibly a member of the new creation. He is made new, so that he is incorporated into Christ, and he or she becomes a member of His Mystical Body.

So Paul is beginning here by emphasizing that whoever you are, if you're in Christ, you've already been made a new creation. The graces, the gifts, that would have ordinarily been associated with the new creation, the end of the time — the gift of the Holy Spirit, for example, the gift of righteousness — these have already become accessible in the present through faith and through Baptism.

So Paul here is trying to teach the Corinthians that although you look the same after Baptism, you should not live the same, and you in fact *aren't* the same, because whoever is in Christ is a new creation. The old has passed away, and the new has come.

And all this, this mystery of the new creation:

All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation... (2 Corinthians 5:18)

So the primary dimension of this entry into the new creation has to do with the forgiveness of sins. Because the primary problem with the old creation is not that it wasn't good. God makes it good in the book of Genesis. The problem with the old creation is that it was fallen, and that through sin — the sin of Adam and Eve in Genesis 2 and 3 — death enters into the world. And as Paul will say in Romans:

Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses... (Romans 5:14a)

In other words, there's a dominion of sin, a dominion of death, that's part of the old creation, in which everyone who lives in the old creation is subject to. And so the principal problem with the old creation is the problem of sin.

And so what happens is God sends Christ into the world in order to reconcile the world to himself, and then He gives the apostles — as well as Paul, who is unique among the apostles, because the risen Christ appears to him — the ministry of reconciliation. Paul's principle task, the apostles' principle task, is to reconcile sinners who live in this fallen world to God... to solve the problem of sin through the ministry of reconciliation. And so that's why he says:

... not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. (2 Corinthians 5:19)

...that God was in Christ, reconciling not just people to Himself. What did Christ reconcile to Himself? Look at it — He reconciled *the world* to Himself. So Christ comes in not just to redeem human beings. He comes to redeem the whole cosmos. He comes to inaugurate a new creation, and His resurrected body for Paul is the beginning of that new creation. He has put the old to death on the cross and raised it up in the new.

And now the apostles' mission is to bring that message of reconciliation to the whole world, so that through faith and Baptism, every human being might become a new creation in Christ. So Paul says:

So we are ambassadors for Christ... (2 Corinthians 5:20a)

Just like an emperor would send out ambassadors on behalf of the empire to bring the rest of the world into subjection to the emperor (that's what they did), so too Christ as the emperor of the kingdom of Heaven, sends the apostles as His ambassadors. But His message isn't one of political subjugation or military occupation. His message is one of reconciliation. He's the emperor who wants to reconcile the world to Himself and make them His subjects by forgiving their sins and making them new creations in Christ.

So, in this beautiful description of the Gospel, Paul says:

...God making his appeal through us. We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. (2 Corinthians 5:20b)

And then in this last verse, Paul makes this stunning statement which has puzzled readers literally for centuries and centuries. Great theologians, great preachers have puzzled over this next line, trying to figure out exactly what Paul means when he says:

For our sake he [meaning God] made him [meaning Christ] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Corinthians 5:21)

I don't know about you, but when I've heard this passage read at Mass, I don't remember the specific occasion, but I can remember hearing that read, that Christ was made sin and wondering, "What does that mean? How could Christ, who is without sin — who is sinless — *become* sin?" What does that mean? Is Jesus ontologically changed into sin? Does Christ become sin? Because sin is evil. What does that mean, he became sin who knew no sin?

Well, this is a great example of where when you come across a passage in the New Testament in the Bible that is difficult or hard to understand, it's wonderful for you to wrestle with it on your own, but it's also crucial to ask, well, how have other people interpreted this? How did ancient Christians interpret it? How did the saints and Doctors of the Church interpret it? What is the tradition of interpretation that has been handed down to us over the centuries.

And in this case, if you go to the Church Fathers, and you look at how they interpreted it, you'll recognize that there are two different streams of interpretation — two different traditions about how to interpret this. Well, let me begin with the one that they don't say.

The Church Fathers do *not* say that what Paul means here is that Christ became evil, that He was actually, in a sense, transformed into sin or made ontologically into evil. Because remember, Christ is not just fully human; He's also fully divine.

So He doesn't become evil, but what does it mean to say He was made sin? I mean, it sounds like that's what he's saying.

So, two traditions are there. First, one tradition is that what Paul means is that Christ took the place of sinners. So Paul, when he says He was made sin, what he means was, He was made a substitution for sin. You'll see this reflected, for example, in the writings of the fourth century Church Father St. John Chrysostom. St. John Chrysostom was the greatest preacher of his day, and he's also one of the most famous eastern Church Fathers who was the bishop of Constantinople. And in his commentary on this text — he wrote homilies on 1 and 2 Corinthians — he says, listen to this:

“God allowed his Son to suffer as if a condemned sinner, so that we might be delivered from the penalty of our sins.”<sup>2</sup>

So in other words, Chrysostom is saying that when Paul is describing Jesus being made sin, what he means is that He was made to *appear* a sinner, because what happened to Him? First of all, He suffered the curse of crucifixion. So this was a very shameful death. He was executed in public. And if you go back to the book of Deuteronomy in the Old Testament, it says:

... for a hanged man is accursed by God... (Deuteronomy 21:23c)

So there was this belief, certainly by the first century AD, that anyone who died by crucifixion or who was hung, was cursed by God. So in other words, the very form of Jesus' death makes Him *appear* to be cursed. It makes Him appear as a sinner. And John Chrysostom is saying is, God allowed Christ to suffer as if He were a sinner, so that we who are actually are sinners might be delivered from the punishment for sin. So this is the idea of Christ as a substitutionary sacrifice of atonement.

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<sup>2</sup> John Chrysostom, *Homilies on 2 Corinthians* 11.5. In Gerald Bray, ed. *1-2 Corinthians* (Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament VII; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1999), 252.

Think here of the suffering servant, for example. You go back to Isaiah 53, famous prophecy of the suffering servant. Isaiah 53:4 says:

Surely he has borne our griefs  
and carried our sorrows;  
yet we esteemed him stricken,  
smitten by God, and afflicted.  
But he was wounded for our transgressions,  
he was bruised for our iniquities;  
upon him was the chastisement that made us whole,  
and with his stripes we are healed. (Isaiah 53:4-5)

So the idea is that although the servant is righteous, we are sinners, and he takes our sin, our suffering, our sorrow upon himself — to the extent that he actually looks like he's stricken by God. He looks like he's accursed by God, when in fact he is the one, ironically, making us righteous, bringing healing to us.

So one interpretation is that when Paul says:

For our sake he made him to be sin... (2 Corinthians 5:21a)

... means He made Him to be a substitution for sin, a sacrifice for sin.

The second interpretation is one that I wasn't familiar with at first, but when I got to dig into the Church Fathers, really struck me as powerful. According to the second view, when Paul says that Christ was made sin, he actually means that Christ was made a sin offering, which was one of the kinds of sacrifice in the Old Testament.

Now, in order to understand this, you have to go back and read the book of Leviticus. Good devotional reading, if you have some time. Just read through the first four — no actually, the first seven — chapters of Leviticus, and it will give you a description of the different kinds of sacrifice. So for example, you have the burnt offering (sometimes called the holocaust), you have the bread offering (sometimes called the cereal offering, the *minkhah*), you have the peace offering

(sometimes called the *shelamim* — or not sometimes, that’s what it means in Hebrew, *shelamim* or the peace offerings). You’ve got these different sacrifices. You’ve got the guilt offering.

And then there’s another sacrifice called the sin offering in the book of Leviticus, chapter 4. And what a lot of us don’t realize — this is fascinating, but really important — in the original Hebrew and in the original Greek of the Septuagint, the name for the sin offering is just the sin. There is no word “offering” in Hebrew or Greek. We add that in the English translation. But listen to this literal translation of the Greek describing the sin offering in the book of Leviticus, the offering offered to atone for sin. This is what it says:

Then the priest shall take some of the blood of *the sin* [*offering*] (Hebrew *chatta ’th*; Greek *hamartia*)... [S]o the priest shall make atonement for him *for his sin* (Hebrew *chatta ’th*; Greek *hamartia*), and he shall be forgiven.<sup>3</sup>

So the word sin there in Hebrew is *chatta ’th*. In Greek, it’s *hamartia*. And the word for sin offering in Hebrew is *chatta ’th*, and the Greek is *hamartia*. It’s the same word. So in other words, in the Old Testament, the word “sin” isn’t just used to describe a transgression of a law or the breaking of a commandment. It’s also the word used to describe the kind of sacrifice you use to atone for transgression of the law or breaking the commandment.

So according to various ancient Church Fathers, what Paul actually means here would be accurately translated in this way:

For our sake he made him to be [a] sin [offering] who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Corinthians 5:21)

So for example, there’s an ancient commentary attributed... it was often, it was for centuries believed to be written by St. Ambrose, the Latin Church Father through whom St. Augustine was converted. Scholars have called that into question, so now it’s referred to as Ambrosiaster. So... I laugh at these names — so if it’s not

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<sup>3</sup> Leviticus 4:25-26; cf. LXX



Ambrose, who are we going to call it? We'll call him Ambrosiaster, so it's like Ambrose but not actually Ambrose.

But it was a very famous commentary on the letters of Paul. And Ambrosiaster says this:

“it is not wrong for him to be said to have been made ‘sin’, because in the law the sacrifice which was offered for sins used to be called a ‘sin’.”<sup>4</sup>

So this is not some newfangled idea. This is just ancient Latin — even Latin Fathers recognize this. So in this view, Christ became a sin offering, even though He knew no sin, for our sake, so that we might become the righteousness of God.

Now the Church doesn't have an official position on how to interpret this verse, but in my opinion, the more compelling translation is the second one — or the most compelling interpretation is the second one — although it doesn't actually rule out the first one, because sin offerings function as substitutionary sacrifices for sin. So it's probably a case of both/and, rather than either/or here.

The main point is this: Christ is sinless. That's very important. He's not guilty of any sin — neither original sin nor actual sin. He's a pure sacrifice. But God makes Him to be a sin offering to substitute for our sins, so that we might be reconciled to God — the whole world be reconciled to God — *and* (here's the kicker) so that just like He becomes a sin offering for us, we might become righteous for Him, so that we might become the righteousness of God.

And I'll close with that, because this is an important point. My good friend Dr. Michael Barber makes this point really well in his book on *Salvation: What Every Catholic Should Know*. You might want to read that; I encourage you to read it if you've wondered about the process — how are we saved? What does the Bible say?

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<sup>4</sup> Ambrosiaster, *Commentary on 2 Corinthians 5:18-21*. In Ambrosiaster, *Commentaries on Romans and 2 Corinthians* (trans. Gerald L. Bray; Ancient Christian Texts; Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2009), 227.

One of the things that Dr. Barber does in that book is he emphasizes that many people tend to reduce salvation simply to being saved from Hell, being saved from damnation, being saved from eternal punishment. But that is not the fullness of the Gospel; that's only half of it. Salvation involves not only being saved *from* sin but being saved *for* righteousness, being saved *for* God. And we see that here for Paul, that not only through the death of Christ are we reconciled to God, but he says:

For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him...

...meaning what? In Christ.

...we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Corinthians 5:21)

And St. Thomas Aquinas, in closing, said this in his commentary on that verse. He says:

He did this, "that we might be made the justice of God in him," i.e., that we who are sinners, might be made not only just, but justice itself, i.e., that we might be justified by God... "The justice," I say, "of God," not ours.<sup>5</sup>

That's Aquinas' *Commentary on 2 Corinthians*, paragraph 202. So what Aquinas is basically saying there — and this is important — that when we are baptized, come to faith in Christ, an actual change takes place in us. We're not just declared to be righteous; we actually become justice itself. We become righteousness itself, through God's grace.

And that is why we can actually say that if anyone is in Christ, he isn't just a believer. He isn't just a practicing Catholic. He isn't just a member of the parish or a member of the earthly institution of the Church. No, no, no. If anyone is in Christ, according to St. Paul, he is a new creation.

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<sup>5</sup> Aquinas, *Commentary on 2 Corinthians* no. 202; trans. F. Larcher