

The Fourth Sunday of Ordinary Time

(Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	Zephaniah 2:3; 3:12-13
<i>Response</i>	Blessed the poor in spirit; the kingdom of heaven is theirs!
<i>Psalms</i>	Psalms 146:6-7, 8-9, 9-10
<i>Second Reading</i>	1 Corinthians 1:26-31
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	Rejoice and be glad; your reward will be great in heaven.
<i>Gospel</i>	Matthew 5:1-12A

The fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time for Year A continues our journey through the opening chapters of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. And here we have a text from 1 Corinthians 1:26-31, and it's all about the calling of the Corinthians...about God choosing them in Christ. So let's read what Paul has to say, and we'll try to unpack it. In chapter 1, verse 26, Paul says this:

For consider your call, brethren; not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth; but God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong, God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption; therefore, as it is written, "Let him who boasts, boast of the Lord."¹

So that's the passage for today. What's going on here? Well, if you recall, Paul writes the letter to the Church at Corinth, which is a relatively young church. And one of the things that's been happening in his absence from the Church at Corinth

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.

is that the figure of Apol'los has come to Corinth. And as we mentioned in previous videos, Apol'los was an Alexandrian believer in Jesus. He came from the city of Alexandria, and he was known for his eloquence and his wisdom. And in ancient terms, recall—in an ancient context, recall—that if someone was wise or eloquent, it would frequently be linked with their identity as having studied philosophy or actually being a philosopher. Think about the word philosophy...literally means a “friend of wisdom.” *Philos* is the word for “friend”; *sophia* is the Greek word for “wisdom.” So a philosopher is someone who is wisdom's friend.

Sometimes people translate philosopher in English as a lover of wisdom, but literally it's the friend of wisdom. And so Apol'los appears to be a kind of philosopher figure who comes from Alexandria in Egypt, which was a great intellectual center in the ancient world. So Athens was known for its philosophers. Alexandria was also known for its philosophers and for people who sought wisdom—people like Philo of Alexandria who was obviously trained in hellinistic moral philosophy, even though he was a Jewish figure.

So Apol'los is a similar figure to that, and it appears that some of the Corinthians have not only begun to set up divisions amongst themselves—some of them saying, “I'm with Paul” or “I'm with Apol'los”—but some of them have apparently (we can infer from this) critiqued Paul. Because Paul is not as eloquent as Apol'los. Paul is not as philosophically trained as Apol'los. And some of them appear to be using that against Paul. So what Paul is doing is kind of responding—not explicitly but implicitly—to the critique by reminding the Corinthians that they themselves...they're not wise men. They're not a bunch of philosophers. They are not wise according to the standards of the world. Not many of them are powerful, evidently, according to the standards of the world...or of noble birth.

So he's kind of giving us a little window here into the demographic of the Church in Corinth...and by inference into the demographic of lots of other Christians in the first century AD. We know from other New Testament documents, as well as later Church historians, that Christianity spread most rapidly not among the proud and the wealthy—although there were wealthy people who believed and who

patronized, who provided for the Church—but among the poor, among slaves, among women.

We actually have certain critics of the early Church—like Celsus and Porphyry, these were pagan critics of the Church in the second, third centuries AD—who criticized Christianity because it was so popular among the lower classes. And yet, what Paul's doing is kind of turning that on its head and saying, "Look, not many of you were wise. Not many of you were powerful by worldly standards." But that's precisely the point of the Gospel...is that God chooses the foolish. God chooses the lowly and exalts them above the powerful and makes them wiser than the wise and the philosophers by giving them the revelation of the truth of the Gospel—that God has come into the world as a lowly carpenter from Nazareth. It's precisely this carpenter from Nazareth who suffers a slave's death on the cross, who is in fact the king of the universe...who is in fact the king of glory...who is in fact the Messiah, not just of Israel, but the king of the nations.

So there's this paradox that's built into the very Gospel itself. It's ultimately the paradox of the cross—that the mystery of the incarnation and the mystery of the cross are both mysteries (as Paul will say in Philippians) of God's self emptying. The fact that Christ Jesus, although He was in the form of God, didn't count equality with God something to be grasped, but He empties Himself and He takes the form not just of a human being—He's born in the likeness of men as Paul says in Philippians—but He takes the form of a slave.

So Christianity is a slave's religion, because its very founder takes the form of a slave when He takes the death of a slave on the cross at Calvary. So all of that is kind of swirling underneath the text here. So Paul's responding to what was likely a critique of perhaps Him or maybe other Christian leaders—like Peter, Cephas, who's mentioned in 1 Corinthians 1—as not being very wise by worldly standards. Paul turns that argument around and says, "Well, look at the nature of the Gospel itself. God has chosen what seems to be foolish and what seems to be lowly as the very mechanism, as the very instrument by which He will bring salvation to the whole world."

Therefore it's fitting that the Corinthians themselves—who aren't wise by worldly standards, who aren't noble by birth—are the ones that God chooses to be His emissaries...to be His members of the body of His Son. That's the mystery and the paradox of the cross. So if you go back with that in mind and just read it again:

...consider your call, brethren; not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful...

If you think about ancient Roman empire, the strata of power in the Roman empire (shall we say) were not as multi-layered as today. There's a very small group of elites who have power and then a very large group at the bottom of the economic ladder, at the bottom rung of power in the empire. We see this, for example, with the apostles themselves. Even though Peter (for example) goes out and he founds all these different churches, he travels throughout the Roman empire, by definition he's a slave. He's not a citizen of the Roman empire, so when Peter is ultimately crucified in Rome—when he's ultimately executed—he's executed by crucifixion, which is the slave's punishment.

Whereas Paul, by contrast, when he's going to be executed eventually...will be decapitated, will be beheaded because it's a more dignified form of execution reserved for a citizen. So you just see a little bit of a window there into how Roman society was stratified between citizens and noncitizens and between the elites...between the haves and the have nots. And Paul's saying here, "Look, don't let the fact that you weren't noble or wise or powerful or wealthy in any way lead you to doubt that you are in fact the Chosen People." And in verse 27, he says:

God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong, God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.

So notice there...what's God's rationale in sending His Son into the world in the form of a slave? It's the humiliation of the worldly, the powerful, the rich, the elite. Because only through humility will anyone be saved. This should make you think

—as you’re hearing Paul’s language here—it should be echoing Mary’s Magnificat in the Gospel of Luke, where she talks about:

My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden. (Luke 1:46-48)

And the Greek word there is literally “a female slave.” He has looked upon His slave. He has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted the lowly. So there’s this turning upside down that’s part of the Gospel—that the Gospel turns the social order upside down. It exalts the poor. It exalts the lowly. It exalts the humble, and it lifts them up to thrones. And then it also dethrones the mighty. It also takes down those like Herod, for example. He’s the first one...or Caesar himself. They are going to be stripped of their power, whereas Christ, this Jew from Nazareth (this tiny town)...Jesus will be exalted as not just king of Israel or even king of the nations, but king of the whole universe. That’s part of the paradox of the Gospel.

And so Paul uses that paradox...He explains it that God wants it to be the case that no human being can boast before God. Rather that, God Himself is the source of our life in Christ Jesus:

God made our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption; therefore, as it is written, “Let him who boasts, boast of the Lord.”

So what Paul is trying to do here is root out the vice of pride or arrogance and replace it with the virtue of humility. And the model of ultimate humility is Jesus Himself, who as the eternal Son of God, is Lord over all things, but empties Himself of that glory and then comes down to take the form of slave and is born in the likeness of not just of a human being, but of a poor human being from Nazareth, — whose foster father, St. Joseph, can’t even afford to buy a lamb at the temple whenever he presents Him. Poverty, humility...that’s the model that Christ Himself establishes. So the Corinthians, in other words, need to guard themselves against being dazzled by worldly wisdom...or against doubting that they have been chosen by God, either because they say “I’m too poor,” “I’m not of noble birth,”

“I’m not powerful,” “I’m not wise....how is it that God could choose me to be a member of the mystical Body of His son, a member of the Church?”

Paul says because that’s precisely consistent with the Gospel itself. It’s precisely consistent with what God did in Christ Jesus when He sent His Son and He was born in the likeness of men. Again, I’m drawing on Philippians 2 there. But I just bring this up, because at least for me, when Paul talks this way, it’s not the way I’m used to talking. Let me say what I mean here. If you look at that very first verse. Notice it says there:

...consider your call, brethren...

Now the Greek word for “call” there is *klēsis*, and it literally means “call.” *Kaleó* is to call someone. But the Latin word there is *vocationem*. We get the word “vocation” from it. So reread it again with the Latin translation in mind:

consider your [vocation], brethren; not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth; but God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise...

Now pause there. This is one of the first times in Paul’s letter that he uses this term “vocation” or “calling.” And when we speak about vocation in contemporary Catholic circles, what do we usually mean by it? We usually mean a religious vocation, a vocation to the priesthood or religious life—in other words, “religious” meaning a vocation to take vows. *Religio*, to take a special vow, whether it’s vows of poverty, chastity, obedience in religious life. To take the vows of entering the priesthood, to become a cleric. So we will pray for vocations. You’ll hear this frequently: “for an increase in vocations.” And that’s fine, because people are, of course, called by God to take vows in religious life. But there is a danger in using the terminology of vocation only to refer to vocations to the priesthood and the religious life...because that’s not how the Bible speaks about vocation. It doesn’t use it in that exclusive sense. In fact, when we encounter the language of vocation in Paul, he always means it with reference to the vocation of the baptized—the calling to faith and Baptism, to be a member of Christ Jesus.

So it's important for us to kind of emphasize that and illuminate it, because it helps us to realize what the Second Vatican Council taught—the universal call, or we could say the universal vocation, to holiness. In other words, that every single baptized person, no matter how poor you are, no matter how ignorant you are, no matter how lowly you are in worldly standards. If you're not of noble birth, it doesn't matter. God has called you. He has a vocation for you. He has chosen you, as Paul says, from the world to be a member of the mystical body of His Son. You have a purpose. You have a mission in Christ Jesus that you received on the day of your Baptism...on the day you received the gift of faith.

So I think it's a helpful corrective (Paul's language here) to the attitude you'll sometimes see in contemporary Catholic circles that say, "Well, priests and religious...they have a vocation. God has called them to do something. I'm just a lay person. He hasn't called me to do anything." Or... "I'm here to fulfill my obligations to go to Mass and then just spend the rest of my week living a secular life." No. That's not what the second reading today is teaching us. That's certainly not what Paul is trying to teach the Corinthians. He's trying to actually help the Corinthians understand that every single one of them, no matter who they are, if they have been baptized, if they have faith in Christ, they have a vocation. And we'll see what the nature of that vocation is as we walk through the letter of Paul to the Corinthians. A lot of the first letter of Paul to the Corinthians is going to be about explaining to them the nature of their vocation—the nature of the call, what it means to be called by Christ Jesus.

And we do see a little bit of it in this passage. Obviously, we're called to humility. That's one of the first virtues he mentions here. But he also says that we're called to righteousness (so justice), sanctification (that means being holy), redemption (freedom from sin, being delivered from sin), and ultimately, to humility:

"Let him who boasts, boast of the Lord."

So if you're going to boast, if you're going to brag, if you're going to brag on anyone, brag on God. Boast in Christ Jesus—that's where our boasts should be. It's a reminder that that call is not because of anything we have done but because of the grace of God operating in Christ Jesus. It's all a gift. That's where Paul's going

to begin his letter to the Corinthians. And then he's going to start moving into details about how they are to live as members of Christ.

In closing, then, I'd just like to emphasize two quotes here. This is from St. John Chrysostom. And St. John Chrysostom was one of the first Church Fathers. He lived in the fourth century AD. Very famous writer. He was one of the first to write a full series of homilies on 1 Corinthians, and his name means "Golden Mouth." I've mentioned this before, but I'll say it again just because it's so important. He was one of the greatest preachers in the history of the Church. And if they call you Golden Mouth, that probably means you're a good preacher. And from his *Homilies* on this passage from 1 Corinthians, I'll just share some of Golden Mouth's words and let you see how he preached on this passage many, many centuries ago.

Okay, so in his homily, what Chrysostom is going to emphasize is the paradox of the fact that it wasn't the wise, it wasn't the rich, it wasn't philosophers who converted the Roman world. It was lowly, humble people—fisherman from Galilee. This is what he says:

In human terms, it was not possible for fishers to get the better of philosophers, but that is what happened by the power of God's grace... From whence did it enter their thoughts to expect to overcome the world, unless they had seen Christ after He was risen? What? Were they beside themselves, to reckon upon any such thing inconsiderately and at random? For it goes even beyond all madness, to look, without Divine grace, for success in so great an undertaking. How did they succeed in it, if they were insane and frenzied?

By the way, here he's responding to the criticism sometimes people say that the apostles were crazy. They were fanatics. And he says, "Okay, if they were crazy, how did they succeed?" He continues:

...[How] did they undertake to go forth to so great wars, and to make their venture against earth and sea, and to strip and stand their ground so nobly,

for a change in the customs of the whole world which had been so long time fixed, they being but twelve men?²

Chrysostom's *Homilies of 1 Corinthians*, section 5, verse 5. And if you think about that, he's right. He's pointing to the miracle of the conversion of the Roman empire. Think about it. It wasn't Plato. It wasn't Aristotle. It wasn't even Alexander the Great who was able to convert the minds of the whole world. It was Simon Peter, some fishermen, a tax collector, and Paul (this rabbi from Jerusalem) who brought their teaching throughout the known world and against all odds, succeeded in planting the seeds of the Gospel throughout the entire empire.

So what Chrysostom is showing here is the miracle of the conversion of the world through the grace of Jesus Christ, that He chose from the very beginning to be given first and foremost not to emperors and philosophers and the rich and the wealthy, but to the poor and the lowly in the figures of the apostles.

² Chrysostom, *Homilies on 1 Corinthians 5.5*