

The Nineteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time

(Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	1 Kings 19:9A, 11-13A
<i>Response</i>	Show us thy steadfast love, O Lord, and grant us thy salvation.
<i>Psalms</i>	Psalms 85:9, 10, 11-12, 13-14
<i>Second Reading</i>	Romans 9:1-5
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope
<i>Gospel</i>	Matthew 14:22-33

With the nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time for year A, we shift out of Romans 8 and into one of the most difficult sections in all of Paul's letters—which is saying a lot. It's chapters 9-11 in Romans...Romans 9-11. You're probably familiar with the fact that in 2 Peter (the second letter of Peter), it says about Paul's letters—the earliest reference we have to Paul's letters—says:

There are some things in them hard to understand... (2 Peter 3:16b)

It's in 2 Peter 3. And I've always taken a little bit of consolation in the fact that if Peter says there are things in Paul's letters that are difficult to understand, then maybe it's okay when I read Paul's letters and think, "What is he saying? I don't understand." So if there's any section of Paul's letters—which are themselves difficult to understand—that is even more difficult than the rest of his letters, it's Romans 9-11. Most scholars recognize this is one of the most densely argued in all of Paul's writings, and he's dealing here with the question of the salvation of Israel...and the question of the relationship between his fellow Israelites. Remember Paul is a Jew. He's a Hebrew of Hebrews, he's a pharisee of Pharisees. He's a member of the twelve tribes of Israel, but he's wrestling in this part of Romans with the mystery of the fact that many of his fellow Israelites have not accepted the Messiahship of Jesus and have not accepted the Gospel that Paul preaches, the Good News of salvation.

So in this series in the lectionary, the Church is going to take a few short selections from this very long and intricate section of Paul's letter to the Romans and just give us a taste of some of the things that Paul says about the people of Israel and the salvation of Israel. So I just want you to keep that in mind as we're walking through this.

Once again, there's a lot that we're skipping here, but I'll try to at least give you a little bit of an insight into what Paul has to say about the people of Israel and the salvation of Israel in Romans 9-11. So the reading for today is taken from the beginning of this section. It's Romans 9:1-5. This is what Paul has to say:

I am speaking the truth in Christ, I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit, that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen by race. They are Israelites, and to them belong the sonship, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and of their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ. God who is over all be blessed for ever. Amen.¹

What's going on in this passage here? Well, the first thing that's taking place is that Paul is expressing his own personal sorrow and his own personal anguish over the fact that many of his fellow Israelites have not accepted the Gospel. So remember, Paul is engaging in this ministry in the 40s and the 50s of the first century AD. So this is a couple of decades after the crucifixion of Jesus, after the public ministry of Jesus, after His passion, death and resurrection.

And yet, at this point, there are still many Israelites—whether they be Jews living in the land of Israel, like in Jerusalem or Galilee, as well as Jews in the Diaspora, living in various synagogues in Rome, northern Egypt, or Asia Minor—who have not, in fact, accepted the Messiahship of Jesus...and that Paul, who has gone around the Mediterranean preaching the Gospel, has encountered a lot of

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.

opposition, a lot of rejection. All you have to do is read through Acts 9-28. The last two thirds of the Acts of the Apostles is all about Paul's travels throughout the Mediterranean world, preaching the Gospel.

And although, as we're going to see in a little bit—a little further on in Romans—Paul will describe himself as the apostle to the Gentiles. His primary mission is to bring the Good News to the nations, to the non-Israelites, to the pagan peoples of the world. At the same time, Paul's *modus operandi*—his method of evangelization in Acts of the Apostles—is that he always goes to the synagogue first when he gets to a new city. He preaches the Gospel there to his fellow Jews, to his fellow Israelites, and then only once members of the synagogue have rejected him or rejected the Gospel does he then bring it to the Gentiles...does he bring it to the non-Israelites.

And this is his method not only in the Acts of the Apostles. but in Romans itself. At the very beginning of the letter, Paul makes famous statement, Romans 1:16:

...I am not ashamed of the gospel: it is the power of God for salvation to every one who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

So Paul's own statement about the fact that the Gospel comes to the Jew first and then to the Greeks, shows the primacy of Israel in God's plan of salvation. But it also points up his own personal anguish at experiencing so much rejection at the hands of his fellow Israelites when he brings the Gospel into the various synagogues throughout the Roman Empire and throughout the Mediterranean where he's traveling.

So that's the kind of background to his statements here. So if you want a little bit more on that, you can go read Acts 9-28. You'll see the persistent opposition that Paul encounters from his fellow Israelites. So what he says here is:

I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed...

And the Greek word there, *anathema*—we get the word anathema from that. He could wish that he:

...were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brethren...

And then the RSV says here:

...my kinsmen by race.

That's an unfortunate translation, because there is no actual word for race. Race is a kind of a more modern concept. The Greek word is...you'll have *ethnos*, like a people. And Paul doesn't actually even use that here. What he says is: "my brethren *kata sarka*"—my brethren according to the flesh. It's literally what he says. So:

...I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brethren...

...according to the flesh. And Paul will make this distinction often—the flesh and the spirit, the old creation and the new creation. So Paul is brother to Gentiles, according to the spirit—those who have been baptized are his brothers in Christ. But the Israelites, even those who don't believe in Jesus, are his brethren...but they're his brethren according to the flesh rather than according to the spirit. Hope that makes a little more sense of what he's talking about here. He says:

They are Israelites... (Romans 9:4a)

So remember Paul is Jewish. Jesus is Jewish. He's a member of the people of Israel, so he's speaking here in particular about all those who by blood are descended from Jacob or who are descended from Israel—the ancestor, the great patriarch, Abraham, Isaac, and then Jacob is the one who's renamed Israel. So he says:

They are Israelites...

And then he lists...he gives a list of the various privileges of the people of Israel, a list of the gifts that God has given to the Chosen People of Israel. And I just want to walk through that list with you and make sure you understand it, because it's the bulk of the reading for today. So he says:

...to them belong [number one] the sonship...

What does that mean, the sonship? This is very important to grasp. In modern times, it has become very popular for us to say all human beings are children of God. And there's a real sense in which that's true, because all human beings are created by God in His image and in His likeness. So just like a father gives life to his son or daughter, so too God as creator is like a father and all human beings are like his children. They bear His image and they bear His likeness.

But that's not what Paul means when he talks about the sonship, because the sonship in the Old Testament has to do with the covenant relationship between God and Israel, in particular. Because what happens is, in Genesis chapter 1 and 2, although Adam and Eve are created in the image and likeness of God at the beginning, through sin they break that relationship with God. They break that covenant with God. And they retain His image, so to speak, but they lose His likeness. The likeness is distorted through sin. And so the rest of the story of salvation is about God calling His children to be like Him again and restoring that relationship through the gift of the covenant.

You can see this is Exodus chapter 4:22. When God sends Moses to Pharaoh to bring the twelve tribes out of Israel, His reason (Exodus 4:22) is:

Israel is my first-born son, and I say to you, "Let my son go that he may serve me"...

So there's a unique relationship between God and Israel that is a result of the covenants that God had made with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. So when Paul says theirs is the sonship, he's talking about that special relation of adopted sons of God, that relationship with God.

Second, he says theirs is the glory. Okay, what does that mean? “The glory” there is another technical term for the glory cloud. So if you remember the glory of God’s presence in Exodus 40, after the people of Israel enter into the covenant in Exodus 24, they build a tabernacle in Exodus 25. And then in Exodus 40, once they finish the tabernacle—which takes the rest of the book of Exodus to describe the exact details and then how Moses follows those, and they build the tabernacle—it says:

...the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle.

So the glory is a special reference to the glory cloud—the *shekinah* the rabbis would later call it—of God’s presence. So He’s present with His people in a special way through the cloud of glory.

Number three, Paul says theirs are the covenants. Notice the plural there. It’s not just one covenant with God—between God and Israel. There are multiple covenants. So you have the covenant with Abraham that is made in Genesis chapter—well, actually, there are several covenants, but the three parts of one covenant. Just don’t get me started on that. But Genesis 12-22 is the tri fold covenant of Abraham. You can read my *Introduction to the Old Testament* with Dr. John Bergsma, and we’ll take you through that.

But you have the covenant with Abraham, then you have a different covenant that’s made with Moses in Exodus 24. Then you have another covenant that’s made again with Moses, 40 years later in Deuteronomy 28. Then you have the covenant with David that’s made, so there are multiple covenants in the Old Testament. And Paul is saying those various stages of covenant relationship with God, that all belongs to the people of Israel.

The giving of the law—think here of the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20. That’s given to Israel, especially. God doesn’t appear to every nation in the world and give a revelation of the Decalogue. That’s a gift that is particular to Israel.

Paul also says that theirs is the worship. What does that mean? You might think, “Well, pagans can worship God too. They can worship the creator.” Well, yeah, but “the worship” means the temple, the tabernacle, and the specific regulations of worship that God reveals to Israel in the book of Exodus, as well as the book of Leviticus and Deuteronomy, where He lays out a calendar of worship for certain feasts—Passover, Pentecost, the Day of Atonement, the Feast of Tabernacles. These are specific acts of worship that are revealed by God. So when Paul talks about the worship, he’s talking about the liturgical calendar of the people of Israel. That’s a special gift given just to them. It’s a supernatural revelation.

Promises, number six. With those words, he’s referring to the prophecies of the gifts that are to come in the age of salvation—promises like the promise of a new covenant (Jeremiah 31), the promise of a new heart (Ezekiel 36), the promise of a new creation (Isaiah 65-66). So all those promises that are made to the prophets, that’s something that God gives specifically to the people of Israel.

So you’ve got all these gifts, all these privileges of the people of Israel, that show God’s love for them as His Chosen People—the sonship, the glory, the covenants, the law, the liturgy, the promises, the patriarchs, Paul goes on. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, these great saints of the Old Testament...all of this leads up to the greatest gift of all, the greatest privilege of all, Paul says:

...and of their race...

Again, the word race is inserted here, it’s not actually in the text. It just says from them:

...according to the flesh...

...*kata sarka*...

...is *ho christos*, the Messiah, the Anointed One, the Christ. He comes from the people of Israel. He’s the greatest of all their privileges. And then Paul says:

...God who is over all be blessed for ever.

We'll get to the God part in just a second, but for now, two points. First, sometimes people will say that Paul has changed the title Messiah to just the name for Jesus—because he talks about Christ, Christ Jesus, and that kind of thing. Well, there's some degree to which that's true, in the sense that he uses it in a way that sounds as if it's just a name. But he is not in any way eliminated the titular aspect of Messiah, like the idea that it's a title. Because right here he says *ho christos, the Anointed One, the Messiah*. So here he's talking about the ancient Jewish hope for the coming of an anointed king in the future who would come and fulfill the promises and fulfill the covenants and fulfill the worship and fulfill the law—the one who they were longing for, the one who they were hoping for. The Christ comes from Israel, according to the flesh.

So this is just a great example of the fact that although Paul is the apostle to the Gentiles, he in no way obscures or diminishes the Jewish identity of Jesus Himself, as well as the many gifts and privileges of the people of Israel as the Chosen People of God.

So if you know any of my works and many of my writings, I frequently do a lot of work on the Jewish roots of Christianity. Well, remember, Paul is as thoroughly Jewish as Jesus Himself is, and he makes that very clear in Romans 9:1-5. The Jewish roots of the Gospel is on display in the reading for today.

Now, with that said...one last aspect of this text is actually very controversial, and it's very significant. And it's that last line. So when Paul says:

...the Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever.

...is from the people of Israel, according to the flesh. There's a debate about how to interpret that last verse. Does Paul identify Jesus as God in this verse or not? Because if you read through the letters of Paul, you will see that when Paul uses the word *ho theos*, when he talks about God, he primarily uses that to refer to God the Father. He doesn't have any statements in his letters—well, apart from this particular one here. As a rule, Paul doesn't go around saying Jesus is God, just in

that kind of bold, blatant way...although, Paul certainly makes clear that Jesus is divine or that He is equal with God the Father.

And if you want a discussion of this, you can check out, again, a book that I wrote with Dr. John Kincaid and Dr. Michael Barber called *Paul, A New Covenant Jew*. And we have a chapter in that book on the christology of Jesus, where we show, for example, in Philippians 2, that Paul makes very clear that the Son, Jesus, is equal with God the Father. So when Paul says:

Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant...(Philippians 2:5b-7)

So Paul's description of what we would call the Incarnation there, makes clear that Jesus possesses equality with God even before He becomes man, even before He takes the form of a servant, taking human form.

So that's just one example. There are many other examples—1 Corinthians 8:6 is another one and others—where Paul makes clear that Jesus is equal with God. But he doesn't usually call Him God. He doesn't usually use the word *theos*. But in this verse, it appears that he does...but it's ambiguous, because the Greek can be read two ways. The Greek itself is ambiguous. Some scholars interpret the text to be an affirmation that Jesus is God. In other words, they read it as the Revised Standard Version has it here:

...of their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is God over all, blessed for ever. Amen.

But you can read the Greek differently, because there's no punctuation in the original Greek. You can also read it as:

...of their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ. God who is over all be blessed for ever.

You can read it as a kind of final prayer, praising God the Father...and then an Amen. And it's just not clear in the original Greek, although most ancient Greek translators took it as an affirmation—most ancient Greek Christian writers took it as an affirmation of Jesus' divinity. And as Paul uniquely, actually, just identifying Christ as God who is over all, be blessed forever.

Not much hangs on that interpretation, because there are plenty other passages in Paul that make clear that Jesus is God. They just do it in a different way.

Alright, so if you take the previous interpretation that I mentioned, that it is...that Christ is God in the sense that Paul is affirming that explicitly in this verse. Then the point—the kind of upshot of Paul's crescendo of gifts here—is that the greatest of all the gifts that Israel receives is the fact that the Christ, the Anointed One...who isn't just the Messiah but is actually God Himself come in the flesh, comes according to the flesh from the people of Israel. And that is a truly, truly great gift and a great privilege that the people of Israel have—that they can say the Christ who is God comes from the twelve tribes of Israel. He comes from the people of Israel.

So I'll close this particular reading by highlighting a passage from the Second Vatican Council. As you may know already, one of the key themes of Vatican II—especially in the wake of the Holocaust, which is also known as the Shoah, the great tragedy of the execution of so many millions of Jews under the Nazi regime at the time of the Second World War and before that, in the early 20th century—was...at the council, there was a very strong emphasis, a renewed emphasis on dialogue with and relationship with the Jewish people of today.

And so the Vatican II Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions—*Nostra Aetate* is the title of that document—has a section on the people of Israel, on the Jewish people, that actually quotes this very passage from St. Paul and its affirmation of the importance of the Jewish roots of Christianity. So I'll just end with that passage. Vatican II says this:

As the sacred synod searches into the mystery of the Church, it remembers the bond that spiritually ties the people of the New Covenant to Abraham's

stock. Thus the Church of Christ acknowledges that, according to God's saving design, the beginnings of her faith and her election are found already among the Patriarchs, Moses and the prophets... The Church, therefore, cannot forget that she received the revelation of the Old Testament through the people with whom God in His inexpressible mercy concluded the Ancient Covenant. Nor can she forget that she draws sustenance from the root of that well-cultivated olive tree onto which have been grafted the wild shoots, the Gentiles.

That's another passage from Romans 9-11.

Indeed, the Church believes that by His cross Christ, Our Peace, reconciled Jews and Gentiles, making both one in Himself. The Church keeps ever in mind the words of the Apostle about his kinsmen: "theirs is the sonship and the glory and the covenants and the law and the worship and the promises; theirs are the fathers and from them is the Christ according to the flesh" (Rom. 9:4-5), the Son of the Virgin Mary. She also recalls that the Apostles, the Church's main-stay and pillars, as well as most of the early disciples who proclaimed Christ's Gospel to the world, sprang from the Jewish people.²

So I just bring this quote to you, again, because a lot of my own personal work and my own writing has been very focused on the Jewish roots of Christianity. And in doing that, I really am taking my cues not just from Jesus Himself or the writings of Paul, but also from the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, which emphasized that the Church Herself always recalls the fact that Christ, the Virgin Mary, and the Apostles sprang from the Jewish people...and that the Church cannot understand Herself...the mystery of the Church is inextricably intertwined with the mystery of Israel and the mystery of the Chosen People of God.

² Vatican II, *Nostra Aetate*, Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, no. 4