

The Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time

(Year B)

<i>First Reading</i>	Deuteronomy 5:12-15
<i>Response</i>	Sing joyfully to God our strength.
<i>Psalms</i>	Psalms 81:3-4, 5-6, 7-8A, 10-11AB
<i>Second Reading</i>	2 Corinthians 4:6-11
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	Your Word O Lord is Truth Sanctify us in the truth
<i>Gospel</i>	Mark 2:23-3:6

The 9th Sunday in Ordinary Time for Year B continues our journey through the Second Letter of St. Paul to the Corinthians, and a very powerful and memorable passage that reflects on human weakness and human mortality, and also on the grace of Christ in 2nd Corinthians 4:6-11, this well-known image of jars of clay or earthen vessels. It says this:

For it is the God who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For while we live we are always being given up to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh.¹

Okay, the context of this passage is the broader letter of St. Paul to the church at Corinth, which is very much focused on suffering, on the mystery of suffering, and in particular on the mystery of suffering in Christ, as being a member of his mystical body, which will entail suffering in union with Christ who suffered for us and for our salvation. So I always encourage people. If you are going through

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.

a time of trial or if you're experiencing suffering in your life, Second Corinthians is the letter for you. Because at the time, Paul himself is undergoing various trials and tribulations that he describes in the early chapters of the letter. And so in his own human experience of suffering, he's giving us some profound Christological and theological, and even ecclesiological, like a theology of the church, reflections on the mystery of suffering. Not just human suffering in itself, but suffering in Christ. Like, why do Christians suffer? Why do Apostles, who are chosen vessels of Jesus, why do they suffer? Paul is going to suffer by being beaten with rods, by being thrown out of synagogues, by being shipwrecked and set adrift at sea for a day and a night, to say nothing of the other sufferings that he would endure in prison and elsewhere before eventually offering the ultimate sacrifice and being decapitated in Rome as a martyr, as a witness to Christ. So why does Paul have to go through all of these trials and tribulations whenever he belongs to the Messiah, whenever He belongs to Christ, whenever he has as his Advocate the God who said let the light shine out of darkness, the creator of the world, the omnipotent God, right, who sent Christ and who revealed the glory of God in the face of Christ, is also the one who's allowing him to experience trials, to suffer. And So what Paul says is that the treasure of salvation that we have as Christians is given in earthen vessels.

This is a metaphor that he uses here for the human body. If you look, that same image, it can conjure up, for example, the jars of clay, the vessels, the earthen vessels that were used in sacrificial worship in the Book of Leviticus. There are these certain laws about how to deal with vessels of earth, with earthen vessels, right? And how to keep them ritual really pure. It could echo that, but more likely it's just a way of referring metaphorically to human mortality, right, to our human bodies, which are from the dust of the earth. Think about Genesis 1, right? Adam is made from the clay, right? He's made from the dust of the ground, and he will go back to dust after he dies, right? But it also gets used in the book of Job, there's a powerful passage here in Job 10:8-9, as an image for our mortality. So if you if you look at Job 10:8-9, it says this, Job is praying to God. It says:

Thy hands fashioned and made me;
and now thou dost turn about and destroy me.

Meaning you bring my life to an end.

Remember that thou hast made me of clay;
and wilt thou turn me to dust again?

So the image that Job uses there is of God as a potter and human beings as the vessels that God makes from clay. And just as a potter can make a vessel from the clay of the earth, and then destroy that vessel and grind it back into dust, right, into earth, so too God has the authority and the power to make Job, but then also to allow him to suffer and die, right, to break him down and return him to dust again. So if you take that imagery of jars of clay or earthen vessels and man being made from clay by God, whether in the book of Genesis or in the book of Job, and then come back to a 2 Corinthians 4, when Paul says we have this treasure in earthen vessels, what he means is we have the supernatural treasure of the light of Christ, of the glory of God, but it's hidden in the earthly vessels of our mortal bodies. And the reason God does that, this is powerful, is to show that the power we possess is from God and not from us. It's a supernatural power of God working through the members of Christ's body, the suffering members of Christ body, to show that the source of that power and the redemptive power that they have and the grace that they experience is not themselves, right. It's not an earthly power, it's a heavenly power. It's not a human power, it's a divine grace. And it's only through that power and that grace that those who are members of the mystical Body of Christ, like Paul himself, are able to do the following:

We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed...persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed.

We'll see this over and over again. Whenever the Christians are struck down, more rise up in their place. The Church isn't destroyed when people are martyred, it actually grows, it flourishes, right? And then "always carrying in the body", Paul says, "the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies." Alright, so what's he mean here? It's interesting in the Greek, when it says always carry the death of Jesus in the body, the Greek verb there is *nekrōsis*. It literally means the dying of Jesus. So there's a kind of process of dying that's being manifested through the sufferings of the members of Christ's body. And the goal of this is not some kind of masochistic love for suffering itself, but it's precisely so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. "For while we live", Paul says, "we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh." And then he goes on to say so. "So death is at work in us..." This isn't in the lectionary, but it is important. It's the next verse. "but life in you." So what Paul is saying here, in effect, and a very poetic way, is that his sufferings, his afflictions, his perplexities, his persecutions, and then ultimately his death, his

being struck down, which he will be when he is martyred, is for the life of others. It's for the salvation of others. In other words, there's a kind of redemptive character to the suffering of Paul as an Apostle, and he's trying to teach the Corinthians that their sufferings as well can also be redemptive. They can be offered for the salvation and for the life of others, precisely because they are members of the Mystical Body of Christ.

It's a basic point, but it's really crucial to remember. When Paul says that the church is the body of Christ, that isn't just some kind of cool metaphor for saying how everyone is united with one another and united with Christ. It's also a mystery that reveals that anyone who is part of Christ's body, should expect not just to taste the glory and the light of the resurrected body of Christ, but before tasting the glory and the light of the resurrected body of Christ, to also share in the perplexities, the affliction, the trial, the suffering, and ultimately the death of the crucified body of Jesus. So Paul's trying to explain the paradox of Christian suffering, the paradox of human suffering in Christ by linking it to the reality that Jesus himself died in order to enter into the life of the resurrection. And therefore his disciples should expect to follow in his footsteps, right? They will taste the glory and the light of the new creation, the glory and the light of the resurrection, but only through the perplexity, the affliction, the trial, the suffering, and then the death that comes from being united to Christ crucified. And recognizing that although the Church's mission and the graces it receives are supernatural, they are a transcendent power that comes from God, that power is manifest through the earthen vessels, through the mortal bodies of its frail and weak members.

So, if you want to reflect on this some more, especially if you've experienced suffering in your life and wondered why am I suffering, why is God allowing me to suffer, what's the meaning of the suffering that I'm undergoing? I would highly recommend reading this this book. This is the Apostolic letter of John Paul II, St. John Paul II now, *On the Christian Meaning of Human Suffering (Salvifici Doloris)*. And in this text, John Paul II looks at the mystery of suffering in Scripture, beginning in the Old Testament and going all the way through to the New Testament. And unsurprisingly, a large chunk of the letter is focused on 2nd Corinthians, the the letter that we're reading today in the lectionary. So I'm going to close with a quote from St. John Paul II. Listen to what he says about the words we receive today in the Church's lectionary:

The Redeemer suffered in place of man and for man. Every man has his own share in the Redemption. Each one is also called to

share in that suffering through which the Redemption was accomplished. *He is called to share in that suffering through which all human suffering has also been redeemed. In bringing about the Redemption through suffering, Christ has also raised human suffering to the level of the Redemption. Thus each man, in his suffering, can also become a sharer in the redemptive suffering of Christ.* The texts of the New Testament express this concept in many places. In the Second Letter to the Corinthians the Apostle [St. Paul] writes: “We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For while we live we are always being given up to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus” (2 Cor 4:8-11)...These sufferings enable the recipients of that Letter to share in the work of the Redemption, accomplished through the suffering and death of the Redeemer.²

In other words, and this is an extremely important point, Christian suffering, as human suffering, but also even more as suffering united with Jesus, is not meaningless. It's not valueless. It actually has value because by being united with Christ in a death like his through his baptism, Christ has enabled every member of his body to share in the redemptive suffering of which he himself is the head, right, and which he himself carried out on the cross. So although our own sufferings in themselves are empty and difficult, and as he will say, suffering in itself is an evil, they can be redeemed, they can become salvific, they can become redemptive, precisely by being accepted by members of his body and then united to the cross. And so I leave that with you, just as something to reflect on. How do you, how do I, how do we, in our daily lives remember that we are always carrying about in our bodies the dying of Jesus, precisely so that the life of Jesus might be manifested in the world around us.

² John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Salvifici Doloris* nos. 19-20.