

## **The Second Sunday of Advent**

(Year C)

<i>First Reading</i>	Baruch 5:1-9
<i>Response</i>	The Lord has done great things for us; we are glad.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 126:1-2, 2-3, 4-5, 6
<i>Second Reading</i>	Philippians 1:4-6, 8-11
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight... and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.
<i>Gospel</i>	Luke 3:1-6

The second Sunday of Advent for year C takes us to another of St. Paul's letters. In this case, it's his letter to the Philippians. And it gives us a selection from the opening chapter of Philippians, which is also about preparing for the second advent of Christ. So Philippians 1:4-6 and then 8-11 says this — I'm going to back up to verse 3 just to put it in context:

I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, thankful for your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. And I am sure that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

And here it skips down to verse 8:

For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus. And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruits of

righteousness which come through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.<sup>1</sup>

Why is this passage chosen for Advent? Basically, you can see if you read it carefully, there are two references there to the “day of Christ” or the “day of Jesus Christ”. And this is a standard early Christian formula for referring to the *parousia* or the second coming. So sometimes you’ll see Paul and other early Christian writers talk about the *parousia* of Christ, and they mean His return, His final advent.

Other times, however, they’re going to use the expression the day of the Lord Jesus or the day of the Lord or the day of Christ or the day of Jesus Christ as a way of referring to the same event. But the second expression is actually rooted in the Old Testament prophetic literature. The prophets will frequently call the day of the Lord, or they’ll frequently use the term the day of the Lord, as a way of referring to a day of judgment or a particular people or a particular city or a particular empire. But that language comes forward in the New Testament as a way of referring to the final day of judgment or to the final advent.

So that’s the principal reason that this passage is chosen for the second Sunday of Advent. Now within that context, we’ll see that toward the end of the passage, Paul says something we find in his other letters, like in 1 Thessalonians. He is exhorting his audience — in this case, the Philippians — to prepare for the day of Christ, to get ready for the second coming, to not treat the second coming as if it’s something that will never happen or that it’s something far off in the future, but to prepare themselves so that they might be:

... blameless for the day of Christ...

... and in particular, to do so by growing in agape or growing in charity, by growing in love. So you see this — that middle verse, verse 9:

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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.

And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ...

So remember, Paul here is writing at a time when the expectation for the return of Christ is still very palpable. In the early generations of the Church, in the first several decades, remember Christ tells the apostles:

Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour. (Matthew 25:13)

He talks about His return taking place like a thief in the night — in other words, at an unexpected time. So one of the things that the apostles and Paul are doing is not just passing on the Christian faith or teaching Gentiles (like Paul teaches) how to live lives of morality in accord with the commandments, in accord with the teachings of Christ. They're also very conscious, very aware, and very intentional, about the necessity of living with the recognition that Christ could return at any moment and that they need to be ready for the *parousia*.

So it's easy for us, now that two thousand years have passed since the death and resurrection of Christ, to grow more lax about that and think, "Well, it's been this long so far. Who knows when He's going to come?" But in those first few decades in particular, the eschatological fervor and the hope that Christ would come very soon — like within a few decades — was very much alive. And we can learn from that. It's one of the reasons why the Church has the season of Advent, to remind us that Christ is coming. Yes, we don't know the day or hour, but we need to be ready for the day of Jesus Christ... or in this case, as it might be for each one of us, for the day of our particular judgment when we're going to encounter Christ, even if we happen to pass away before His final, public return takes place.

Okay, so now with that said, there's one aspect of this reading from Philippians chapter 1 that is really theologically significant, and I'd like to kind of reflect on for just a minute. Because you might be thinking, "Alright Dr. Pitre. I want to prepare for the second coming or I want to prepare for the judgment, of my particular judgment at the end of my life. But as I look at my life, it makes me a little nervous, as I see my own history of sin, as I see my own (and continue to

experience my own) human weakness, it actually makes me scared of the idea of the final judgment. It makes me afraid of the second coming.”

And it is fascinating to me that whereas ancient Christians often look forward to the second coming of Christ with joy and expectation and eagerness and hope, it’s often the case that many modern Christians will talk about the second coming as if it’s something to be afraid of or if it’s something to be fearful about or anxious about, often because (to be fair)... because of the fact that the New Testament says a great tribulation will precede it. So we understand that, but at the same time, Paul in his letters always talks about the *parousia* with joy and hope and eager anticipation.

So people might say, “How can I prepare for the second advent with any kind of confidence when I’m such a sinful and weak person?” And Paul gives us a clue here in the opening verses of the passage for today that really is important for us to remember. He says this, in verse 6 he says:

And I am sure that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

What does that mean? Well, here Paul is encouraging the Philippians to approach the day of the Lord, the day of judgment, with confidence, because the good work that has begun in them — the work of their conversion, the work of their growth in holiness, the work of their growth in charity — at the end of the day, is the work of Christ Himself. It’s the work of Christ dwelling in them that is going to bear the fruit of righteousness that he mentions at the end of the passage.

So you can already see Paul, in a sense, cutting off with the past the later error that would be known as the heresy of Pelagianism — that we will earn the gift of salvation, that a human *can* earn the gift of salvation through their own merits, apart from the work of grace, apart from the work of Christ. And Paul is absolutely opposed to such an idea, and you can see here that he conceptualizes any good work that the Philippians might have done as actually Christ working in them. So because of that, he says, “I’m confident that the person who began a good work in

you through His grace is going to bring that work to completion on the day of the Lord”.

So there’s no reason to be afraid of the final judgment. If Christ is dwelling in us, if Christ is actually working in us, then it’s He who is going to bear those fruits of righteousness. We don’t do it on our own. We’re not doing it on our own power. We are born by His grace.

So Paul has a very robust theology of grace — you’ll see it throughout his letters. But I do think that this is a key passage, precisely because (as you may recall) in the 16th century at the time of the Protestant Reformation, figures such as Martin Luther, for example, are going to read Paul’s letter to the Galatians 2, where he says:

... yet who knows that a man is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ ... (Galatians 2:16a)

And Luther’s going to read that expression “works of the law” as a way of referring to good works or good deeds. And he’s going to see Paul as polemicizing against good works and the idea that good works play any role in our righteousness, in our justification. I could go into... it’s too far a field right now for me to say what Paul is referring to there or to go into the whole issue of the context of Galatians and how he’s talking about circumcision when he’s referring to the “works of the law”, as well as other aspects of the old covenant law. But I won’t go into that right now. You can check out... I have an essay and book called *Perspectives on Paul*, where I lay out — oh, I’ve got it right here. Sorry, I don’t usually do that, but I’ll grab it.

So this book called *Perspectives on Paul*, I have an essay in here called the Roman Catholic Perspective on Paul, where I talk about works of the law and the relationship between them and good works and a whole essay on how that’s been interpreted over the history of the Catholic tradition. So check that out if you want to look at that.

But what's interesting is, in Galatians, Paul *doesn't* use the expression "good works". He uses "works of the law", which can be used as a technical term for circumcision and Sabbath and food laws and things like that that were particular to Judaism.

But here he *does* use the expression "good work". He uses — the Greek is *ergon agathon*, literally a... an *ergon* is a work and *agathon* is the adjective for good. So *ergon agathon* is a good work. But when Paul uses... when he actually uses the expression "good work", is he critiquing it? No. Is he talking about it in a pelagian sense, as if it's something we do on our own? No. What he says is, the good work that the Philippians have done is actually Christ working in them. It's the grace of Christ active in them.

And so I bring that up because if someone were to argue that good works don't matter, that our good works as Christians don't matter, they'd actually be arguing not with Paul but against him. Because to say that the good works that take place in our life after Baptism don't matter is, if Paul is right, to say that the work of Christ doesn't matter, because the good works that are at work in us are the work of the one who redeemed us and who gave us His grace.

So, sorry, I'm getting a little preachy there. I get a little homiletical, but it is a very important verse for us to see. And, as I love to say and I'll keep saying again, you don't have to take my word for it. You can look at the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. So I'll end here with the living tradition — two quotes, both from the *Catechism*, although one is written primarily by a saint.

So in paragraph 2011, there's a really powerful section in the *Catechism* on grace. And I can't encourage you enough to go back and reread just a couple of paragraphs from the *Catechism* on the way grace works in us. Because in my experience, I have to say — limited though it might be — there are a lot of Catholics who, in overreacting to the Lutheran (like Martin Luther's) critique of the role of good works and merits and responding to that insistence, for example, that we're justified by faith alone and not by good works... sometimes Catholics will end up embracing a kind of Pelagianism without even being aware of it, an

erroneous idea of the relationship between grace and our works and our good works.

So I just want to highlight this, make sure we understand that when Catholics talk about the role of works in our justification and sanctification, that we always do it in a way that gives primacy to the grace of Christ. Listen to these words from the *Catechism*:

The charity of Christ is the source in us of all our merits before God. Grace, by uniting us to Christ in active love, ensures the supernatural quality of our acts and consequently their merit before God and before men. The saints have always had a lively awareness that their merits were pure grace.<sup>2</sup>

Alright, pause there. This is important. If, as Catholics, we speak about the merits that are the fruits of our good works, we always have to do so by recognizing that it is the love of Christ, it's the charity of Christ dwelling in us that is the source of all our merits before God. In other words, the only thing that gives a supernatural quality to our good acts is the fact that it's Christ working in us.

So on the one hand, we of course have to do. Like Paul will say elsewhere in his letters, he says:

... work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. (Philippians 2:12b)

We have to work, but we also have to recognize that the ultimate origin and source of anything good that we do — and certainly any supernaturally good works that we do — have their origin, their power, it all comes from Christ dwelling in us. So we can't, so to speak, take credit for it. We can't go around boasting in our works, because they're really, if they're anything or if they're efficacious at all, they are the works of Christ.

And the *Catechism* here gives a wonderful quote to kind of exemplify this, from one of my all-time favorite saints, and that's St. Thérèse of Lisieux in *Story of a*

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<sup>2</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, par 2011

*Soul*, her wonderful autobiography... which if you haven't read it yet, you absolutely must do. There's a beautiful Act of Offering that is recorded, a prayer of hers. And this is what she says. You'll see Thérèse's lively awareness that all of her merits before God are pure grace. Listen to these words; I'll close with this:

After earth's exile, I hope to go and enjoy you in the fatherland, but I do not want to lay up merits for heaven. I want to work for your love alone.... In the evening of this life, I shall appear before you with empty hands, for I do not ask you, Lord, to count my works. All our justice is blemished in your eyes. I wish, then, to be clothed in your own justice and to receive from your love the eternal possession of yourself.<sup>3</sup>

Alright, so what's Thérèse saying there? Well, she's making clear that when we appear before God on the day of Jesus Christ, on the day of judgment, we don't ask him, "Hey Lord, count up my works. Count up my merits and check out how good I did, and then give me what I earned. Give me what I deserve."

No, she says the proper disposition for the saint is to appear before God with empty hands, recognizing that everything that we've ever done — if we did anything good, if we did anything fruitful, if there was any righteousness — it was actually the righteousness of Christ. It's the merits of Christ. It's the good work of Jesus Christ acting in us, and we can't really take credit for it at the end of the day. Because at the end of the day, the only thing we want to work for is not laying up merits for Heaven, but working for the love of Christ alone, doing it for His charity.

And that's why I think Thérèse, in her profound humility, could do exactly what St. Paul says in the reading for today. He says, "I'm confident that the one who began a good work in you, at the moment of your Baptism, is going to bring that work to completion on the day of the Lord Jesus."

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<sup>3</sup> St. Thérèse of Lisieux, "Act of Offering," in *Story of a Soul* (trans. John Clarke; Washington, D.C.: ICS, 1981), 277