

## The Second Sunday of Easter

(Year A)

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| <i>First Reading</i>      | Acts 2:42-47  |
| <i>Response</i>           | O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;<br>his steadfast love endures for ever!                  |
| <i>Psalms</i>             | Psalms 118:2-4, 13-15, 22-24  |
| <i>Second Reading</i>     | 1 Peter 1:3-9   |
| <i>Gospel Acclamation</i> | Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed<br>are those who have not seen and yet believe. |
| <i>Gospel</i>             | John 20:19-31   |

Happy Easter, everyone. Today the Church celebrates the second Sunday of Easter. And as I'm sure you all know, but it's important to keep in mind, that within the Catholic Church, Easter isn't just a single day. It isn't even just the Octave of the great eight days of celebrating the resurrection. It's a whole season, where we have 7 weeks, the 50 days between Easter and Pentecost, leading up to the celebration of the coming of the Holy Spirit. And during the Easter season, the Church alters (on Sundays) the way She selects the readings and which readings she selects. So before we turn to the second reading for the second Sunday of Easter, I just want to make a couple of quick points.

The first thing you're going to notice during the Easter season is that the Old Testament reading (the first reading) is going to be replaced by selections from the Acts of the Apostles—the account of the birth of the Church and the spread of the Gospel. But the second thing that changes, which not everyone catches, is that although during the bulk of the year the second reading is going to be from one of the letters of St. Paul—with the exception of St. James on one brief occasion during Ordinary Time. During the Easter season, we take a break from looking at the letters of Paul, and we read from the letters of two other apostles—Peter and John.

So let me give you the Church's explanation of this. This is the official explanation of why we do this on the Sundays of Easter, and I want to read to you. This is from

the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, a document on the order of the lectionary. And it says in paragraph 100 about Sundays in Easter, and I quote:

The first reading is from Acts, in a three-year cycle of parallel and progressive selections: material is presented on the life of the primitive Church, its witness, and its growth. For the reading from the apostles, 1 Peter is in Year A, 1 John in Year B, Revelation in Year C. These are the texts that seem to fit in especially well with the spirit of joyous faith and sure hope proper to this season.<sup>1</sup>

So notice, what the Church does here is it continues to give us apostolic testimony in the second reading. But instead of giving us the letters of Paul (which are the ordinary readings), it gives us the letter of Peter—1 Peter in particular—in year A, and then 1 John in year B and then Revelation, which is also attributed to John, in year C. So for the rest of the Easter season, for the next five Sundays, what the Church is going to do is read semi-continuously through the first letter of Peter. So I just want you to keep that in mind as we're journeying through this Easter season.

The other thing I would bring up, and this is just my own suggestion, but I found it helpful. I think it's fascinating that in the Easter season, the Church reads from the letter of Peter and the letter or the Apocalypse of John and the Acts of the Apostles...because if you look at the Acts of the Apostles, what happens after the resurrection in the early chapters of Acts, the two prominent apostles that are preaching and teaching in Jerusalem are precisely Peter and John. For the first eight chapters of the Acts of the Apostles, Peter is the primary expositor of the Gospel, and John is often right there at his side. So in a sense, if this is helpful to you, you can kind of see the Easter season as the time when the Church recapitulates in the lectionary the experience of the spread of the Gospel in the early Church after the resurrection. Not only by reading the account of how the Gospel spread from Acts, but by listening to the apostolic preaching of the two prominent apostles of those first weeks and months after the resurrection...the apostle Peter and John, the son of Zebedee.

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<sup>1</sup> Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, *Ordo Lectionum Missae*, no. 100 (1981)

So let's begin. With year A, we're going to hear first from the prince of the apostles, Peter, and from his first letter, the first letter of Peter. Now in the lectionary itself, the reading begins with verse 3, but since it's at the very beginning of the letter, I'm going to back up to verse 1 and just read the entire opening section here so that you can have the context. So a reading from the first letter of Peter. It begins in this way:

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ,

To the exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappado'cia, Asia, and Bithyn'ia, chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood:

May grace and peace be multiplied to you.

And here's where the lectionary picks up.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy we have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and to an inheritance which is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you rejoice, though now for a little while you may have to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith, more precious than gold which though perishable is tested by fire, may redound to praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. Without having seen him you love him; though you do not now see him you believe in him and rejoice with unutterable and exalted joy. As the outcome of your faith you obtain the salvation of your souls.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</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.

Alright, there's a lot going on here in this letter as you can already see. Space and time now will prohibit us from doing a full scale introduction, but let me just say a couple of words here about the context of this particular letter.

The first thing you'll notice here is that it is attributed to Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ. And the Greek word there, Peter, is *petros*, and it's the word for "rock." And you might recall from the Gospel of Matthew—I'm certain you recall from the Gospel of Matthew—that *petros* was not Simon's original name. His original name was Simon, which is a Greek form of Simeon, which is one of the sons of Jacob...one of the twelve sons of Israel. And Peter is really more of a title that is given to Simon, the chief of the Twelve, by Jesus, when He gives him the keys of the kingdom in Matthew 16. So it's interesting here, that as far as we can tell, up to the first century AD, the word *petros* was not used as a name for a person. And yet Jesus takes that word, and He applies it to Peter, and it becomes Peter's name. It's the way he's known amongst the congregations of believers, not just in the land of Israel but throughout the *Diaspora*, the Dispersion, the Jews living outside the land.

So the first point is just the identity here of Peter, to whom the letter is attributed. Second, notice the audience to whom it is written:

To the exiles of the Dispersion...

Pause there. The Greek word there is *diasporas*, and it literally means a dispersion or a scattering. But this was a technical term from the first century AD not just for any group of people, but for Israelites, for descendants of the people of Jacob—the Jews, who although obviously their ancestors originated in the Holy Land, were now living outside the Promised Land of Galilee and Judea, the Promised Land to Abraham. So Jews who lived in Rome, Jews who lived in Asia Minor, Jews who lived in Greece, Jew who lived in Egypt and Alexandria—they were referred to as Jews in the *Diaspora*, in the Dispersion. The idea was that the holy people, the chosen people of God, had been scattered throughout the Gentile nations. And so those communities and those different Gentile cities and Gentile territories and Gentile countries were known as the *Diaspora*, the Dispersion.

So what's interesting here is...notice that Peter describes them as exiles in the Dispersion. So this has led interpreters since ancient times—and modern scholars as well—to suggest that the audience of 1 Peter isn't just any Christian. It isn't just any believers in Jesus, but in particular, it's Jewish Christians that are living in the Jewish *Diaspora*. This is really a fascinating suggestion, because if you think about it...I don't have time to go into this right now, but a number of recent scholars have made this case (and it goes back to ancient times, but it's been revived) that what you have in the New Testament is the Pauline letters, which are all grouped together and which are addressed principally to Gentile Christians. Paul is the apostle to the Gentiles.

And then you have a second group of letters that are called the Catholic epistles—1 Peter, 2 Peter, 1, 2, and 3 John, James, and Jude. They're often called the Catholic epistles because unlike the letters of Paul, they weren't written to the Church at Corinth or the Church at Thessaloniki...but were written to the Church as a whole. They were written to the universal Church, hence the word Catholic. So they're called the Catholic epistles—1 Peter is one of the Catholic epistles.

Sometimes people will think the Pauline epistles are Protestant and the Catholic epistles are Catholic. That's anachronistic and highly erroneous. No, the point is that unlike the Pauline letters, many of which are specifically addressed to Churches in a specific locale, the Catholic epistles were basically circulated through the Church as a whole. They had a broader audience, a broader destination.

In fact, with that in mind, if you think about Peter as the chief of the apostles and as the first pope and bishop of Rome, and if you think of this as Peter's first letter and it's being sent to multiple churches, technically speaking, you could say that this is the first papal encyclical. Because what is a papal encyclical? It's a letter from the bishop of Rome that isn't meant for just one particular diocese, but it's meant to be circulated throughout the Church as a whole, throughout many local churches. And I like to tease my students and joke and say, "Just like many papal encyclicals today, 1 Peter, the first papal encyclical, has suffered the same fate. Nobody reads it." So anyway. You can add a laugh track. It's a good joke.

It's actually not funny, both because we should read papal encyclicals, and because we should read 1 Peter. So that's why I'm excited today that on the second Sunday of Easter, the Church (unlike many people) is not ignoring 1 Peter but actually putting it in a very prominent place by listening to the words of Peter in his first letter throughout every Sunday of Easter as we prepare for the feast of Pentecost.

Now that we've got the context of the letter, one last thing about the introductory verses that aren't in the lectionary. It's interesting that Peter here gives a kind of trinitarian greeting. In chapter 1, verse 2, he says:

...chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit for obedience to Jesus Christ... (1 Peter 1:2a)

So notice, all three Persons of the Trinity there: God the Father, the Spirit, and Jesus Christ the Son. So it's just fascinating that you have that trinitarian (implicitly trinitarian) language in the first letter attributed to Peter, the bishop of Rome. In any case...now let's look at the verses that the lectionary actually uses for today, starting with verse 3. The first thing that stands out is this language of being born anew. Usually when people think of being born again, we think of the Gospel of John—John 3 when Jesus says:

...unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

But here, Peter is saying that through God's mercy, everyone (we), all who have been born in Christ:

...have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead...

So there's a new birth to the resurrection, and then he also does something interesting, especially if this is written to Jewish Christians. He talks about a new inheritance. Look at verse 4. It says we have been born anew:

...to an inheritance which is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you...

Now pause for a second. If you were in a first century Jewish context, and you talked about someone being born into an inheritance, one thing that might immediately come to mind is that the descendants of Abraham were born into a family where their inheritance was the Promised Land. That's the principle inheritance that's at the center of the story of salvation throughout all of Scripture. God promises Abraham He's going to bring him to the Promised Land. He's going to give it to his descendants as an inheritance for all generations, that they're going to possess that land. Here, Peter is taking that image of the Promised Land, but notice what he's doing. He's saying, "You've been born anew...":

...to an inheritance which is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you...

So pause there. Notice what 1 Peter is doing here. The letter is using the language and imagery of the Promised Land, but doing what? Transfiguring it...in a sense, elevating it to a heavenly realm. So the true inheritance of those who are in Jesus Christ, who've been sprinkled with His blood, it's not the perishable or fading inheritance of the earthly Promised Land, but rather the imperishable and unfading Promised Land that's kept in Heaven. And how do you receive this inheritance? Well, by God's grace, you are:

...guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.  
(1 Peter 1:5)

So notice this. It's not just Paul who talked about the importance of faith—*pistis* in Greek—for salvation. Peter too is preaching a Gospel of faith. And you'll see this in the Acts of the Apostles. There are lots of interesting parallels between the Petrine letters and Peter's speeches in Acts. People have drawn parallels that are really interesting.

One of the things you'll see is that in Acts 15, when they're having a debate over circumcision, Peter gets up and says effectively, "We are saved by grace through faith"...so that circumcision isn't necessary for salvation. And that's very much the message of Paul in Paul's letters as well—the importance of faith for salvation.

Another aspect of 1 Peter that's very important is the imagery of the last time. So notice there it says that:

...salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

And the Greek word there is *eschatos*. We get the word eschatology from that. It's the study of the end times, the study of the end days. And so what 1 Peter is revealing here is that since the resurrection of Jesus, we are in the eschaton. We are in the last days. And a lot of what you're going to see in both 1 Peter and 2 Peter is a focus on the fact that this world is coming to an end, and that Christ is going to return in His *parousia*, His second coming...and that we have to be ready for that. We have to prepare for that, although it continues:

...for a little while you may have to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith, more precious than gold which though perishable is tested by fire, may redound to praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. (1 Peter 1:6-7)

So this theme of suffering—as we're going to see as we walk through the letter over the next several weeks—is going to be really crucial. It's really at the heart of 1 Peter. If you know anyone who is going through a time of trial and a time of suffering and they need encouragement, I can't encourage you highly enough to have them read (or read with them) 1 Peter. Because this letter is very much focused on what it means to suffer in this life in imitation of Christ as we prepare for His second coming...as we prepare for His revelation, as it'll say...His apocalypse, His unveiling. The revelation of Jesus Christ is Peter's way here of referring to the same reality that Paul calls the *parousia*. So when Paul will talk about the coming of Christ, the *parousia*, Peter calls it the revelation of Christ—literally in Greek, the *apokalypsis*, the unveiling, the apocalypse.

Now when we use the language of apocalypse, we think it means like the cataclysmic end of the world. And certainly, the end of this world and the beginning of the new world is an important part of the second coming, the apocalypse, the final judgment. But what Peter has in mind here is this unveiling of



Christ in His glory at His second coming. And he gives that to his audience in closing as a grounds for hope, because he says, “Look, although you have not seen him...”:

you love him; though you do not now see him you believe in him and rejoice...

And it's precisely that faith, that trust in the unseen Christ that will:

...obtain the salvation of your souls.

Now if you think about this, it makes sense on the lips of Peter. Because Peter is not only chief of the apostles, he's an eyewitness to Jesus. Yes, he believed in Jesus. Yes, he loved Jesus. But he actually saw Jesus, he lived with Jesus, he heard Jesus speak. He was His student for three years, as far as we can tell from the Gospels. Whereas the people in the *Diaspora*, to which the letter is addressed, they've never seen Him. They've never heard Him, and yet they love Him and they have faith in Him. And that faith, Peter is saying here, is a saving faith...and through it, they will obtain the salvation of their souls.

So a beautiful way to begin the Easter season. I'll close here with a little word from the living tradition. One of the earliest accounts that we have of the life of Peter and of the traditional beliefs about the origin of this letter comes from the pen of St. Jerome. Remember, Jerome was one of the Doctors of the Church. He's a fourth century scholar, and he wrote a famous book called the *Lives of Illustrious Men*. It's like little biographies, little short biographies of various saints and apostles and figures in the early centuries of the Church. And Jerome gives us an account of both Peter's life, but also gives us an interesting insight into what ancient Christians believed about when and why and how and for whom 1 Peter was written. So just keep this in mind as we're walking through 1 Peter over the course of the next couple of weeks. This is what Jerome says:

Simon Peter the son of John, from the village of Bethsaida in the province of Galilee, brother of Andrew the apostle, and himself chief of the apostles, after *having been bishop of the church of Antioch and having preached to*

*the Dispersion—the believers in circumcision, in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia—pushed on to Rome in the second year of Claudius to over-throw Simon Magus, and held the sacerdotal chair there for twenty-five years until the last, that is the fourteenth, year of Nero. At his hands he received the crown of martyrdom being nailed to the cross with his head towards the ground and his feet raised on high, asserting that he was unworthy to be crucified in the same manner as his Lord. He wrote two epistles which are called Catholic, the second of which, on account of its difference from the first in style, is considered by many not to be by him. Buried at Rome in the Vatican near the triumphal way he is venerated by the whole world.*<sup>3</sup>

That's Jerome, *Lives of Illustrious Men*, chapter 1. It's the first chapter on Peter. So the two things that stand out about that that's interesting to me is first...notice the tradition was in the early Church that Peter went and preached to the Jews, preached to the circumcision—which we actually know about from Paul's letter to Galatians. When Paul meets with Cephas and James and John, he says, “they gave me the right hand of fellowship.” And he said that “we agreed that I would go to the Gentiles and they would go to the circumcised.” So Galatians 2 actually says that Peter, James, and John all had a mission to their fellow Jews, whereas Paul was sent to the Gentiles.

So that's the first thing that's interesting—the correspondence between that tradition that Peter preached to (primarily to) the Jews and Paul preached primarily to the Gentiles. And then secondly, according to Jerome, that these two letters that are attributed to Peter, were actually written by him while he was bishop of Rome. For 25 years, he was bishop in Rome. So notice, Jerome is quite clear that Peter traveled around. He went to Antioch, for example, and evangelized there. But eventually, under the reign of Claudius—which would be in the 40s of the first century—he took up office of bishop of Rome...that it's from there that he writes his letters to believers in the *Diaspora*.

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<sup>3</sup> Jerome, *Lives of Illustrious Men*, 1; trans. NPNF1, 3.361

So it just gives us a little bit of a window on what early traditions were about the origins of 1 Peter, and I want you to keep that in mind as we walk through not just this letter but other Catholic epistles. Try to read them with a Jewish Christian audience in mind. And when you do that, you're going to see that there are certain things in them that come to life as we listen to the voice of Peter during the Easter season, the prince of the apostles.