

The Second Sunday of Lent

(Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	Genesis 12:1-4A
<i>Response</i>	Let thy steadfast love, O Lord, be upon us, even as we hope in thee.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 33:4-5, 18-19, 20, 22
<i>Second Reading</i>	2 Timothy 1:8-10
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	He was still speaking, when lo, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.”
<i>Gospel</i>	Matthew 17:1-9

On the second Sunday of Lent for Year A, the Church chooses another passage from the letters of Paul that correspond thematically to the Gospel for today, which is the account of Jesus’ transfiguration—His being unveiled on the mountain of the transfiguration and giving the disciples a little glimpse of His glory...a little foretaste of the resurrection. And so the Church today chooses for us a passage from Paul’s second letter to Timothy, in which Paul talks about the Gospel of grace, of salvation that points forward to the immortality that God is going to give us through the death and resurrection of Christ.

So let’s look at 2 Timothy 1:8-10. It’s a very short text for today, but as usual with Paul, short does not mean that it is shallow. There’s always something rich here. So the context here is Paul writing to one of his young disciples, Timothy, who’s been sent off to plant churches, to build and to lead some of the early Christian communities in Paul’s absence. And Paul here is writing from prison, so there’s several epistles where Paul writes from prison...writes while he’s in chains. These are called the prison epistles. Scholars will often group them together, and 2 Timothy is one of them. So the context here is that Paul is in prison, he’s writing to encourage Timothy, and this is what he says:

Do not be ashamed then of testifying to our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel in the power of God, who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not in virtue of our works but in virtue of his own purpose and the grace which he gave us in Christ Jesus ages ago, and now has manifested through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.¹

Okay, so there's several aspects of this passage that stand out, worth highlighting. Number one, the context of suffering. It begins here by Paul exhorting Timothy, "Take your share of the suffering for the Gospel." Literally, here in the Greek, Paul is saying "join with me in suffering." I think this is an important point. If you read through Paul's letters, the idea that when a person becomes a Christian, they would stop suffering is absurd. Precisely the opposite is the case for Paul. Through Baptism—dying and rising with Christ—a person is configured to Christ crucified and resurrected. And so each individual person, each individual Christian, as a member of the Body of Christ, for Paul, has a certain share in the sufferings of Christ.

So Paul here is kind of reminding Timothy of his identity and to take his share of suffering for the sake of the Gospel in the power of God. And that basic reminder of who he is leads Paul then to a second point to kind of just lay out the Gospel. What is the Gospel? He says, the Gospel in the power of God...

...who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not in virtue of our works but in virtue of his own purpose and the grace which he gave us in Christ Jesus...

Alright, so pause there. Whenever Paul uses the language of Gospel, although in Catholic circles we will often talk about the Gospel or the Gospels as the four biographies of Jesus, the four books of the evangelists (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John), remember that for Paul, he never uses the term that way...as far as we know.

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.

Well, actually, there's one debatable passage. But we won't go there. It's in 2 Corinthians 8, where Paul talks about Luke—or Paul talks about a companion of his being famous in the Gospel. And some of the early Church Fathers took that as a reference to one of the books of the Gospels—namely, the Gospel of Luke. But that's a disputed point; we won't go into that.

By and large, the majority of the time when Paul uses the word *euangelion*—"good news" or "good message"—he's referring to simply the Good News of Christ's passion, death, and resurrection. And in this case, he talks about the Gospel of salvation and how God saved us (meaning him and Timothy and everyone else involved):

...and called us with a holy calling... (2 Timothy 1:9a)

Now the word Paul uses here for call, *kaleo*...for him always has reference to the Latin term—the vocation, the calling to the grace of Baptism and faith. In other words, the initial grace of salvation of being saved, of being delivered from the sin of Adam, the reign of sin and death that we see in Romans...but also from our own sin, from any actual sin that we've ever committed. It's the Good News of salvation from sin through the grace of being called to faith and Baptism.

So for example, in 1 Corinthians 7, Paul will say...he's talking about...some people are debating, "Well, if I'm a Gentile, do I need to be circumcised once I become a believer in Jesus?" And he says this in 1 Corinthians 7:17:

...let every one lead the life which the Lord has assigned to him, and in which God has called him.

The same word as in 2 Timothy.

This is my rule in all the churches. Was any one at the time of his call already circumcised? Let him not seek to remove the marks of circumcision. Was any one at the time of his call uncircumcised? Let him not seek circumcision.

So notice...what does Paul mean there when he talks about the time of your call? Now, we use the word (in contemporary Catholic circles) vocation usually to refer to a person having a calling to either enter into the priesthood or enter into religious life, and take vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. So we'll say, "Do you have a vocation to priesthood or religious life?"

Paul doesn't use the word vocation or calling in that way. When Paul talks about a vocation or a call, he's talking by and large—again, this is his normal way of speaking—about the call to become a Christian, the call to be baptized, the call to have faith and become a member of the mystical Body of Christ.

So if you take that language back to 2 Timothy (the passage today), when Paul's talking about God having saved us and called us with a holy calling or a holy vocation, he's not talking about a particular vocation to the religious life or priesthood or become an apostle or something like that. He's talking about the call to salvation itself—the call to Baptism. The reason this is important to stress is because Paul (in that context) is going to say, "In that context, we are saved not in virtue of our works but in virtue of God's purpose and the grace which He gave us in Christ Jesus ages ago."

So the specific language here is that we are saved, Paul says, not according to works—the Greek, *ou kata ta erga*. The Greek word *erga*...it literally means "works." So Paul says we're not saved according to works, but we're saved according to God's own grace. The Greek word there is *charis*. So not *kata*, according to works, but *kata*, grace...according to God's grace and according to his purpose.

Now, I can imagine that there might be some of you watching this video, if you're Catholic, thinking, "Well, wait...I thought our works do matter. I thought we were going to be judged according to works." And that's absolutely true. Paul himself in Romans 2:6, says that God...

...will render to every man according to his works...

So final judgment, final justification, absolutely will be according to both faith and works. But in context here, is Paul talking about final judgment? No. He's talking about the initial call to the life of grace—the Good News of salvation, the good news of the forgiveness of sin. And in that case, what theologians call “initial justification”—the gift of grace that takes place at the beginning of the life of grace, the beginning of salvation—that absolutely is not according to works. It is pure grace. It's a gift.

And if you have any doubt about that, just listen to another passage from St. Paul where he's even more clear than in 2 Timothy. So this isn't the reading for today, but it's a parallel with the reading, so it can help you understand it better. In Ephesians 2:4-10, Paul's talking to the Ephesians about their conversion from paganism (which the Ephesians were pagans) to becoming believers in Christ. And this is what he says about how that process works. Pay attention to what he says about grace and faith and works:

...God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with him, and made us sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus...

If you skip down to verse 8, Paul continues:

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God— not because of works, lest any man should boast.

So pause there for just a second. In Ephesians 2, Paul is making very clear—and any Catholic should know this, if you don't know this, you need to be clear on it—that we are saved by grace through faith and not because of any works. So the initial gift of salvation that God gives to, for example, the Ephesians, to whom Paul is writing, who turned from paganism and became members of the Church...that initial gift of salvation was not because of anything they had ever done. They didn't earn the grace of salvation through their works. It's a pure gift. They are saved by grace through their faith in Jesus Christ and not because of anything they

had done. That is, as we're going to see in a second, that's Catholic doctrine, precisely because that's the teaching of Scripture.

However—and this is important—that doesn't mean that works don't have any role in our salvation. In fact, if you look at the very next verse in Ephesians 2, Paul goes on to give a very specific role to works. So if you keep going to the next verse, you'll see this, but I want to read it in context, so back up to verse 8, and then we'll read all the way down to verse 10, and you'll see the full picture. Paul says:

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God— not because of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

So notice what Paul goes on to say. No sooner has he said that we are not given the gift of salvation because of works, that he immediately goes on to say, with that said, we are created by God in Christ Jesus for good works. So in other words, once we become a member of the Body of Christ—that's what he means when he says “in Christ Jesus”—the very purpose we have for being grafted into the Body of Christ is for the sake of good works. But notice, what does he say?

...which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. (Ephesians 2:10c)

So there's this mysterious concurrence between God's grace and our action. Notice there in Ephesians 2:10, even our good works—which we do because we have free will—were prepared by God beforehand through His grace. So for Paul, everything is grace. Everything is grace. The initial gift of salvation is a free gift of grace. Faith, our trust in Christ, is a gift of grace. And even the good works that we then begin to perform once we're a member of Christ, for which we were created, those are still the results of God's grace. So everything is grace for Paul, and that's the full Catholic picture of salvation that we get from St. Paul. We're saved by grace, through faith, and created for good works in Christ Jesus...which, as Paul

will say elsewhere, we will also be judged. God will render every man according to his works—Romans 2:6.

So, we could go into a lot more detail about that. If you want a little bit more on it, I actually co-authored a book called *Paul, A New Covenant Jew*. It was written by myself, Dr. Michael Barber, and Dr. John Kincaid. And we have a chapter in there on justification and salvation. And we look at how Paul sees that in his letters. And we look at that from a Catholic perspective. So if you want a little more in depth treatment, you can look at our book *Paul, A New Covenant Jew*.

For now, though, in closing, I'd just like to give you a few quotations from the living tradition to show you that this idea of being saved by grace through faith and being created for works...but that the initial gift of our salvation isn't because of our works, is just part and parcel of the Catholic tradition. This is the standard, common reading of the letters of Paul, going all the way back to the earlier centuries and as articulated by the official teaching of the Church, the living Magisterium of the Church.

So let me give you a few quotes to illustrate this, because in my experience, a lot of times—at least in contemporary Catholic circles—I've encountered Catholics who, in the attempt to resist certain Protestant readings of Paul, have actually erred on the side of giving too much emphasis to works and making it sound as if the initial gift of salvation at the beginning of our life in grace, beginning our life in Christ at Baptism, is somehow dependent on works, which is not the case. That's actually a heresy. It's called pelagianism. Let me walk through a couple of examples of this and show you.

So the first person I'm going to quote from is St. Thomas Aquinas. St. Thomas Aquinas is an amazing figure. He's living in the 13th century, and he is one of the Doctors of the Church, a Dominican theologian. In fact, he's often called the Common Doctor. In other words, he's one that every Catholic should know and read and love. He wrote a series of commentaries on all of the letters of Paul, and this is what St. Thomas Aquinas has to say about our verse for today from 2 Timothy 1. Thomas writes:

“He [Paul] says, therefore: he called us not by our virtue, namely, not by our works, which are the effects of virtue: “not by the works of justice which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us” (Titus 3:5).²

And here, Thomas is quoting Titus 3:5. That’s from Aquinas’ *Commentary on 2 Timothy*. So notice, Aquinas doesn’t have any hesitation of saying with St. Paul that God saved us not because of our works but because of His mercy.

Then again, even more authoritative than St. Thomas was the Council of Trent in its *Decree on Justification* that was released in the mid-16th century...the year 1546. The Council of Trent is emphatic about the fact that nothing that we do in our life earns the initial gift of salvation. And listen to these words. This is going to be striking for some people. Maybe you’re non-Catholic. Maybe you’re listening to this...listen to what the Catholic Church’s doctrine is here. The Council of Trent says:

[W]e are said to be justified gratuitously because nothing that precedes justification, neither faith nor works, merits the grace of justification; for “if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise (as the same apostle [Paul] says) grace would no longer be grace” (Rom 11:6).³

So notice what Trent is saying there. Nothing that precedes justification—so think here of the Ephesians. They were pagans. They might have been good pagans before they were baptized. But nothing that precedes the gift of justification in Baptism, whether works or even faith, the act of faith...none of those things earn the grace of being made righteous in Christ, the grace of justification. That’s pure gift on God’s part. It’s a pure gift. Otherwise, if it weren’t a gift and it were earned, if it was on the basis of works, Paul himself says in Romans 11, then grace wouldn’t be grace. So if I gave you a gift for your birthday—*charis* is the Greek word for grace, it’s the same word for gift—and you had paid me beforehand, would it be a gift? No, it would be a reward. It would be something you earned. It

² Aquinas, *Commentary on 2 Timothy* no. 21; trans. F. R. Larcher

³ Council of Trent, *Decree on Justification*, Chapter 8

would be something you merited, something you paid for. The essence of the gift here is that it's given freely. Otherwise, grace wouldn't be grace.

So the Council of Trent is very emphatic that nothing that precedes justification—whether you faith or your works—earns the gift. It's a gift. It's freely given. And in fact, if you come a little further in time to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which was published in 1992...the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is very emphatic that the heresy known as pelagianism, the idea of earning grace, earning God's grace, earning the grace of salvation—is something that the Church still rejects. And in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraph 406, it makes a very brief reference to Pelagius, who was one of the chief opponents of St. Augustine. So in the late 4th century and early 5th century, there was this heresy known as pelagianism, and it was named after a prominent figure, commentator on Paul, Pelagius, in the early Church.

I'd like to add a slight disclaimer here, too. There's a lot of debate in contemporary scholarship about exactly what views Pelagius held, and whether the views that are attributed to him traditionally were in fact his own opinions. I'm just leaving that aside now and looking at how the Church summarizes his position in the *Catechism*, and also the traditional understanding of the heresy and the error of pelagianism. And this is what the *Catechism* says about Pelagius' error:

Pelagius held that man could, by the natural power of free will and without the necessary help of God's grace, lead a morally good life; he thus reduced the influence of Adam's fault to bad example.⁴

And as you see, if you study Church history of Pelagious' view, that apart from grace, we could do good, which some people took to mean that apart from God's grace we can do good things that could earn the gift of salvation. That error was quickly condemned by the Church and continues to be condemned to this day.

And yet, I have to confess here that I have more than once in my time as a teacher met Catholics who seem to think—or be under the assumption that—we do have to

⁴ CCC 406

earn the gift of salvation in some way, shape, or form. Sometimes they're not as explicit. Most of them have never even heard about Pelagius. But there's a kind of semi-pelagianism that sometimes creeps into contemporary Catholic understandings or articulations of the mystery of salvation.

I think largely it's an overreaction to the Protestant emphasis on faith alone. So sometimes some Catholics will want to emphasize the importance of works as a way of contrasting our position with those of the Protestants, because there were Protestant reformers who took the view that it doesn't matter what we do and that works have no role in our salvation. And that of course is unbiblical also. Paul's going to be very clear (as we just saw) that we were created in Christ for good works. He's going to say elsewhere that we will be judged according to our works. Jesus Himself in Matthew 7 says:

“Not every one who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.

So Jesus Himself makes our final judgment contingent on whether we obey or not. So works clearly have a role. But what we want to avoid is the idea—the error—that our works somehow earn the initial gift of salvation. And if you have any doubts about that, I'll end with one last quote from the *Catechism*. This is my favorite of all, just because it's very concise and very clear. And it comes as a surprise to some Catholics who might have a little more of a semi-pelagian view of salvation. In the beautiful section on grace and merit in the *Catechism*—which I strongly encourage you to read if this topic is sparking your interest—the Church says this:

Since the initiative belongs to God in the order of grace, *no one can merit the initial grace* of forgiveness and justification, at the beginning of conversion.⁵

I'm going to say that again. In fact, those aren't my italics—those are the *Catechism*'s. The Church is emphasizing this.

⁵ CCC 2010

Since the initiative belongs to God in the order of grace, *no one can merit the initial grace* of forgiveness and justification, at the beginning of conversion.

Very powerful, very important point. We do not have to earn the initial gift of salvation. It is pure gift. It's a free gift of grace.

And if you have any doubts about that, just look at the Church's custom of baptizing infants. If there is any church that teaches that salvation is pure gift—it's by grace and not earned—it's the Catholic Church, because we baptize infants who don't have the ability to even perform a good work that could earn the gift of God. And so infant baptism in particular is a beautiful illustration of the fact that the initial gift of justification—the initial gift of forgiveness of original sin, the initial gift of salvation—is freely given. It's pure gift. As Paul say, it's...

...not in virtue of our works but in virtue of his own purpose and the grace which he gave us in Christ Jesus ages ago, and now has manifested through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus... (2 Timothy 1:9b-10a)

And the Greek word there (in closing) for “appearing” is *epiphaneias*—the epiphany. And that's really what we celebrate today as well as we see Christ appearing to the disciples in His glory on the mountain of the transfiguration...an unveiling of the life and the immortality that He's going to bring through His cross and resurrection.