The Second Sunday of Lent

(Year C)

First Reading	Genesis 15:5-12, 17-18
Response	The Lord is my light and my salvation
Psalm	Psalm 27:1, 7-8, 8-9, 13-14
Second Reading	Philippians 3:17—4:1
Gospel Acclamation	…a voice from the cloud said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him."
Gospel	Luke 9:28b-36

The second Sunday of Lent for year C takes us to Paul's beautiful letter to the Philippians 3:17-4:1. And this is a very famous from Paul, once again, in which he talks about the importance of not setting our mind on earthly things but that we should remember that our citizenship or our commonwealth — as some translations have it — is in Heaven. So let's look at this passage for today. Philippians 3:17 says this:

> Brethren, join in imitating me, and mark those who so live as you have an example in us. For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is the belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. But our commonwealth is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will change our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power which enables him even to subject all things to himself.
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> Therefore, my brethren, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved.[1]

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[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.

You can probably notice already from that last verse that Philippians is one of Paul's most affectionate letters. It's one of the ones… it's written to a congregation that he really loves deeply. He describes them as his joy and his crown, so if you want a really beautiful, uplifting letter of Paul, read the letter to the Philippians. If you want to hear Paul furious, read the letter to the Galatians. He's not so happy with the Galatians.

But here in Philippians, he's joyful in their faith. He's proud of them. And he's ending a letter here — this is toward the end of the letter — he's giving them an exhortation (that you'll find elsewhere in his letters) to imitate him. One of the interesting things Paul will say to his congregation — not just imitate Christ (he'll see that), but "imitate me, St. Paul." Well, he doesn't call himself St. Paul… but, "imitate me as an apostle of Christ."

Because he's trying to teach these young congregations often of formerly, predominantly, formerly pagan, Gentile converts that their faith in Christ means they have to change the way they live. And for a lot of them, they've never seen anyone live like the apostles lived. They didn't see Jesus Christ walking around the streets of Nazareth and the cities of Galilee, preaching and teaching and living a life of perfect holiness. So they need a model to imitate, and they can't pull out their *Lives of the Saints* and read about all of the saints throughout the centuries, because the saints have not yet come to be. This is in the first generation of the Church.

So Paul tells them, "Imitate me. The way you see me live? Mimic that." The Greek word, we actually get the word "mimic" — *mimesis*, the Greek word for "imitation." So he's saying:

> Brethren, join in [mimicking] me, and mark those who so live as you have an example in us.

Because not everyone is living according to the example of the apostles. Paul recognizes that:

> For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, live as enemies of the cross of Christ.

That's a striking condemnation. So he's talking about the fact that not everyone lives according to the Gospel. In fact, some people live as if they are enemies not just of Christ, but enemies of the cross itself.

Who's he talking about here? What kind of people are these? Well, he gives some examples. He says first:

> Their end is destruction…

In other words, he means they're going to be damned — that's pretty serious. Second, he says:

> … their god is the belly…

What does that mean, "their god is the belly"? That means they worship the pleasures of the flesh, especially the pleasures of food and drink. So what Paul is describing here is something that would have been fairly common in, especially in, first century paganism, which was known for having many festivals in celebration of the gods — like the god Bacchus, the god of wine, or the god Dionysus… you'll see Dionysius sometimes… also the god of drunkenness and revelry is what it'll often be called. Comos, another Greek deity, was the god of partying, basically.

And during these festivals, in celebration of these pagan gods, there would be drunkenness. There would be gluttony, so they would have used both food and drink. And then they would do the kinds of things people do whenever they're drunk or satiated by food and drink. They would commit sins that followed from drunkenness and the abuse of food and drink.

So here, what Paul is doing is he's speaking to a congregation that is having to leave that kind of life behind — the life of paganism, the life of gluttony and drunkenness and immorality — that was part of pagan culture at the time and part

of the worship of the gods and goddesses, not just of Greece but of Rome as well. So he's saying:

> Their end is destruction, their god is the belly, and they glory in their shame…

They not only prey through human weakness to sins of the flesh; they actually celebrate it. They glory in it, is what Paul says:

> … they glory in their shame…

They think it's great, because their minds are set on earthly things. But — so here Paul sets up the contrast:

> But our commonwealth is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will change our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power which enables him even to subject all things to himself.

Alright, so notice what Paul is doing here — this is really, really crucial. He's setting up a contrast between the way the pagans think and the way the Philippians who are in Christ should think. And the first contrast he puts here is that their minds are set on earthly things, but our citizenship or our commonwealth is in Heaven.

Now, as soon as you go to that verse — that verse is so crucial, but people translate it in different ways. Okay, so there are three major translations that you'll find here. The older translations, like the old Douay-Rheims from the 16th century, will say "our conversation" is in Heaven. The RSV that I'm using here, the Revised Standard Version, says "our commonwealth" is in Heaven. And then the New American Bible says "our citizenship" is in Heaven. So which of those is right?

Well, let's go back to the Greek. Sorry, I can't help it; you have to do this. This is really important though, because those three words are pretty different — our conversation, our commonwealth, or our citizenship. So what's the Greek word?

So the Greek word that Paul says here is *politeuma*. Literally, "our *politeuma"* is in Heaven.

And this word has a number of different meanings. Commonwealth is a fairly accurate one, but the best translation is actually the one the New American Bible gives, which is "citizenship."

You can see this, for example, in the writings of Josephus. Josephus is a first century Jewish historian that I've mentioned many times before. But there's a fascinating passage in one of his writings where he's talking about Plato — the philosopher Plato, the Greek philosopher — and his famous work the *Republic*. I don't know how many of you have spent time with Plato's *Republic*, maybe you read it in college. If you're a philosophy major, you certainly — or you better have — read it in college.

But in Plato's *Republic*, he describes the ideal society from his point of view as a philosopher. And so Josephus the Jew is familiar with Plato's book on the *Republic*, and he actually uses Plato's book on the *Republic* as… well, in the context of discussing Plato's book on the *Republic*, he uses the word *politeuma* to describe the citizenship. So listen to this quote for just a minute. This is from Josephus *Against Apion*, who writes:

> Plato principally imitated our legislator [Moses] in this point, that he enjoined his citizens to have the main regard to this precept, "That every one of them should learn their laws accurately." He also ordained, that they should not admit of foreigners intermixing with their own people at random; and provided that the *commonwealth* (Greek *politeuma*) should keep itself pure, and consist of such only as persevered in their own law.[2]

That's from Josephus, *Against Apion* 2.257. So a couple things are worth noticing here. First, this is really interesting… there was an ancient Jewish tradition — and Josephus reflects it here — that Plato got a lot of his ideas from Moses… that Plato basically cribbed from Moses …that he had read the Pentateuch translated into

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[2] Josephus, *Against Apion* 2.257; cf. 2 Macc 12:7

Greek (Septuagint…which would later be known as Septuagint) and that he was influenced by Moses', not just his legal ideas but even the idea that Plato has of there being invisible, perfect realities that are reflected on Earth, that Earth is a shadow (so to speak) of these invisible heavenly realities.

The Jews had this tradition that Plato stole that from Moses, because if you look at Moses in the Pentateuch, he goes up the mountain and he sees the invisible realities, and he comes down the mountain, and he tells the Israelites to build the tabernacle according to these invisible types that they've seen in the Heavens.

So that tradition aside, Josephus is basically describing Plato's book on the *Republic*, and one of the things he says is that in an ideal republic, the people should learn their laws. They should know the laws, they should know them accurately, and that they shouldn't allow too many foreigners to intermix with the *politeuma*, with the citizenship, with the citizenry, so that they can persevere in those laws without bringing foreign laws and foreign customs to mix it up and confuse it.

So the point of this quotation is just to show you that when Josephus, who is a contemporary of Paul — he's a first century Jew in that he lives in the same time period, basic time period — when he uses the word *politeuma*, he means the citizenship of a particular republic or a particular nation or a particular people.

So when Paul uses it here, it's really interesting. What is Paul saying? He's contrasting the Philippians with the pagans, whose minds are set on earthly things. And he's saying our citizenship is where? In Heaven. In other words — this is really important — at the end of the day for Paul, those people who are in Christ, whether they're Jews or Gentiles, their citizenship is not primarily with, for example, Jerusalem. Jerusalem is the capital city of the people of Israel. It's the chosen city of the Holy Land. But for Paul, our citizenship isn't with the nation of Israel centered on the earthly Jerusalem. Our citizenship (for Paul) with the Gentiles also isn't with Rome — the capital of the Roman imperium, of the Roman empire. That's not the citizenship to which we belong.

At the end of the day and in the final analysis, Paul is saying our *politeuma* — our political affiliation, we might say — the *polis*, the city to which we are tied, is not the earthly Jerusalem or the city of Rome, but our citizenship is where? In Heaven. It's in Heaven.

Now, in order to realize exactly what Paul says here, it's actually helpful to go to another letter of Paul for just a second — his letter to the Galatians. If you look in Galatians 4:26 and following, Paul makes a similar argument against some members of the early Church — the circumcision party he calls them — who are arguing that Gentiles needed to be circumcised in order to be saved.

And in that context, one of his arguments against that position is that those who are in Christ, don't belong to the earthly Jerusalem which is known for circumcision (the laws of circumcision). They belong to a heavenly Jerusalem. Listen to what he says. He says, verse 24 — let me back up. He's talking about the two wives of Abraham, Sarah and Hagar, and he says this:

> Now this is an allegory: these women are two covenants. One is from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery; she is Hagar. Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia; she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother.

Alright, so notice what Paul is doing here. He's saying the two women in Genesis — the two wives of Abraham, Sarah and Hagar — represent two different cities. Hagar (the slave) represents the earthly city of Jerusalem, but Sarah (the wife) represents the heavenly city of Jerusalem. So in ancient Judaism — like I was just talking about with Plato — there was this idea that earthly, visible realities are, in a sense, mirrors. They're images of invisible, heavenly realities. So the earthly Jerusalem, for Paul, corresponds to an invisible, heavenly Jerusalem that you can't see.

And so what Paul is saying here is, the Christians who are arguing that you have to be circumcised to be saved are acting as if we belong to the laws of the earthly Jerusalem. But we don't, because our King isn't seated on the throne in the earthly

Jerusalem. Our King is seated on a heavenly throne at the right hand of the Father in the heavenly Jerusalem, or what Paul calls the Jerusalem above:

> … she is our mother.

So you see here, the image of a mother city. And we actually get the word "metropolis" from this in English. So if we say that some city is a metropolis, we don't just mean it's a really big city. We mean it's the mother city — *métér* in Greek is "mother", *polis* is "city." So a metropolis is a *métér polis*; it's a mother city.

So Paul is saying there are two metropolises. There's the earthly metropolis of Jerusalem, and then there's the heavenly metropolis of the invisible Jerusalem. And we don't belong to the earthly metropolis of Jerusalem. We belong to the heavenly metropolis of Jerusalem above. She's our mother. She's our mother city.

So if you take that teaching from Galatians and go back to Philippians 4, what you're going to find is that Paul is kind of assuming the same reality. When he says "our citizenship is in heaven", what he basically means is "the city to which we belong", "the *polis* to which we belong", the *politeuma*, the body of citizens that we belong to is the heavenly Jerusalem, not the earthly one, because:

> But our commonwealth is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will change our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power which enables him even to subject all things to himself. (Philippians 3:20-21)

Because guess what? He's the King of the heavenly city, and He's also the King of *all* creation. The heavenly city is above every other city, and that's the one to which we actually belong. Then he ends the passage:

> Therefore, my brethren, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved.

So what he's doing there is he's exhorting them to be steadfast, not to fall back into the ways of their pagan relatives, the pagan members of the city at Philippi, to which they belong. You can imagine the Philippians thinking, "Well, I'm a Philippian first." And Paul is saying, "No, actually, that's not the city you belong to." "Well, I need to participate in the activities of the city of Philippi. We have the festivals of the city at Philippi, and in order to show I'm a good citizen, I need to share in the culture of Philippi." "No," Paul says, "not when that involves being an enemy of the cross of Christ, making a god of your belly, glorying in shameful activities, and ending up destroyed as a result. No, your citizenship is in Heaven. You need to remain steadfast. You need to endure and wait for the Lord who is going to come from Heaven, in order to transform our earthly bodies to be like His heavenly body, His resurrected body in glory."

Do you see why this passage might be the second passage in the second Sunday of Lent? Again, if Lent is a time where the Church is particularly focusing on the catechesis of converts — of people who are coming into the faith, who are going to become Christians, who are going to become Catholic — one of the things you have to teach people to do is not just have faith in Christ, but to change the way they live… to change the way they live and to recognize that their lives need to reflect the fact that they don't belong to the earthly city, that they are exiles, so to speak. They are foreigners who are living in a foreign land (this world), as they wait to return to their homeland, which is the heavenly Jerusalem, where they'll meet their heavenly king, who is Christ the Lord.

So I bring this up just because… man, I think this passage is so powerful for acting as a corrective to the human impulse that Christians fall prey to as well, to act as if they're principal citizenship *is* on Earth rather than Heaven. And you can see this above all — well, not above all. But you can see this in a very powerful way in the way even Christians will put politics before fidelity to Christ.

So ask yourself a question: Am I a Catholic first? Am I a Christian first? Or am I a member of x political party first? Which one occupies your mind more? Which one affects the way you live more, the choices you make, the things you talk about, the things you act on?

Obviously here, the Church commends and exhorts all of its children to be good citizens of their earthly cities. So patriotism, love for fatherland, love for family, love for community — those are all natural virtues that the Church doesn't want us to throw away. However, at the same time, where is our principal fidelity to be given? It's not to earthly cities, earthly kings, earthly *politeuma* (politics), but to the heavenly *polis* that is Jerusalem, where Christ reigns as Lord of all.

And so one of the things the Church is going to have to make sure that people coming into the Church recognize is that by becoming a Christian, you have to leave your old life behind. There are going to be aspects of your *politeuma*, of your political past, of your earthly life, of the culture of whatever city or land or nation you dwell in, that are not compatible with the Gospel. And you can't keep living them. You can't keep living in accordance with them. You can't, so to speak, serve two masters.

So this is a very powerful, powerful passage from Philippians. There's a lot of… it gives us a lot of food for thought that is really worth reflecting on. And I will say one other thing about that. This is a little… I probably shouldn't say this, because it could be misunderstood, but that's okay. I'm giving you a caveat: don't misunderstand me here. But I do get a little nervous — this is important.

Sometimes you'll hear — it's become customary to talk to, to refer to Rome as the Eternal City. That's a standard phrase; people talk about this all the time. And one of the reasons — when people say that, what they often mean is, is this city has been around for thousands of years. It was the capital of the Roman empire, and now it's the seat of the successor of Peter. It is the preeminent see of all the cities in the Church. And for that reason, you can understand why people might refer to Rome as the Eternal City, to kind of give it due honor.

And in that sense, it's okay to say that. However, you've got to be careful about that, because technically speaking, even Rome is not the Eternal City. According to Scripture, the Eternal City — the only city that will never pass away — is the heavenly Jerusalem. And the reason I'm emphasizing that is because sometimes when we start to speak about Rome as the Eternal City, or we start to act as if the nation or the city or the kingdom to which we belong is going to be around forever,

we forget that every city in this world (according to Scripture) will come to dust, and that there will only be one that will remain for all eternity, and that's the heavenly Jerusalem. Even the earthly city of Rome is going to pass away one day at the end of time.

So it's important to keep in mind, that according to St. Paul, according to the New Testament, the Eternal City is the heavenly Jerusalem. And the earthly city of Rome, as well as other major cities like Constantinople or Alexandria or Antioch… Jerusalem… these holy cities that have always been revered in Christian tradition, they are all (in a sense) earthly outposts of the heavenly capital of the kingdom of God, and that's the heavenly Jerusalem.

And so that's what Paul is trying to emphasize here. He's trying to remind the Philippians where their true loyalty lies and where their true citizenship lies, and that's with Jesus Christ who is in Heaven and reigns from Heaven and will come from Heaven.

So I end with two last quick points from the tradition. First, this is… this idea that I don't actually belong to my earthly city but I belong to the heavenly city and my citizenship is there — this is a basic staple of early Christian teaching and preaching.

So for example, the letter to Diognetus — it's one of the early apostolic writings from the apostolic fathers. It says this, this is from the probably 2nd century:

> [Christians] are in the flesh, but do not live according to the flesh. They spend their lives on earth, but are citizens of heaven.[3]

We're here in this world, we live in this world, but at the end of the day, ultimately we're citizens of Heaven. Beautiful passage there and something to remind us.

The final thing I would say is, just from the living tradition, is interesting. I mentioned earlier that the old Douay-Rheims Bible translates this "our

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[3] *Diognetus* 5

conversation is in Heaven". And maybe you're familiar with that translation or conversation is Heaven. That gives a totally different connotation than "our citizenship is in Heaven." So where did that come from?

Okay, well, that translation actually comes from the ancient Latin Vulgate of St. Jerome. So here I have a copy of the old Clementine Vulgate, which is a rendition of Jerome's translation of the Scriptures known as the Vulgate. And when Jerome translated the New Testament into Latin, the word that he used to translate *politeuma* was *conversatio*. They actually get the word "conversation" from that. So if you look at the Vulgate — the ancient Vulgate — it actually says "our conversation (our *conversatio*) is in Heaven".

So readers of that Latin translation, when they went back to Philippians 3, read it this way. They read it as saying, "... their minds are set on earthly things, but…":

> "Our conversation (Latin *conversatio*) is in heaven"[4]

So the emphasis was drawn on between what the pagans think about and what we Christians think about. They set their minds on earthly things, but our *conversatio* — what we talk about, what we think about, is on heavenly realities. And so there's actually a whole tradition in the west from this verse that's very focused on the way we think and also our prayer, like our conversation with God is on heavenly realities and things like that.

Eventually though, however, in the 20th century, one of the things that happened was the Vulgate was revised. A lot of people don't realize this, but in 1979, Pope John Paul II — among many other things that he did — brought to completion the translation of the Nova Vulgata. This is the New Vulgate, and it was a re-translation into Latin of the Hebrew and Greek and Aramaic Scripture, but with certain corrections as well to some of the translation decisions that were made by Jerome or other ancient Latin translators that were less than accurate.

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[4] Phil 3:20, Vulgate

So I checked on this before I did this lecture, and I thought it was interesting. In the New Vulgate, in Philippians 3:20, it translates it a little differently, and it captures, honestly… it captures the Greek here more accurately. And it says, Philippians chapter 3, verse 20:

> "But our citizenship (Latin *municipatus*) is in heaven"[5]

So our municipality is in Heaven. And there you hear in that translation a little more accurate rendition of *politeuma* in Greek — the idea of our belonging to a city, our citizenship, or our municipality is in Heaven.

So if you ever get visited by some local officer, and you're having to fill out a form: what municipality do you belong to? You can say, well, our municipality is in Heaven, and you'll be very biblical in doing so. But anyway, I just thought it was interesting — a little note there. So if you've ever wondered about that translation, "our conversation is in Heaven", that's from the ancient Vulgate. But the most accurate version of it is "our citizenship is in Heaven", because the Epistle to Diognetus is correct. Although as Christians we live here on Earth, we really at the end of the day — and hopefully for all eternity — will be citizens of Heaven.

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[5] Phil 3:20, Nova Vulgata