

The Second Sunday of Ordinary Time

(Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	Isaiah 49:3, 5-6
<i>Response</i>	Then I said, “Lo, I come; I delight to do thy will, O my God”
<i>Psalms</i>	Psalm 40:2, 4, 7-8, 8-9, 10
<i>Second Reading</i>	1 Corinthians 1:1-3
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	I delight to do thy will, O my God. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God
<i>Gospel</i>	John 1:29-34

On the second Sunday of Ordinary Time for Year A, the Church begins Her three-year journey through the letters of St. Paul. As I’ve mentioned before in other videos, we’re all very familiar with the three-year cycle of readings that take us through the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke—those associated with the Gospel, with the Old Testament, and the psalm. But there’s also a second tract that’s taking place on all of the Sundays in Ordinary Time, as well as through the festival seasons—it’s the readings from the letters of St. Paul.

We’re going to work through—over the course of the next three years in Ordinary Time—all of the letters that are explicitly attributed to Paul, as well as the letter to the Hebrews, which is anonymous...and then also the letter of St. James, one of my favorites. But mostly it’s going to be about Paul. And so this year, in Year A, we’re starting our journey with Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians. And so you’ll notice, if you turn to the second reading for today, it is the beginning of the letter to the Corinthians.

So it’s a very short passage, and the Church will often do this whenever it’s going to start a new letter of St. Paul—it’ll just give you the opening verses from the epistle itself. So we’re going to read through those verses, and then I’m going to just back up, and put them in context, both in the context of Paul’s letter to the

Corinthians (say a little about that), as well as the meaning of the verses themselves. So let's read the second reading for today and start our journey with St. Paul. I'm really excited to begin with you.

So 1 Corinthians 1:1-3 says this:

Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, and our brother Sos'thenes,

To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.¹

Okay, end of the reading. Now, if you've ever paid attention to the second reading in Mass, which often times, many people don't, you might have wondered...why did we just read that? I mean, there's not much there.

And again, the reason we read these very short verses is to introduce the semi-continuous reading of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. So before we start to kind of unpack what the words mean in this passage, let's just say a little bit about the first letter to the Corinthians.

Unlike some of the letters of Paul, this is one of the letters where nobody disputes the authorship. It says it right there in the first verse...Paul as the author. And thankfully, no scholars to this day dispute that Paul, in fact, was the author of 1 Corinthians. And he'll identify himself here at the beginning and also at the end of the letter in chapter 16.

Second, with regard to the date of this letter, most commentators think that it was written around 56 AD. So if you think of Jesus being crucified probably around

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.

32-33 AD...this is around 56 AD. So it's about 20...a little over 20 years after the crucifixion.

During Paul's third missionary journey, most scholars think that he wrote this text while he was residing in Ephesus. So Paul ministers to the Church at Ephesus for a couple of years. He stayed there for two years—at least two years straight. And it was during that time that he did some of his literary activity and his writing. And so 1 Corinthians is generally regarded as having been written during that period—so the mid-50s of the first century AD.

And if you look at the book of Acts, the Church at Corinth is a church that was founded by Paul, but then he ended up having to leave it to go to the Church at Ephesus. So again, although this isn't in the reading for today, just so that as we're journeying through 1 Corinthians, we have a little bit of background, I want to look at the account in Acts of the Apostles 18 of Paul's arrival at Corinth...and his founding the Church there. So I'm just going to read some of the verses. It might be a little long, but just follow along with me to try to flesh this out, because I want you to get a feel for Paul's experience at Corinth. And that'll give you some background for when we're reading through the letter to help make it a little more familiar.

So in Acts 18, it's describing Paul's third missionary journey. And it says this:

After this he left Athens and went to Corinth. (1 Corinthians 1:1)

Okay, pause there. You might remember the story of Paul going to Athens and the Acropolis, and he sees all the altars to the pagan gods. And he makes his famous speech at the Areopagus. Okay, well after that speech took place, which wasn't very fruitful—he had a few converts but not many—Paul leaves Athens and then he goes to the city of Corinth. And this is what it says:

And he found a Jew named Aq'uila, a native of Pontus, lately come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome. And he went to see them; and because he was of the same trade he stayed with them, and they worked, for by trade they were

tentmakers. And he argued in the synagogue every sabbath, and persuaded Jews and Greeks.

Okay, so pause there. Notice, Corinth is a pagan city. It's a Roman city—it's a Greek city, actually, but it's in the Roman Empire. However, there is a Jewish synagogue there, and of course Paul's custom is to go first to the Jewish synagogue. He meets a couple of Jews, Priscilla and Aq'uila, who are actually from Rome, and they take up tentmaking together. That was the trade that Paul practiced, so that's how he made his living. That's how he paid his bills, so to speak, while he was living in Corinth. Now it continues:

When Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedo'nia, Paul was occupied with preaching, testifying to the Jews that the Christ was Jesus. And when they opposed and reviled him, he shook out his garments and said to them, "Your blood be upon your heads! I am innocent. From now on I will go to the Gentiles." And he left there and went to the house of a man named Titius Justus, a worshiper of God; his house was next door to the synagogue. Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, believed in the Lord, together with all his household; and many of the Corinthians hearing Paul believed and were baptized.

Alright, so pause there. Notice what happens now. Paul is preaching at first in the synagogue, but he gets rejected by many of the Jewish leaders. So he says, "Fine, I'll turn to the local Gentiles. I'll turn to the local pagan population." And one of the first of the Gentiles to come to him is a god-worshiper. This would be a Gentile who believed in God but did not receive circumcision. Alright, so they're kind of like in between pagan and Jew. So they're Jewish by belief, but not by ritual. So they're still Gentile by ethnicity, but they believe in the God of Israel.

And so Paul begins preaching, and many of the Corinthians—meaning many of the Gentiles—are actually baptized. So he's founding the Church there. It starts with the synagogue, then he goes to the Gentiles—to the Jew first, then to the Greek. Now it keeps going:

And the Lord said to Paul one night in a vision, “Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no man shall attack you to harm you; for I have many people in this city.” And he stayed a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them.

Alright, so press pause there. So notice, Paul is engaging in his ministry from the ground up. He’s starting a new Church in the city of Corinth. He gets a God-fearer, he gets a couple of Jews, and he gets a bunch of Gentiles. And for a year and half, he is able to plant the Word of God among them. However, verse 12:

But when Gallio was proconsul of Acha’ia, the Jews made a united attack upon Paul and brought him before the tribunal, saying, “This man is persuading men to worship God contrary to the law.” But when Paul was about to open his mouth, Gallio said to the Jews, “If it were a matter of wrongdoing or vicious crime, I should have reason to bear with you, O Jews; but since it is a matter of questions about words and names and your own law, see to it yourselves; I refuse to be a judge of these things.” And he drove them from the tribunal. And they all seized Sos’thenes, the ruler of the synagogue, and beat him in front of the tribunal. But Gallio paid no attention to this.

Alright, pause. So notice what else is happening in Corinth. Paul is getting some opposition from the local Jewish leadership, and it seems to be the case that that’s true because some Jews are starting to accept his Gospel and be baptized and it’s causing a threat to the local synagogue. So they try to bring Paul before Gallio, the Roman proconsul. But he’s a pagan, he’s a Roman. He doesn’t care—he’s not interested in these Jewish quarrels, these kind of intraJewish squabbles. Which notice...that’s how he perceives Christianity at this point. It’s just a squabble between two different Jewish factions. It’s not yet seen as its own independent religion. It’s a Jewish movement within Judaism, okay?

And so as a result, a mob breaks out, and they seize Sos’thenes, who’s a ruler of the synagogue—in other words, a Jewish leader of the synagogue—who apparently is taken up with Paul at this point. And they beat him in front of the tribunal. But as

sometimes officials do, Gallio just turns a blind eye to it. He doesn't pay any attention. Now, verse 18, it says:

After this Paul stayed many days longer, and then took leave of the brethren and sailed for Syria, and with him Priscilla and Aq'uila.

So Paul leaves Corinth, and he goes elsewhere. Now if you fast forward down to verse 24, one last element is important. It says this:

Now a Jew named Apol'los, a native of Alexandria...

That's in Egypt, not Louisiana—Alexandria, Egypt. Shoutout to all my friends in Alexandria, Louisiana...but this is not where Apol'los is from.

...a Jew named Apol'los, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was an eloquent man, well versed in the scriptures. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord; and being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John.

Interesting. So he had been baptized by John—or at least John's disciples—but he's heard about Jesus, and he's started to preach and teach about him.

He began to speak boldly in the synagogue; but when Priscilla and Aq'uila heard him, they took him and expounded to him the way of God more accurately. And when he wished to cross to Acha'ia, the brethren encouraged him, and wrote to the disciples to receive him. When he arrived, he greatly helped those who through grace had believed, for he powerfully confuted the Jews in public, showing by the scriptures that the Christ was Jesus.

While Apol'los was at Corinth, Paul passed through the upper country and came to Ephesus.

That's chapter 19, verse 1. Now we'll stop there. So I just read that last section, because as we're going to see, Apol'los is going to pop up in the letter to the Corinthians. We already see two figures in Acts here that are going to be mentioned

by Paul in the letter. The first is Sos'thenes. You'll notice right at the beginning of the letter, Paul says:

...called by the will of God to be an apostle...and our brother Sos'thenes...

So who is this guy? Well, he's evidently a Jewish convert to the faith in Jesus. He was the former ruler of the synagogue who got beat by the mob and has now taken up with Paul to participate in spreading the Good News. And the other figure who's going to show up is Apol'los. We'll see there's going to be some rivalry between Paul and Apol'los in the letter to the Corinthians, because basically Apol'los is like the preacher who comes on the heels of Paul, and all the groundwork that Paul did to build up the Church, Apol'los is going to come and he's going to continue to preach after Paul leaves, but there's going to be some factions that arise with certain people favoring Apol'los, who's evidently really eloquent...and other people favoring Paul, who by his own admission is not as eloquent or as good of a preacher.

So I hope that just fleshes out a little bit for you the background of the Church at Corinth. That's pretty much the bulk of the information that we have from the Acts of the Apostles. Now what Acts doesn't tell us but which is really important to know, is that this city—this Greek city that Paul was evangelizing—was no tiny town. Corinth was a very famous, very ancient Greek city. It was a port city, and it was actually the capital of Achea, which is a territory in what we now refer to as Greece. And as a port city, Corinth was famous for two things. First, it was famous for its wealth. Like lots of port cities, a lot of trade took place there, so there was lots of money in Corinth. It was renowned for lots of rich people living there. And the second thing it was even more renowned for was immorality—and in particular sexual immorality. In fact, a couple of Roman quotes here. Aelius of Aristides said this about the city of Corinth:

“[Corinth] chains all men with pleasure” so that “all men are equally inflamed by it... [I]t is clearly the city of Aphrodite”²

² Aelius Aristides, *Orations*, 46.25.

So if you know anything about Greek mythology, you'll know Aphrodite is the goddess of love. And so to call the city of Corinth the city of Aphrodite is a way of talking about the sexual immorality that's rampant in that city. In fact, the city was so well known for its immorality that Aristophanes—the very famous Greek playwright, author of many comedies—coined a verb, *korinthianzesthai*, literally to “to act like a Corinthian.” And the verb—he would use that Greek verb—it was a synonym for “fornication.” So to fornicate was to act like a Corinthian...or to Corinthianize was another word for fornication.

So that's the city that Paul plants the Gospel in. And that's very important, because as we're going to see, sexual immorality is going to be one of the key issues that Paul deals with in his first letter to the Corinthians. In fact, if you look at the first letter to the Corinthians and just kind of walk through chapter by chapter, really what this letter is is a kind of collection of multiple problems that Paul is addressing in the Corinthian Church. So he's left the Corinthian Church behind, and he has to write this letter to them while he's at Ephesus to address a whole host of issues and problems that they're dealing with.

So let me just give you a few of them. I'll just walk you through the letter. So in 1 Corinthians 1 and 2, he's dealing with the problem of divisions in the Church. In 1 Corinthians 3 and 4, he's dealing with factions—certain people are siding with him and other people are siding with Apol'los. In 1 Corinthians 5 and 6, he's dealing with problems of sexual immorality, including incest, prostitution, as well as other forms of fornication...and he even deals with the question of homosexual activity.

In 1 Corinthians 6, he's dealing with lawsuits between believers. So some of these believers are taking each other to court. In 1 Corinthians 7, he's dealing with questions about marriage and celibacy and virginity and divorce and remarriage after divorce. In 1 Corinthians 8-10, he's dealing with questions around idolatry and syncretism, like the blending of discipleship with Jesus and visiting pagan temples.

And the next several chapters—1 Corinthians 11 and following—he's dealing with liturgical disorder. There's all kinds of confusion going on whenever the Christians meet to celebrate the Lord's Supper. This is a very important aspect of 1

Corinthians. It's one of the few descriptions we have in the New Testament of what worship was like in the first century at the time of the apostles...although he doesn't really tell us about what they were supposed to do. He tells us about what they were doing wrong. So there's lots of liturgical conflict and chaos.

1 Corinthians 12-14 deals with conflict in the Church over the charismatic gifts, especially the gift of speaking in tongues. And then finally, the letter comes to an end with Paul dealing with the problem that many of the Corinthians don't seem to believe in the resurrection of the body. They're not even sure that there is actually a bodily resurrection for believers. They seem to have accepted that Jesus was raised from the dead, but they haven't translated that into their own faith just yet.

So I love to—when I talk about this letter—kind of point out to students just how relevant 1 Corinthians is to the Church today. In fact, it's interesting. If you look at the lectionary very carefully, you'll notice that for Year A, Year B, and Year C, with the second readings, we always begin the liturgical year in Ordinary Time with 1 Corinthians. So this is one of the letters that the Church splits up over three years.

So for example, in Year A, we look at 1 Corinthians 1-4. We're going to read those first four chapters from the second through the eighth Sundays in Ordinary Time. And then in Year B, we're going to read 1 Corinthians 6-11—which deals with sexual immorality and food sacrifice to idols, that stuff—in the second through fifth Sundays in Ordinary Time. And then finally in Year C, we're going to look at 1 Corinthians 12-15. That's the speaking in tongues, the love chapter, and the question of the resurrection. That'll be on the second through eighth Sundays in Ordinary Time.

So it's interesting...it's almost as if at the beginning of each liturgical year, the Church wants to give us the kind of basics of Pauline evangelization, which is found in the Church at Corinth. Because this really is the basics. Paul's giving the basics of how to live the Christian life to a Church that clearly does not know a lot about what it means to be in Christ. I mean, for example, in chapter 5 and 6, he's going to have to tell them, "You can't marry your mother-in-law, and you can't visit a brothel and engage in prostitution." Those are pretty basic Christian precepts

that you would think they might know. But the people at Corinth—there's just a lot of confusion, just a lot of disarray.

So it's actually also consoling, because sometimes people (or students) might say, "Dr. Pitre, there's so many problems in the Church today...sometimes it's scandalous and it makes me wonder: Is the Catholic Church really the Church that goes back to Christ?" And I like to say, "Look, just think about it. If the Church is plagued by divisions, rampant immorality, lawsuits between believers, syncretism, confusion in the liturgy, lack of understanding of the Holy Spirit, funerals where people don't even seem to believe in the resurrection of the body or life after death...then that's the true Church. Because that's exactly what's going on from the very beginning in the Church at Corinth. There have always been these problems, especially when the Gospel is being newly planted in a particular place. So there's going to be confusion like that. That's just a little bit of a joke, but it is interesting. I think it's providential that the Scripture preserves Paul's letter to this Church that has so many problems, because then it becomes a very practical and pastoral letter for dealing with the problems—the same problems—that we have in the Church today.

Alright, so with that said then, we'll just end by going back and looking at the actual words Paul uses here in this opening letter. Because although it's brief, as you're going to see with Paul, just because it's short, doesn't mean it's shallow. Paul will say a lot with a little, and there are a few key nuggets in this opening section that are very rich. The first is just Paul's reference to himself as an apostle. It's important to remember the Greek word *apostolos* means "one who is sent." So Paul's self-conception is that he was somebody sent by God to Corinth to bring the Good News of salvation to them. It wasn't just an accident that he ended up there. He is an apostle of Jesus Christ. He is sent with a mission to bring salvation to the people at Corinth.

The second thing that's interesting about this opening line for me is when Paul says:

To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints...

Notice there, first, Paul's language of being "in Christ Jesus." This is going to be at the very center of Paul's thought. As we work through the letters of St. Paul, keep your eyes on that expression "in Christ," because that's how Paul thinks about what it means to be a Christian. It's not just that I believe in Jesus or that I accept Jesus, it's that through Baptism I become a part of the Body of Christ. I am now in Christ. I am a member of His mystical Body, and that's going to govern everything Paul has to say about what it means for how we live as disciples. So he's going to say, for example, to the Corinthians a few chapters down the road, you can't go to a brothel and unite yourself to a prostitute, because you are a member of the Body of Christ. And to unite yourself with a prostitute is to make that prostitute a member of Christ. And he says God forbid that something like that should happen. So Paul's ethics, his moral teachings, are going to flow out of the mystical reality that if you're a baptized Christian, you don't belong to yourself anymore. You're no longer your own. You are Christ. You are bought with a price, and you now are in Him. You're part of His mystical Body, and you have to live as if you are His Body living in the world. So keep your eyes on the expression "in Christ."

And then finally, but not least significantly, notice here. I just told you that Paul was writing to a Church full of ex-pagans who don't know their left hand from their right. They're a very rich city, a very immoral city. And what does he say to them? You are called to be saints. And the Greek word there is *hagios*...or *hagioi* is the plural. It literally means "the holy ones." Now that's really powerful, because when we—contemporary Catholics—use the expression "saint," we tend to use it restrictively to refer to canonized saints who the Church has publicly proclaimed as exhibiting holiness and who have died and who are now alive with God in Heaven. That's how we use the word "saint." So we tend to use the word "saints" to refer to believers who are dead and alive in Heaven and have been publicly recognized by the Church.

That is not how Paul uses the expression "the saints." For Paul, the term "saints" is his favorite way of referring to believers on Earth who are living right now, who have been baptized into Christ. That's all it takes for Paul. You are called to be a saint by virtue of your Baptism and faith in Jesus Christ. We'll see how this plays out. But I bring this up because it's interesting. If you look at all Paul's letters—

we'll read through them in the course of the next three years—you'll see he never uses the term Christian, not once, to refer to those who believe in Jesus.

But over 30 times, you know what he calls his congregation, the people he's writing to, the people he's instructing? He calls them *hagioi*. He calls them saints. So for Paul, all Christians are saints insofar as we have been set apart through Baptism and made members of the mystical Body of Christ. Now, as we are going to see, we're going to have to live the reality of what we actually are and what we were called to be in Baptism.

You'll see—gosh, there's so much here—when Paul uses the language of “a call,” he's doing something different than we tend to. We tend to talk about somebody having a vocation—having a call—to either religious life or the priesthood...entering into the consecrated life. Paul never uses the language of vocation that way. For him, when he talks about being called, he's always talking about the call of Baptism. It's the vocation of every single baptized person. And what is that vocation? It's to be holy. It's to be a saint.

Sometimes...one of my teachers said this once....asked a group of students, “How many of you want to go to Heaven?” Every hand goes up. And then you ask, “How many of you want to be saints?” Three go up. Well, guess what? Everybody in Heaven is a saint. That's the only people who get in. So we have to kind of bring down that barrier in our concepts and our minds about the call to sainthood and the call to Heaven. There are two ways to talk about the same reality. So Paul here is going to be very clear here to the Corinthians that despite the many problems they have, they're all called to holiness. They're called to be saints.

And I think one of the interesting things about this is that if you look at contemporary Christian discourse, we tend to talk about people as believers. We put the emphasis on: “Do you assent to these doctrinal truths? Do you believe? That's important.” Paul uses “believers” a handful of times in his letters. “Do you trust in Jesus? Do you believe in Jesus?” He uses “believers” to describe Christians about three or four times. He uses “saints” to describe Christians over 30 times. So think about the emphasis in what Paul's doing on the universal call to holiness.

Now I'll end with this final quote. You might be thinking, "Well, that's fine, Dr. Pitre, if Paul says everyone is called to be a saint. But you know, isn't Paul kind of the first Protestant?" Sometimes people see him that way. But no, this is just the teaching of the Church. In the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraph 2013, it takes one of the teachings of Vatican II that was very central, which we refer to as the universal call to holiness. This is what the doctrine of the Church says:

"All Christians in any state or walk of life are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of charity." All are called to holiness: "Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" [Matt 5:48]³

So notice what the *Catechism* is saying. Holiness is not just something for bishops or priests or deacons or consecrated religious sisters (nuns), or monks, brothers, whatever. Every single Christian, in any state or walk of life, is called to holiness, and therefore is called to be saints. And that'll be our challenge as we walk through the letters of Paul over the next three years, we're going to see that the vast bulk of what Paul is doing in his letters is teaching believers—teaching the baptized—how to be saints.

³ CCC 2013, citing Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium* no. 40