

The Seventeenth Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	1 Kings 3:5, 7-12
<i>Response</i>	Oh, how I love thy law!
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 119:57, 72, 76-77, 127-128, 129-130
<i>Second Reading</i>	Romans 8:28-30
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	At that time Jesus declared, “I thank thee, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to babes;
<i>Gospel</i>	Matthew 13:44-52

On the seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, the second reading continues our study of Romans 8. You’ll notice that a lot of the lectionary has slowed down, so to speak, and spent a lot of time in this particular chapter of Romans. It’s a very theological rich chapter. It’s also a very beautiful chapter, so I’m glad the lectionary is doing this, because it’s one of my favorite chapters in Romans. And the reading for today is once again short but really full of theological richness. It’s Romans 8:28-30. This is a very important text that I’m about to read. It’s one of the classic New Testament texts on the two doctrines or teachings on God’s divine foreknowledge, as well as the doctrine of predestination—very controversial topic. So we’re really looking at providence and predestination in these few verses from Paul.

So, caveat, there’s no way I can do this justice in a short video like this, but I’m going to try my best to at least give you a little bit of insight into the biblical foundations of what the Church has to teach about providence and about, yes, predestination. You might not realize the Catholic Church has a doctrine of predestination, but she does. And so I’ll give you a few basic insights into that based on what Paul has to say about that in the reading for today. So pay attention if you’ve ever wondered about either of those topics. Let’s listen to what Paul’s inspired words have to tell us. In Romans 8:28, we read:

We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the first-born among many brethren. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.¹

That's the end of the second reading for today. Okay, so a few points stand out. The first one is the image of divine foreknowledge. So you notice in verse 29 there, it says:

...those whom he foreknew he also predestined...

So let's just back up for a second. What does that mean, "those who he foreknew"? The Greek word here is *pro-ginōskō*. And it literally means "to know before." So *pro* means before. And *ginōskō* is just the standard Greek word for "know" or "to know", to have knowledge of. So to know in advance is a power that God possesses. It's one of His divine attributes, His ability and His power to know everything that's going to happen before it happens. And Paul here, in asserting this, is just stating a standard teaching of the Jewish Scriptures. For example, if you look at Psalm 139, it's kind of a classic description of divine foreknowledge—beautiful description too. In Psalm 139:1-4, we read:

O Lord, thou hast searched me and known me!
Thou knowest when I sit down and when I rise up;
thou discernest my thoughts from afar.
Even before a word is on my tongue,
lo, O Lord, thou knowest it altogether. (Psalm 139:1-2, 4)

So notice, what is the Psalm saying there? It's saying that God not only is omniscient, He not only knows everything that's happening, He knows when I sit down. He knows when I stand up. And He not only knows what I think; He

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.

discerns my thoughts from afar. In other words, even though He's transcendent in Heaven, He's not part of this creation, even though He suffuses it and He dwells it in a certain sense by His divine presence and power. He knows what I think, so He knows everything I say, everything I think. He knows everything I do. So He's not only omniscient, though, He also has foreknowledge. He knows it before I say it, even before I speak a word or even before it's on my tongue, He already has knowledge of it.

So that's just a standard Jewish way of describing what we would call divine foreknowledge. And so Paul says that God foreknew those whom:

...he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son...

So what does that mean? Predestined. Well, the Greek word here—sorry for the Greek, but I have to do this—is *pro-ORIZŌ*. *Pro* again means “before” or “ahead of,” and *ORIZŌ* is “to decide” or to choose something. So He determined something. So He determined or He decides in advance. That's the language of predestination. And so, again, this is straight from the Jewish Scriptures. If you look at the book of Job 42, Job says to God:

“I know that thou canst do all things...”

In other words, He's omnipotent. He's all powerful.

“...and that no purpose of thing can be thwarted.”

God is in control of the events of human history. It's Job 42:1-2. So here, we see Paul teaching both divine foreknowledge and divine predestination. Now I know, I know, for a lot of Catholic viewers and listeners—based on my years in the classroom—that when Catholics hear the word predestination these days, a lot of them think, “Oh, well, wait...predestination is something that other Christians believe, like Calvinists in particular”...because John Calvin, one of the Protestant reformers, was very famous for his doctrine of what is called double predestination. Namely, that God foreordains, irrespective of human will, some people to go to Heaven and some people to go to Hell...irrespective of their

decision for or against Him or their choice to accept or reject His grace. And so many Catholics kind of are...I'm going to say repulsed, but that's fairly a strong word. They are repulsed by the idea of predestination, because they think of it primarily in a Calvinistic mode—idea of the double predestination, where God foreordains for people to be damned, irrespective of their response to grace.

Although it's true that Calvin made that view of predestination very famous and widespread, it is not, in fact, a biblical doctrine of predestination. It's a misinterpretation of the biblical teaching of predestination. But we don't want to throw the baby out with the bath water, right? The reason the Catholic Church teaches and affirms predestination—this is important—is because the Bible teaches and affirms predestination, and not just the Bible in general, but Paul in particular. Romans 8 is the locus classicus, the kind of classic place where Scripture explicitly affirms the idea that God decides in advance. He predestined the elect, the chosen:

...to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the first-born among many brethren.

Okay, as soon as I say that, you might be thinking, “Well, hold on. What about the whole issue of free will?” And of course, free will is also a biblical teaching that the Catholic Church affirms. I'll just give you one passage if you want to look this up. This isn't from Paul, but it's from a book that we can make a really strong case that Paul was familiar with, and that's the book of Sirach. There are several allusions to and very close parallels between Paul's writings and the book of Sirach—which is only in the Catholic Old Testament, by the way. But it's still an important writing, even for non Catholic Christians. So Sirach 15:14, it says:

It was he who created man in the beginning,
and he left him in the power of his own inclination.
If you will, you can keep the commandments,
and to act faithfully is a matter of your own choice. (Sirach 15:14-15)

So Sirach is very clear that God makes man free. He has the power of his own inclination. And if he chooses, he can keep the commandments through his own free choice. So what we have in Scripture is a tension between the doctrine of

God's divine foreknowledge and providence—it's predestination, His foreordaining everything that's going to happen—and the affirmation of the truly free will of each human person. And that tension between those two is just part of biblical revelation. Both truths are affirmed by Scripture and would have been affirmed by Paul.

In fact, I don't have the quote with me off the top my head, but there's a quotation in the *Mishnah*. It's a saying of the rabbis. And remember Paul is a member of the Pharisees, so he grows up as a Pharisee and he learns the doctrine of the Pharisees. And one of the sayings of the rabbis in the *Mishnah*—I'm paraphrasing but basically—it says that all things are foreordained and free will is given. Okay, so do you believe in providence or do you believe in free will? Do you believe in predestination or free will? And the Pharisee would say, "All things are foreordained and free will is given." Well, how do you reconcile that? And they would say, "All things are foreordained and free will is given."

In other words, there's an affirmation of the two, because both are affirmed by Scripture—even though, obviously, it's a mystery as to how exactly they correspond. And we'll see what the Church has to say about that in the *Catechism* in just a minute, but for now, I'm just giving you the context for Paul's statements here.

So it's not unsurprising that Paul, as a former Pharisee, would speak about predestination, about God not only knowing about what is going to happen in advance, but also in some sense determining what's going to happen in advance. Having the whole map of human history planned and plotted, the whole drama of salvation—from the very beginning to the very end—is already not only known to God but determined by God...that He's like an author who writes the story...and as we'll see in a second, the *Catechism* is going to say: and He writes into that story the free agency of every human being. That's how powerful He is. He can both determine everything that's going to happen and include in it the free choice of every human being. So it's both/and, not an either/or. It's both/and. Both are true.

In any case, we're kind of getting into the weeds here, but I just wanted you to be a little familiar about the background of Paul's statements here. When he talks about

predestination, that's a pretty standard Pharisaic doctrine—which, by the way, is different than other Jewish sects in the first century AD. So there were other groups like the Essenes or the Sadducees, that would not have agreed with the Pharisaic understanding of free will and predestination. Some groups would have been more deterministic—in other words, God decides everything, and we don't have freedom. So that might be one view you would find on the ground there.

In any case, okay, so Paul here is affirming 1) divine foreknowledge; 2) predestination; and then 3) Well, what's the object of predestination? What is he talking about? What does that mean? What does God foreordain? What does He predetermine? In this case, it's salvation. So He says:

...those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the first-born among many brethren. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.

So notice, there's a string of verbs there that Paul's using. First, predestination—God's decision from all eternity, His choosing in advance, making a determination of events. Second, vocation. Then God calls “those whom he foreknew.” *Kaleō* is the Greek word for “to call.” We get the language of vocation from that. So what's my vocation? Well, in this case, Paul's talking about the vocation of salvation. So: predestination, vocation.

...those whom he called he also justified...

There's your third verb, justification, which we could do like multiple videos on this. There's a huge debate about this going back to the Protestant Reformation, at least. Actually, it goes back even further than. It goes back to Origen, but that's a whole other story. Justification can mean both to declare righteous—like in a courtroom, a person is declared vindicated, righteous. But it can also mean to make righteous. I'll leave open for just a minute what that is, but in this case, Paul's doctrine of justification, those who believe in Christ are:

...justified by faith apart from works of law.

And then the final verb:

...and those whom he justified he also glorified.

Glorification for Paul. He tends to use this term to speak about the resurrection of the dead. So that's when we will share in the glory of Christ. So what Paul is doing here is he's going all the way from predestination, which would be at the beginning or even before the beginning of time, to glorification, which would be at the end of time. It's kind of stringing together the whole story of salvation:

...those whom he predestined he also called...

..to faith in Baptism.

....those whom he called he also justified...

...in Baptism and faith. That's when He makes us righteous. He gives us the gift of salvation. And then:

...those whom he justified he also glorified.

...at the resurrection of the dead. Alright, so that's how this is all stringing together. Now, if you go back for a second to Paul's statement about being...

...conformed to the image of his Son...

This is a really crucial statement on Paul's part. And I don't want it to be overshadowed by the fascinating topic of predestination and free will. The point of predestination for Paul is that:

...those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son...

And the Greek word here is *sym-morphos*. *Sym* means “with” and *morphos*—we speak about morphology in English...although maybe not everyone speaks about that so much anymore. But metamorphosis is to be changed, and that’s what Paul is describing: to be changed into the image of His Son.

And the Greek word there for image, *eikón*, we get the word “icon.” So here you see where Paul’s describing, what is salvation about, according to Paul? What is justification about? What is predestination about? What’s it all aiming toward? It’s not just about being declared innocent or forgiven by God. There was a famous line in Luther’s theology of salvation, “*Simul justus et peccator*” —at the same time righteous and a sinner. And there’s a debate about how to interpret that, like there is about everything. But many Christians will take that—and have taken that—as a kind of shorthand way of describing the fact that when we are justified by faith, God declares us to be righteous...but He doesn’t actually make us righteous. We remain wicked. We remain sinners. We remain innocent, but the innocence and righteousness of Christ, in a sense, is extrinsic to us. It covers us, but it doesn’t actually change us from within.

And that phrase “at the same time righteous and a sinner” means we’ve been declared righteous, but we’re not actually righteous. We’re still sinners interiorly, kind of just exteriorly being covered with the righteousness of Jesus.

That’s not how Paul is describing justification in Romans 8, because here, in the very context of talking about being justified, he also talks about being *sym-morphos*—being conformed to the likeness of Christ. Paul doesn’t believe in just declaration, although he does think that we are declared righteous. He also believes in transformation, a real change taking place in the person who has faith and who has been baptized through the power of the Holy Spirit who dwells within the believer. So there’s an interior change because of the gift of the Holy Spirit that really makes a person not just righteous but also into a saint—*hagios*, a holy one like Paul will describe throughout his letters when he refers to believers as saints.

So the believer becomes a little icon of Jesus who in this sense—no, not in a sense. As Paul himself says in Galatians:

...it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me...

And that's a real life of Christ within the believer here. That's what predestination is all about. In fact, maybe I'll give you this quote in just a minute. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is really clear that God predestines no one to hell, but He does predestine to salvation. This is His plan. That's His plan of foreknowledge...is to give the graces that are necessary for us to be conformed to the image of the Son. And that's what Paul is getting at here. So there's a real change that takes place, at least according to Romans, which is Paul's classic statement about the nature of salvation and the Good News of salvation. So this is a very, very crucial verse.

In fact, if you want to dig into this a little more, I co-authored a book with Michael Barber and John Kincaid—two good friends and colleagues of mine—called *Paul, A New Covenant Jew*. And in a chapter of that book, we have a whole chapter on justification, which...I think the subtitle of the chapter is “Conformed to an image of the Son.” And it's all about the real transforming power of justification according to the theology of Paul. And John Kincaid, one of the authors of the book, coined a phrase that's very helpful. He talks about “cardiac righteousness”—in other words, that the righteousness of those who are believers in Christ is not extrinsic. It's not just something external. It's actually interior, because God, through the Holy Spirit, changes the heart—the *cardia*. There's an indwelling righteousness that's part—in fact, not just part of—the essence of what salvation is all about in the New Covenant...that God takes out our hearts of stone, as Ezekial says, and gives us hearts of flesh. He puts a new spirit to dwell within the believer so that the believer can freely keep the commandments with the assistance of God's grace and the grace of the Holy Spirit. So very powerful and very important point there.

So let me wrap up here with two quotes from the living tradition. The first one is from St. Thomas Aquinas writing at the end of the 13th century in his *Commentary on Romans*. You think I have a lot to say about Romans? Try picking up St. Thomas Aquinas' commentary. He has so much insight. But in this verse, he says something important about the first line, which I didn't spend as much time on but I want to return to now. He says:

“[A]ll things work together unto good for us” [Rom 8:28] To realize this we should consider that whatever happens in the world, even if it be evil, accrues to the good of the universe; because, as Augustine says in the *Enchiridion*: “God is so good that he would permit no evil, unless he were powerful enough to draw some good out of any evil.”

That’s powerful. So what is Augustine saying? Augustine and Thomas are both looking at this verse, “All things work together for good for those who love God” and saying that what Paul essentially is saying there is that no matter what happens in the world, no matter how evil it might be, God is so powerful that if it happens, He has only permitted it because He will draw some good out of it. Now that’s a tough one to swallow when you think about—it’s easy to kind of think about it in the abstract. But when you look at particular cases of grave evil, it can become completely obscure to us to say, “How could God bring any good out of such an evil?” And Thomas goes on actually to clarify:

However, the evil does not always accrue to the good of that in which it is. Thus, the death of one animal accrues to the good of the universe... although it does not accrue to the good of that which ceases to be...²

In other words, that animal itself experiences it as an evil, not as a good. But from God’s perspective, He can bring some good out of that particular evil. And in fact, He would not permit it if He weren’t going to bring some good out of it. And if you want exhibit A, just think of the greatest evil that ever was...and that’s the crucifixion of the Son of God, the execution of the truly innocent one, Jesus Christ, on the cross. And yet, it’s out of that greatest of all evils that God brings the greatest of all goods, which is of course the salvation of the world and the restoration of all creation. So there’s your kind of principle upon which you would judge all other evils. So this is the first thing that Thomas says about Romans 8:28, and I think that’s a helpful comment from Augustine and Aquinas to ponder that opening line. Because lots of people love that statement:

² Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Romans* no. 696; trans. F. Larcher

...in everything God works for good with those who love him...

...because it gives hope. At the same time, it's very sobering when you really kind of try to think about in the particular—look at your own life—the evils that you may have experienced or even committed, and think, “How can God bring any good out of that?” And that's where the virtue of hope comes in. You might not—in fact, you probably can't—see the good that He's going to bring out of it. But faith leads you to trust and to hope that God will because of who He is and because of His omnipotence, His foreknowledge and His providence is guiding all things toward good end.

Now I'll close here with...what about predestination, you might be thinking, Dr. Pitre? How about that? Well, in this case, it's very important to note that the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* actually has a paragraph on this. So you don't have to take my word for it. There's a short paragraph on predestination. In paragraph 600 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, we read these words:

To God, all moments of time are present in their immediacy. When therefore he establishes his eternal plan of “predestination,” he includes in it each person's free response to his grace...³

That's the classic Catholic teaching there. So when God establishes His plan of predestination, He includes each person's free response to His grace in it. And you'll notice, I'm going to just turn real quickly to the section of the *Catechism* on life after death that deals with this. So I want to add to that in the section of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* on Hell, that the Church qualifies. Although God does have a plan of predestination, and He includes in it each person's free response to His grace, however, that predestination does not have as its object damnation. The Church teaches:

God predestines no one to go to hell; for this, a willful turning away from God (a mortal sin) is necessary, and persistence in it until the end.⁴

³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, par 600

⁴ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, par 1037

That's *Catechism* 1037. Notice what the Church is saying there. Predestination as St. Thomas Aquinas and others have mentioned is focused on salvation rather than damnation. God gives necessary and sufficient grace to all to be saved, but some, through their own free choice, turn away from God through mortal sin. And that is the cause of eternal separation from God, not God's predestining anyone to go to Hell. So you can look at *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraph 1037.

So I think, in closing, when many people react negatively against doctrine of predestination—whether consciously or not—they're reacting against the common idea that predestination means that God determines some people to go to Hell irrespective of their free response to His grace. And that's not what the Church means when She talks about predestination. She means that to God, all moments of time are present in their immediacy. In other words, He knows everything in advance, and it's present to Him. And in that life, He establishes an eternal plan of predestination, but one—this is fascinating—that includes each person's free response to His grace, whether it's to accept that grace or of course, then, obviously, to reject it. But both the acceptance and the rejection of God are free acts; they're acts of the free will that human person does by virtue of their dignity of having being created in God's image and likeness as free and rational creatures.

So, anyway, that might be more than you ever wanted to know about predestination and free will, but I do think it's important to understand that the Church's doctrine of predestination is something that She gets from Paul—and not just from Paul, but from the reading for today in the seventeenth Sunday of Ordinary Time in year A, Romans 8:28-30.