

The Seventh Sunday of Easter

(Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	Acts 1:12-14
<i>Response</i>	Let all the earth cry out to God with joy.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 27:1, 4, 7-8
<i>Second Reading</i>	1 Peter 4:13-16
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	I will not leave you orphans, says the Lord. I will come back to you, and your hearts will rejoice.
<i>Gospel</i>	John 17:1-11

The Seventh Sunday of Easter for Year A continues the Church's journey through the rich and beautiful first epistle of Peter. And here we look at 1 Peter 4:13-16, which is another famous passage because it's one of the few passages in the New Testament that mentions and utilizes the word Christian as a title for followers of and believers in Christ. So let's see what it says. Peter says:

But rejoice in so far as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. If you are reproached for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. But let none of you suffer as a murderer, or a thief, or a wrongdoer, or a mischief-maker; yet if one suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but under that name let him glorify God.¹

Beautiful passage. Once again, we see that 1 Peter is clearly written to a congregation, to an audience that is facing persecution, that is facing opposition. And here, he reminds his readers that if they are suffering for the sake of Christ, their response to that should be one of joy, should be to literally rejoice because their sufferings are a participation in the sufferings of Christ, which means if they suffer with Him now, they will also rejoice with Him when He's revealed in glory. So earthly sufferings, sufferings in this life, anticipate resurrection, glory, and joy

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.

in the life of the world to come. So a very explicit eschatology or an eschatological theology of suffering.

Why should I rejoice in my sufferings now? Well because they are nothing compared to the glory that is to come, as Paul will say in his letters, or as Jesus himself says in the Sermon on the Mount. So here you hear a bit of an echo in the first letter of Peter of the final beatitude that Jesus gives to His apostles when He says:

Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice

there it is

and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so men persecuted the prophets who were before you.

So you'll see this over and over again in the Catholic epistles, in James and Peter and John, where there are all these echoes of the Sermon on the Mount, especially in James, but also here in 1 Peter, because what you're getting in the apostolic preaching is a summary and an adaptation of the teaching of Jesus Himself. So basically, this is Peter's version of the final beatitude in 1 Peter 4:13.

A second aspect of the passage that goes a little beyond what Jesus says, though, in that beatitude is the specific reference to being reproached or persecuted for the name of Christ, bearing the name of Jesus, is something that early on the apostles and disciples begin to experience. They are associated with Jesus or Jesus the Nazarene. One of the names for the early Church by some of its opponents, they were called the Nazoreans because they were followers of the Nazarene, followers of the man from Nazareth. And because that man from Nazareth claimed to be the Christ, the Messiah, *Christos* in Greek, *mashiach* in Hebrew, both of which mean anointed one, here Peter says:

If you are reproached for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory and of God rests upon you

However, notice here he gives a caveat:

But let none of you suffer as a murderer, or a thief, or a wrongdoer, or a mischief-maker

Okay, so he is very concerned to emphasize that suffering for Christ is virtuous, suffering for Christ brings blessing, suffering for Christ brings glory. But if anyone happens to be suffering for some other reason, because they've been sinning or because they've been breaking the law, because they've been violating the commandments, obviously, that is a whole different category of suffering. That person should be ashamed, whereas if someone suffers as a Christian, they should not be ashamed. In fact, rather, they should consider themselves blessed and they should rejoice.

All right, now in this passage, we see one of the few times in the New Testament where we actually get the word Christian, "if one suffers as a Christian." And the Greek word there is *Christianos*, and it's an interesting term for a couple of reasons. First, if you go back and you look at the book of Acts, for example, Christian was not the earliest way of referring to followers of Jesus. So the Acts of the Apostles will talk about those who belong to The Way, *ho hodos* in Greek. It can mean the way or the path. And that name appears to have been the earliest name for the Church, or one of the earliest names for the Church. If you were a member of the Church, you belong to The Way. But it wasn't very long before followers of Jesus, or members of The Way, started to be referred to by others as *Christianoi*, Christians. And for example, you'll see in Acts 11:26, it says that it was actually in the church at Antioch that they were first called *Christianoi*, Christians.

Now what does that word mean? Well there's some debate about it, so sometimes you'll hear it said, and I may have said this myself, that it means a little Christ. So Christ, *Christos*, is the anointed one. *Christianos* would be a little Christ. So this interpretation of the word sees it as what scholars refer to as a diminutive, so you have Christ and you have a little Christ, a diminutive form of the name Christ. But more recent scholarship actually inclines toward a different interpretation, that

what *Christianos* means is those who belong to Christ or who are members of the party of Christ, that it actually might be more of a collective or communal term, a possessive term rather than diminutive. So for example, there are parallels with this. You might recall in the gospels, there's a brief mention in Matthew and Mark of the Herodians. The Greek word there is *Herōdianoī*, very similar to *Christianoī*. It means those belonging to the party of Herod or those Jews who were supporters of Herod. Saint Jerome actually said that the *Herōdianoī* referred to those who thought that Herod was the Messiah because Herod built the temple. He did some of the things that the Messiah was expected to do, and he claimed, of course, to be king. So the *Herōdianoī* were those who belonged to Herod or those who thought that Herod was the Messiah.

And then there were also the *Kaisarianoī*, those who belonged to the party of Caesar, those who were political supporters of Caesar. So in this interpretation, what *Christianoī* or Christian means is those who belong to Christ, who are part of the body or the party, so to speak, who support Christ and who honor Him, not just as a great prophet, but as the *Christos*, as the Messiah, as the long-awaited king of Israel.

So if that's the case, and I think that that's a very likely interpretation, what Peter is saying here is if you are being reproached, if you are being persecuted because you are a *Christianos*, you are one who belongs to Christ, then your response to that is not to be ashamed, but to rejoice, to count yourself blessed because you will share in the glory of the Christ, the Messiah, when He comes again at the end.

All right, now with that said, so that's just a quick overview of this. If you look at the tradition on this text, there are two features I'd like to close with. First of all, the Catechism of the Catholic Church has a nice little section on the name Christian, on the meaning of Christian, that I thought would be helpful to highlight. In paragraph 1289, the catechism says this:

Very early, the better to signify the gift of the Holy Spirit, an anointing with perfumed oil (*chrism*) was added to the laying on of hands. This anointing highlights the name “Christian,” which means “anointed” and derives from

that of Christ himself whom God “anointed with the Holy Spirit.” This rite of anointing has continued ever since, in both East and West.

Now this is from the section of the Catechism on confirmation. I should have said that earlier. And so what the Church here is doing is recognizing the link between the Sacrament of Confirmation and your identity as a Christian. So you can actually see this a little more clearly in the East. So if you look at the rite of Confirmation, it doesn't just involve the laying on of hands of the bishop. It also involves being anointed with oil, the chrism oil is what it's called. And so in the East, the emphasis on the anointing with oil actually led to the sacrament being known as Chrismation. So the Chrismation is when you receive the graces of what in the West we call Confirmation. In the West, we put the emphasis on the strengthening, the grace of strengthening, that is given to a person who receives Confirmation. In the East, the emphasis falls on the rite itself of anointing by calling it Chrismation. Both same sacrament, same grace, it's just different emphases in the name.

But what the Catechism's highlighting here is chrismation is very revealing to us because it reminds us that those who are in Christ and who have received the sacrament of Chrismation, or the sacrament of Confirmation, have been given the grace to suffer and to bear witness as *Christianoi*, as those who belong to Christ, as those who are anointed with the same Spirit with which Christ himself was anointed. So think here of his baptism. The Holy Spirit comes down upon Jesus in the form of a dove, and He emerges and He enters into His public ministry as the Christos, the anointed one.

So wherever Jesus, the Christ, is, there's also the one who anointed Him, which is the Spirit. They always are together. It's kind of like the unity of the Son and the Spirit are present in the very word *christos*, anointed one, which begs the question, anointed by whom? Anointed with what? What spirit, what power is He anointed with? And the same thing's true for those who receive the sacrament of Chrismation or Confirmation, who are anointed with the chrism, the oil of Christ, and the gift of the Holy Spirit. There's just a little connection there with the name Christian in confirmation in that sacrament.

And then finally, there's a really beautiful exhortation from a little known ancient Church Father, Hilary of Arles. Usually, I'll try to use writings of doctors of the Church or more well-known saints, but Hilary of Arles in the early church has a short commentary on 1 Peter, and I found this to be a helpful, practical application of what we read in the reading for today. This is what Hilary says:

If you suffer as a Christian, you have nothing to be ashamed of. Think of James the son of Zebedee or Stephen.

So pause there. Those are the two earliest martyrs. So James, the son of Zebedee, is the first of the apostles to be martyred. He's put to death by Herod by means of execution by the sword. Stephen is the first of the seven deacons, is how we usually interpret it, in Acts 6 who are chosen to assist the apostles. He is also martyred in Acts 7. So Stephen's the first Christian to be martyred at all. James is the first apostle to be martyred, one in Acts 7, one in Acts 12. And what Hilary is saying here is, look, if you suffer like either Stephen or James, like the martyrs, you don't have anything to be ashamed of because:

*However awful the trials you suffer may be, learn to glory in them, not to be upset by them. Christ's glory is revealed in the church when it suffers.*²

This is something, at least for me, this is hard to get your brain around. How can I rejoice when I'm experiencing trials? How can I not be upset when something bad happens? How can I not be upset when, as Hilary says, when some trial or persecution or suffering comes to me? It's by remembering the truth that the glory of Christ is actually revealed in the Church whenever they're suffering in the Church. So Stephen's martyrdom manifested the glory of Christ through the conversions that came about through it, not least of which was the conversion of Saint Paul, the greatest apostle of all time. James' execution in the early Church manifested the glory of Christ because, if you keep reading, the Church increases in its numbers, both in Jerusalem and abroad, after the martyrdoms of early figures like James.

² Hilary of Arles, *Introductory Commentary on 1 Peter*, trans. Gerald Bray [5th century].

And this happens throughout the early Church. You've probably heard the famous saying of Tertullian, that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of Christians, is the usual translation of it, or the seed of the church. In other words, wherever the blood of the martyrs is spilled on the ground, it acts like seeds that plant the Church so that instead of reducing the Church's impact, it actually grows the Church. So the same thing's true for the sufferings of those of us who aren't martyrs. Every time we receive the trials and tribulations and sufferings of experience as participations in the suffering of Christ, and we learned to glory in them, through that suffering and through that grace that comes through it, we actually expand the impact of the Church. And the glory of Christ is revealed precisely by Christians who suffer as *Christianoi*, who recognize that when I take the name Christian, I shouldn't expect not to suffer. I shouldn't expect not to have trials because I'm being configured to, and I'm belonging to the party of the one, the Christ, who didn't just come to preach and to teach, but to suffer and die for the redemption of the world.