

The Third Sunday of Lent

(Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	Exodus 17:3-7
<i>Response</i>	O that today you would hearken to his voice! Harden not your hearts
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 95:1-2, 6-7, 8-9
<i>Second Reading</i>	Romans 5:1-2, 5-8
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	[W]e know that this is indeed the Savior of the world; give me this water, that I may not thirst.
<i>Gospel</i>	John 4:5-42

In the third Sunday of Lent for Year A, the Church gives us a beautiful passage from Paul's letter to the Romans about Christ's love for us. And this Sunday, the Gospel is focused on the famous story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman—a beautiful story I've actually written about in my book *Jesus the Bridegroom*, which if you look at it carefully, is all about the love of God for His people and the love of Christ for the Church, His bride. So thematically, it's linked with the reading from Romans today, which is all about the gift of salvation, the gift of grace, and how God's love is operative on the cross and in Calvary.

So as we move closer and closer to Holy Week as we journey through Lent, let's listen to what St. Paul has to say about why Christ died for us and what the implications are for our lives in Him. So Romans 5:1-8 is the text here. This is one of those cases where the lectionary will give you a text but it cuts out certain verses. So it'll be a kind of truncated passage from Paul. So what I'm going to do is I'm going to just read the whole text and then when we go through it, I'll let you know which verses are missing from the lectionary reading. I want to give you the full context though. So in Romans 5:1-8, we hear these words:

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in our hope of sharing the glory of God.

And then these are the verses that are skipped, but I'll read them anyway:

More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope...

And here the lectionary picks up:

...and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us.

While we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Why, one will hardly die for a righteous man—though perhaps for a good man one will dare even to die. But God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us.¹

Okay, as usual, there's a lot going on here in this passage from Paul in Romans. Let me just walk through a few key points here. Notice, number one, Paul begins with the assertion that we are justified by faith. And this is taking place in Romans 5. He's just spent the last couple of chapters, 3 and 4, talking about the whole mystery of justification by faith and apart from works of the law, where he's laying out the fact that in Christ, salvation does not come through circumcision but through the gift of grace that comes to us in faith and not by the works of the law. So his whole doctrine of justification by faith, which is really at the heart of this letter, he's presupposing it in this first verse given to us from the lectionary today. So he says:

...since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand...

So pause there for a second. The Greek word for grace, as I've mentioned in other videos, is *charis*. It literally means "a gift." However, in this case, Paul is

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.

describing this gift, this grace, almost as a kind of state or a sphere—a realm, so to speak. He says “the grace in which we stand.” So we are standing in grace. We’re rooted in grace, which we’ve received through the gift of justification by faith. And it is precisely this grace that gives us the ability to rejoice in the hope of sharing in the glory of God. So the gift of salvation for Paul is something that ultimately is going to result in us participating in the glory of Christ’s resurrection.

So whenever Paul talks about glory, he’s almost inevitably talking about not just the glory of God, but also the glory of the resurrection, the glory of Christ that we’ll become partakers of when we finally reach the last day, when we reach the day of the resurrection of the dead.

And I’m not quite sure why the lectionary skips over the next couple of verses, because I really love them; I think they’re beautiful. So I’m going to cheat and just give them to you anyway, because he roots that hope that we have as being members of the Body of Christ. He says:

More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings...

So we don’t just rejoice and have hope for the glory that is to come in the future, but even in the present, Paul says:

...we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope...

So, we can do a whole series just on that verse, but since it’s not in the lectionary for today, I don’t want to spend too much time on it. I just want to highlight, though, that for Paul, the virtue of hope—the gift of hope—is something that is just as important as the gift of faith. These are traditionally the three theological virtues—faith, hope, and love—that Paul will mention in the famous chapter from 1 Corinthians 13. And here, we see him mentioning two of those three theological virtues. He talks about our justification by faith, so faith is both trust in Christ. It’s also fidelity to Christ (faithfulness) and believing in who He is and what He’s done on the cross and in the resurrection.

The virtue of hope is something more though. It points beyond the sufferings of this world to the glory of the resurrection. It's our placing our trust in the promises of God. So you think about it this way. Faith is believing—it's believing in things we don't see. We can't see them but we believe them to be true because of the person who reveals them. Hope is trust in the good things that we haven't yet obtained. So faith is belief in things unseen. Hope is trust in the things that we haven't yet obtained.

So we don't yet have the glory of the resurrection. We don't yet experience the glory of the resurrected body, Paul is saying. Right now, what do we have? We have suffering. We're still in this mortal frame; we're still in this body. Paul himself is still traveling around, preaching the Gospel, facing hardships, facing persecutions, being put into prison, being beaten with rods, being shipwrecked and set at drift at sea for a day and a night. All of these sufferings—that's what he's experiencing now.

But hope is the confidence that the things that we don't yet have—we don't yet possess, like the resurrection of the body—we will one day possess if we endure. If we have the endurance that builds character and out of which flows the gift of hope.

Those verses are just wonderful. I'm not sure why they're not there, but again, I'm in sales. I'm not in management, so I don't get to make these decisions. But it's that hope that Paul's saying in the next verse (verse 5), which is where the lectionary picks up:

...hope does not disappoint us...

That's a powerful statement. This life is full of disappointments. If you've lived even a short while, you're going to be disappointed. What Paul is saying is the hope of Christ doesn't disappoint. Hope does not disappoint us, why?

...because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us. (Romans 5:5)

So by the way, there's your third theological virtue—faith, hope, and love. And according to the tradition of the Church, all three of those supernatural gifts:

- The gift of faith, by which we believe things that we cannot see and which are above our intellect even to comprehend—the mystery of the Trinity, the divinity of Christ
- Hope, by which we trust that we have confidence in our ability to obtain, to receive the good things that we don't yet taste—the resurrection of the body, life from the dead, immortality, the end of suffering, the end of death. That is the gift of hope
- And finally, love, the ability to will the good for others, to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love our neighbor as ourself—the ability to love our enemies even

Agape—that's the love Paul is talking about here. That love of God was poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

Now it's interesting that Paul uses the image there of the love of God being poured into our hearts. So the image there...it's a metaphor. It's a metaphor for liquid. It's a metaphor for water. What do you pour? You either pour water or you pour wine. But here Paul is saying that the love of God, the *agape* of God, has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit.

Now when was the love of God poured into my heart? Well, if you look at 1 Corinthians 12:13, Paul uses a similar metaphor of water. I'm going the wrong way here—1 Corinthians, you need to take a right, not a left. 1 Corinthians 12:13... listen to this parallel from Paul. Paul says this:

For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit.

So notice here. Paul uses the image of water and even of drinking as a metaphor for the gift of the Holy Spirit that is received at Baptism. So I bring this up here because one of the key teachings of the Catholic Church that it really gets from Paul is the idea that—it's not just an idea, but the doctrine, the teaching—that

when we are baptized, we're not simply forgiven of original sin or any actual sins that we've committed. So, Baptism isn't just an act of forgiveness. It isn't just an act of cleansing. It's also an act of infusion. At our Baptism, God infuses His divine life into us. He gives us the indwelling gift of the Holy Spirit, and he pours into our hearts the gift of His love, as well as the gift of faith and the gift of hope. These are called the infused virtues—the idea that if we believe and we hope and if we love in a supernatural way, it's not because of our own efforts. It's because of God's grace. It's because of the gift of the Holy Spirit dwelling within us.

And you'll see this elsewhere in Paul's letters when he'll talk to the Corinthians and he'll say, "Don't you know that you are a temple of the Holy Spirit?" What does that mean? Well, any first century Jew would have known that the temple was a building, and in that building, God's Spirit was believed to dwell. Think of the Old Testament image of the glory cloud coming down upon the tabernacle in the book of Exodus⁴⁰, for example. The glory cloud is a kind of visible sign of God's presence, of his spiritual presence. And when the glory cloud descends into the tabernacle, it makes the tabernacle a dwelling place for God.

So the same thing happens for Paul here in the soul of a baptized person, in the soul of the faithful, when the Holy Spirit is poured into the heart through the gift of faith and Baptism, where we're all made to drink of one Spirit. So I just bring this up because it's important to emphasize that for Paul, Baptism isn't just a kind of external profession of belief in Jesus. Or it isn't just becoming a member of the local parish or the local church. It is those things—Baptism is tied to faith inextricably. It also means we become a member of the Church; we become a member of the mystical Body of Christ. Paul is very clear about that in 1 Corinthians 12. We've all been baptized into one Body.

But there's something even more happening. There's something interior happening according to Paul. Since we've been justified by faith, we stand in grace in a state of grace—by the way, that's where we get the image of a state of grace, the grace in which we stand—because the Holy Spirit has been poured into our hearts, been infused into us.

In other words—this is so crucial—for Paul, justification brings about a real change in the human heart. It’s not just a declaration that you’re innocent or a declaration that God will forgive you, even though He knows you’re still a sinner. No. He forgives you and He pours into the soul the gift of the Holy Spirit, the gift of His divine *agape*, His divine love.

In a book that I co-wrote with Michael Barber and John Kincaid, there’s a wonderful chapter on justification where we talk about—and this is John Kincaid, this is his, in particular, his brain child—we talk about cardiac righteousness in Paul. In other words, God is like the divine heart surgeon, and He’s going to take out our hearts of stone...and through Baptism, He gives us a heart transplant, a new heart. This is from the book of the prophet Ezekiel. He talks about God will give us a new heart, a heart of flesh. And that heart, according to Paul, is filled with the *agape* of God, which is the Holy Spirit. There’s an infusion of the gift of the Spirit that takes place in justification.

So, justification is not merely a legal declaration—although it is that. There’s a declaration that takes place of righteousness. But it’s also a transformation for Paul through the power of the Holy Spirit. Little bit of theology there, but I think it’s important for us to understand what we’ve received. What’s the Good News? This is the Good News from Paul.

Now, he continues here. He says:

While we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.
(Romans 5:6)

And he says most of us would not even die for a righteous man. Although perhaps someone would die for him. But God shows his love—*agape*, same word here, his love—and that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us.

Alright, so notice what Paul is saying here...that before justification takes place, before we are baptized, we are both sinners—and not just sinners. The Greek word Paul uses here is “impious.” *Asebeia* is the Greek. *Eusebeia* means “pious.” *Asebeia* means without any piety, like ungodly, impious, irreverent. So it’s not just

that we're sinners, people who miss the mark. It's that we were ungodly before that grace comes into our hearts. But it's precisely at that point, while we were yet sinners, that God sends His Son and God, through His love, which is manifested on the cross, God dies for us so that we might be justified...so that we might receive the grace of the Holy Spirit. So we might have His love poured into our hearts.

And that's just a powerful message. It's something that the Church is calling to our attention during Lent. And I think it's something that is important for us to remember, especially during the Lenten season, because a lot of what we're focusing on during Lent is calling to mind our sins—remembering that we are sinners, remembering that we are ashes and to ashes we shall return, remembering our humanity, our weakness, and our sinfulness. And honestly, it can be a little bit of a downer, right? It can be a little depressing to focus so much on our sin. So in the midst of that, God—through Paul here—is reminding us that our sin is not a barrier to God's love. In fact, it's precisely our sinfulness, when God saw us in that state, that moved His heart with love for us to send His Son so that He might redeem us.

And there's a great interpretation of this in the living tradition from St. John Chrysostom. I've mentioned him before. He was bishop of Constantinople in the late 4th century, and he wrote a commentary. He wrote homilies on all the letters of Paul. And this is what he has to say about this passage from Romans. Just listen to this and think about this for a minute. St. John Chrysostom wrote:

If then He hath brought us near to Himself, when we were far off, much more will He keep us now that we are near.... What grace is this? tell me. It is the being counted worthy of the knowledge of God, the being forced from error, the coming to a knowledge of the Truth, the obtaining of all the blessings that come through Baptism. For the end of His bringing us near was that we might receive these gifts. For it was not only that we might have simple remission of sins, that we were reconciled; but that we might receive also countless benefits.²

² John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Romans* 9; trans. *NPNF* 11.396

That's from his *Homilies on Romans*, number 9. In other words, what St. John Chrysostom is basically saying here to his congregation as he's preaching here is, "Listen...if God did this for us, if He brought us near to Himself when we were so far away through our sin, then how much more is He going to keep us near to Him through His grace now that we are members of the Body of His Son?"

So it's just...this passage is just a great cause for hope. It should give us hope when we read these words of Paul in Romans 5. Sometimes it can be overwhelming. Sometimes it can be discouraging as we think of our own sinfulness, as we think of our own weakness. And what Chrysostom is basically saying is, "Look, if God loved you when you were in your ungodly state before you were baptized, why should you doubt that He loves you now that you are in a state of grace and that you are a part of the mystical Body of His Son?"

And the *Catechism* gives us a similar message here. There's a passage in paragraph 604 and 605 which actually takes the very text that we're listening to today—the second reading from Romans 5:8—and it comments on it. And it says this about it, I'm quoting here:

“shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us” [Rom 5:8]... He affirms that he came “to give his life as a ransom for many”; this last term is not restrictive, but contrasts the whole of humanity with the unique person of the redeemer who hands himself over to save us. The Church, following the apostles, teaches that Christ died for all men without exception: “*There is not, never has been, and never will be a single human being for whom Christ did not suffer.*”³

That's *Catechism* 604-605. Now that's a powerful statement. I want you to think about that. Think about all of the human beings who have ever existed since the beginning of time or who will ever exist all the way until the end of time. And what the Church is saying here is that Romans 5 is teaching us that there is not, never has been, and never will be a single human being whom Christ did not love and for whom Christ did not suffer and die.

³ CCC 604-605

That's really encouraging. That is Good News, especially as we reflect on the Gospel for today. The Gospel for the third Sunday of Lent in year A is the famous story of the Samaritan woman, who as you know, had a pretty rough life and was not in a state of grace (to use later terminology) when Jesus encounters her. When He encounters her at the well, what does He bring to her attention? Not only is she living with a man who is not her husband but that she's had five husbands. Which, in a first century context, it's difficult to imagine just how scandalous that kind of a life would have been. She not only would have multiple marriages, but she'd have been living in a public and permanent state of fornication and adultery. And yet...and yet...Christ goes to the well and meets her there. He has an encounter with her. He wants to meet with her. He wants to offer her the gift of living water, the gift of the Holy Spirit, the gift of forgiveness.

And of course, in that beautiful encounter, Jesus is the one who takes the initiative. He's the one who says "I thirst" and invites her into this conversation with Him. So I want you to think about it. Maybe your life hasn't been as broken as the Samaritan woman. But we really still should see—each one of us— ourselves in her. Just put yourself—think back on your life. What was the worst sin you ever committed? What was your lowest point? What was your darkest hour? Think about that moment and that sin...and realize that from all eternity, God saw you in that moment. And while you were yet a sinner, He loved you and sent His Son for you. That's the Good News that Paul wants to remind us of, that there never has been, never will be a single sinner for whom Christ did not suffer and die on the cross. And that while we were yet God's enemies, He loved us so much that He sent His Son to suffer and die for us.