

The Thirteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time

(Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	2 Kings 4:8-11, 14-16A
<i>Response</i>	I will sing of thy steadfast love, O Lord, for ever
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 89:2-3, 16-17, 18-19
<i>Second Reading</i>	Romans 6:3-4, 8-11
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.
<i>Gospel</i>	Matthew 10:37-42

The thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time for year A continues our journey through Paul's masterpiece, his letter to the Romans. And here, we turn to chapter 6 and Paul's discussion of the mystery of Baptism and the connection to Baptism and the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ. So let's see what he has to say in chapter 6, verse 3 and following, we read these words:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

Now it skips down to verse 8:

But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him. For we know that Christ being raised from the dead will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.¹

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.

Alright, so what's going on in these verses? The first thing we want to highlight here is Paul's language of Baptism. So he says:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?

Now the Greek word *baptizō* literally means to be immersed in water. And it actually was used in first century context, not just to refer to the kind of immersions that John the Baptist was famous for—that's why he's called John the Baptizer. He's John the Immerser. People go out to him in the river Jordan, and they'd be immersed in the waters of the river Jordan as a symbol of their turning away from sin (repentance) and confessing those sins for the forgiveness of sins. So it says that John practiced...

...a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. (Luke 3:3)

But the imagery of Baptism was something that was also practiced in Judaism of Jesus's day, outside of the activity of John, in the practice of immersion of water for ritual cleansing. So for example, there's a passage from the Gospel of Mark that is easy to overlook in many English translations, but it gives you a little insight into Paul's language here. In Mark chapter 7:1-4, there's a controversy between Jesus and the Pharisees, because the Pharisees notice that some of Jesus's disciples are eating food without having washed their hands. And this is what Mark says, listen to this:

Now when the Pharisees gathered together to him, with some of the scribes, who had come from Jerusalem, they saw that some of his disciples ate with hands defiled, that is, unwashed. (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they wash their hands, observing the tradition of the elders; and when they come from the market place, they do not eat unless they purify themselves...

Now, the Revised Standard Version here says "purify themselves," but literally the Greek says *baptizō*. So they don't eat when they come from the market unless they

baptize. What is that a reference to? Well, it's a reference to the fact that in first century Judaism, not only around the temple but even in the synagogues and in some of the more wealthy people's homes, there were ritual pools of water called *mikvah*. It's *mikva'ot*, actually, in Hebrew—that's the plural. We'll just call it mikvahs in English. And a *mikvah* was a ritual bath where a person could cleanse themselves if they encountered any kind of ritual defilement, like by going to a marketplace where they might have meat that was offered to idols, like a pagan or something like that.

So when certain very devout Jews would come from the marketplace, they would baptize. They would immerse themselves in water. So it was a way, again, like with St. John the Baptist, symbolizing cleansing from sin, especially if you were going to enter into the temple. So there were a lot of mikvahs around the temple that you would immerse in, so that you could enter into the presence of God and cleanse yourself from sin to enter into His holy presence.

So Paul here, obviously though, is describing Christian Baptism, which wasn't a repeated ritual washing but a one time event through which a person would be cleansed of sin—not just ritually or symbolically but actually, really, through union with the death of Jesus Christ...through union with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. So when Paul says:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? (Romans 6:3)

...he's revealing that Baptism isn't just a kind of external symbolic rite—not that there's anything wrong with that. I mean, that's part of it. It is an external symbolic rite, but it's more than that, because you're being baptized into the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. So he goes on:

We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. (Romans 6:4)

So if you think of this in terms of a chart, you can look at one side—you have the life of Christ, the mystery of Christ’s life. You have three stages, basically. After His death, He’s buried in a tomb, and then on Easter Sunday (number two), He rises again. So number three, He’s no longer under the dominion of death. Those are three key points. Once Christ dies and is buried and rises again, He’s no longer under the power of death. He’s never going to die again in His resurrected body.

<i>Life of Christ</i>		<i>Baptism into Christ</i>
Burial (in tomb)	=	Immersion (in water)
Resurrection (from grave)	=	Emergence (from water)
No Longer Under Dominion	=	Dead to Sin, Alive to God

Paul is saying just as that happens to Jesus—or happened to Jesus—in time and history and space, so too through this ritual immersion in Christian Baptism, those who go down into the water are united to the death of Jesus. They’re immersed in the water (just like Jesus’s dead body was buried in the tomb) and then they come up out of the water (just like Jesus’s resurrected body came up out of the tomb), so that (number three) they too are no longer under the power of sin and death. They’re dead to sin and now they’re alive to God. They had a share in the resurrected life of Jesus.

Now, I don't know about you, but that’s not the way I learned about Baptism in my Catechism class. In contemporary Christianity and contemporary Catholicism (at least in the west), when we talk about Baptism or we catechize about it, we tend to talk about it primarily in other categories, like either the cleansing of original sin—that was one of the first I learned, that your original sin is washed away, the stain is washed away in Baptism—or incorporation into the Body of Christ. Through Baptism, you become a member of Christ’s Body. Other people will talk about it as making you a child of God. Through Baptism, you become a son or a daughter of God. And all these are true. They’re all correct. What we don’t often hear is that Baptism is a sacrament of burial with Jesus...or Baptism is a sacrament of dying with Christ and rising with Christ.

But that's precisely what Paul's describing Baptism as here in Romans 6. And it's also crucial for understanding why Baptism is so powerful. Have you ever wondered about that? Maybe you were baptized as an adult. If you were, you'll know that if you come into the Church as an adult, you don't have to go to sacramental confession before you're baptized. Because when you receive the Sacrament of Baptism as an adult, it not only washes away original sin, but it washes away and forgives every actual sin you've ever committed, as well as all the consequences or temporal punishment for those actual sins.

Now, how is that possible? How is this one act of pouring water three times or being immersed in water—how can it wash away twenty years of sin? Thirty years of sin? Fifty years of sin, sixty years of sin? No matter how bad they are. How is Baptism that powerful? It just looks like some water being poured on someone's head or someone being immersed in a pool. The answer is Roman 6. It's because Baptism isn't just an external symbolic cleansing. Baptism is a participation in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, by which He redeemed the world and entered into the new life of the resurrection.

So every time a person is baptized, they are (so to speak) crucified with Christ and raised with Christ, so that the power of His death and resurrection flows through the water of Baptism by the power of the Holy Spirit into the person to where they are forgiven of all original and actual sin and made a child of God, made a member of the Body of Christ...but also made sharers in the one Paschal Mystery of Jesus's Passion, death, and resurrection by which the world was redeemed. Baptism is that powerful because the Passion of Jesus was that powerful. Baptism is that filled with grace because the resurrection of Jesus was that filled with grace. That's what we're tasting when we participate in the Sacrament of Baptism—as Paul will say elsewhere, when we drink of the one Spirit.

So in closing, I'd just end with a quote from St. Thomas Aquinas's famous *Commentary on Romans*. Although I didn't grow up aware of the connection between Baptism and the burial of Jesus, St. Thomas was fully aware of it. And in his *Commentary on Romans*, he says something really interesting about the connection between the Sacrament of Baptism and not just Good Friday (the death

of Jesus) or Easter Sunday (the resurrection of Jesus), but also Holy Saturday, the burial of Jesus. Listen to these words. St. Thomas Aquinas said:

By baptism, men are buried with Christ, i.e., conformed to his burial. For just as a buried man is put under the earth, so one being baptized is submerged under water. Hence, there are three immersions in baptism not only to indicate belief in the Trinity but also to represent the three days of Christ's burial. And just as the three days of burial were one burial, so the triple immersion constitutes one baptism. That is also why solemn baptism is celebrated in the Church on Holy Saturday, when the burial of Christ is commemorated...²

So that's from Thomas's *Commentary on Romans*, paragraph 474. So isn't that fascinating? So there was a custom in Middle Ages of having those who were coming into the Church be baptized on Holy Saturday. We still do this on the Easter Vigil. Because it's the vigil, then it's technically the Sunday, so it's kind of not as quite as clear as Thomas is describing here. But it's never less the case. Why do we baptize people on Saturday at the climax of the Triduum? Well, because Baptism isn't just a participation in Christ's death and resurrection, it's also a union with Him in His burial. And so Thomas brings out this beautiful mysticism of the triple immersion—being baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—with the three days of Christ's burial in the tomb...Friday, Saturday, and then His resurrection on Easter Sunday.

So I just thought I'd share that with you as a kind of beautiful, mystical understanding of the fact that even in the triple immersion or the triple pouring, every time we see a Baptism and we see those three immersions or three pourings—which maybe you've wondered about, why don't we just dump someone once?—don't just think of the Holy Trinity. Also think of the three days that Jesus is in the tomb. Or you can think of the three moments—His death, His burial, His resurrection from the dead. Because that's really what's happening in every Christian Baptism...or at least, according to St. Paul.

² Aquinas, *Commentary on Romans* no. 474; trans. F. Larcher, O.P.