

The Thirteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time

(Year B)

<i>First Reading</i>	Wisdom 1:13-15; 2:23-24
<i>Response</i>	O Lord my God, I cried to thee for help, and thou hast healed me.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 30:2, 4, 5-6, 11, 12, 13
<i>Second Reading</i>	2 Corinthians 8:7, 9, 13-15
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	...our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.
<i>Gospel</i>	Mark 5:21-43 or 5:21-24, 35b-43

The thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time for year B continues our journey through Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, which is not as famous or as well known as 1 Corinthians, but it really is a beautiful and profound letter. One scholar I was reading once compared 2 Corinthians to St. Augustine's *Confessions*. 2 Corinthians is the most autobiographical of Paul's letters. It's a very intimate letter. It kind of reveals the heart of St. Paul.

And in 2 Corinthians 8, the reading for today, we get a beautiful passage from Paul reflecting on the riches and the poverty of Christ. So let's look at what 2 Corinthians 8 has to say. In this passage, the Church has done something She does sometimes where She'll pick out certain verses from a section of St. Paul and not give you the full verses. So I'm just going to read the verses in the lectionary and try to expound them for you today. So it's 2 Corinthians 8, verses 7, 9, and then 13-15. Here's what it says:

Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in utterance, in knowledge, in all earnestness, and in your love for us—see that you excel in this gracious work also.

Then it skips down to verse 9:

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.

Then it skips down to verse 13:

I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened, but that as a matter of equality your abundance at the present time should supply their want, so that their abundance may supply your want, that there may be equality. As it is written, “He who gathered much had nothing over, and he who gathered little had no lack.”¹

So you might feel (even from the reading itself) that it’s a little bit of a pastiche, that it’s kind of chopped up a number of verses, so let me back up for a second and just give you the context. The context of this appeal to the Corinthians is a main subject of Paul’s letter in 2 Corinthians, which is basically his request to the Church in Corinth to take up a collection of money to provide for the poor who are in the Church in Jerusalem.

You might recall in the letter to the Galatians — or you might not recall, but I’ll tell you about it anyway. In the letter to the Galatians, Paul says that he went to Jerusalem, and he spoke with Peter and James and John, that they gave him the right hand of fellowship. And they basically gave him a rubber stamp, full approval, to go and evangelize the Gentiles. But, he says, with the proviso that:

...only they would have us remember the poor, which very thing I was eager to do. (Galatians 2:10)

In other words, the apostle in Jerusalem told Paul, “Go out to the nations, bring the Gospel to the Gentiles, but remember the poor of the Church here in Jerusalem.” So Paul had, as part of his mission as an apostle to the Gentiles, not just the evangelistic mission of converting them. He also had a financial mission, which

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.

was to appeal to their generosity to collect money from them and then to ultimately bring it back to the Church at Jerusalem and dispense it as alms for the poor there in Jerusalem.

So we often don't think of Paul as a philanthropist or a humanitarian raising money, but that's part of what his mission was. And so when he writes 2 Corinthians, a large part of this letter (especially the second half of the letter) is all about the collection for the Church in Jerusalem. So if you want an example of this ... not from 1 Corinthians but from Romans chapter 15, even in that letter Paul describes this collection as part of his mission. For example, listen to what he says in Romans 15:25. He says:

At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem with aid for the saints.

That means the Christians in Jerusalem.

For Macedo'nia and Acha'ia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem; they were pleased to do it, and indeed they are in debt to them, for if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material blessings. (Romans 15:25-27)

So notice what Paul is saying in Romans is, "When I come to Rome, I will already have carried out this mission of going to Macedonia and Achaia, Greece (which is where Corinth is located, in Greece) to collect money for the poor in Jerusalem. Because if the Gentiles have shared in the spiritual blessing of the Jews by becoming members of the new covenant, then they too ought to share their material blessings with the poor and the Church in Jerusalem." So it's a kind of give and take, a mutual exchange of goods. So it gives us a window into the fact that the Church in Jerusalem, Jewish Christians were poor, whereas the Gentile Christians in Macedonia and Corinth appear to have been more well off.

So, in context then, Paul — in 2 Corinthians 8, to go back to the reading for today — is trying to ... basically, he's doing the annual bishop's appeal. Every bishop and every priest will know that once a year, the bishop of the diocese will often

write a letter giving (appealing), making an appeal to the members of the diocese to be financially generous in order to support the missionary work of the diocese — often acts of charity for the poor, but other missionary efforts for the Church as well. Every bishop loves making the bishop's appeal, writing that kind of letter. Every priest loves pronouncing it, and every layperson loves to hear it, right?

It can be an awkward time, because it's a difficult thing for a spiritual entity like the Church to ask for material support through money. And part of what's happening in 2 Corinthians is this is Paul's appeal letter. He's making a financial appeal letter to the Church at Corinth. He's away from them when he's writing it, but he's going to be visiting them soon, and he's trying to encourage them to collect the money and have it ready for him when he gets there. So what he does in this is he uses Christ as the model for charity, as the model for almsgiving. So he says these powerful words:

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich. (2 Corinthians 8:9)

So Christ is the model. Now pause there for a second and ask yourself a question. He says:

...Christ, that though he was rich...

When was Jesus rich? Look at His earthly life. Well, look at the Gospel of Luke, for example. It tells us in Luke chapter 2 that when Mary and Joseph presented Jesus in the temple, they had to offer the sacrifice of two turtledoves, which according to Leviticus 12, was the offering of the poor. You were supposed to offer the sacrifice of a lamb for that particular sacrifice. If you couldn't afford a lamb, the law permitted you to offer two turtledoves as a sacrifice. So when Joseph and Mary offer that sacrifice, it reveals to us they weren't even (at the time at least) ... they didn't have enough money to buy a single lamb. So they would have been very poor. So when Paul says:

...Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor...

He's not referring to Jesus of Nazareth, to His earthly life. There was never a time in Jesus' earthly life when He was rich, so what's Paul referring to? He's referring to His preexistent state as the eternal Son *before* the Incarnation. So here what Paul is doing is He's saying, Christ Jesus, though He was spiritually rich (before the Incarnation), became poor, i.e. that is, emptied Himself of His divine glory, for *your* sake. He becomes a man; He becomes human — watch this:

...so that by his poverty...

...His humanity...

...you might become rich.

So there's an exchange of spiritual goods here. Christ has all the plenitude of spiritual riches in His divinity. But He empties Himself of that glory and that power, and He takes on the fullness of humanity precisely in order to bestow the blessings of divinity on humanity, on those who believe and who become members of His body.

And so what Paul is saying here is that Christ is the model for the kind of generosity that the Corinthians should exercise. So how much did Jesus give up when He became man? Well, He gave up everything, right? As Paul says in Philippians 2:

... who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. (Philippians 2:6-7)

Now don't get me wrong. That doesn't mean He stopped being divine. Sometimes people will think that's what it means. That's not what He's saying. He doesn't cease to be a divine person. He doesn't even cease to have a divine nature. However, He empties Himself of divine glory precisely by assuming a human nature, by assuming limited human form — a human body that can get tired, that can suffer, and that eventually can die. And in that poverty of the Incarnation, that's

going to be the mechanism by which Christ makes the human race rich with the spiritual blessings that He Himself possessed from all eternity as the Son of the Father.

And so that kind of generosity — which is essentially infinite — is the model for the Corinthians. So in the verses that aren't around here and in other passages in the chapter, you'll see that Paul is having a bit of a struggle getting the Corinthians to be as generous as he would like them to be, so he pulls out all of the stops here and basically says, "Your generosity should be modeled on the infinite generosity of Christ in the Incarnation." How much do you want to give? Well, at least as much as Christ gave when He became poor for *your* sake and for the sake of salvation.

Alright, so once he says that, he then applies it. He wants to be clear. He says:

I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened... (2 Corinthians 8:13)

So he's recognizing that he wants them to give out of generosity, not to their detriment but to the benefit of the people in Jerusalem. He says:

...but that as a matter of equality your abundance at the present time should supply their want, so that their abundance may supply your want, that there may be equality. (2 Corinthians 8:14-15)

So it appears from these words ... we can kind of infer that the Church in Corinth is pretty well off economically, at least as compared with the Church in Jerusalem. He describes the Corinthians in Corinth as having abundance, whereas the Church in Jerusalem having want, so he says in the Church there should be a balance. There should be equality. If you've got a surplus, you want to give that away so that those who are in want can be supplied.

And then finally, what's his last model for this? He doesn't just appeal to Christ; he appeals to Scripture. He says:

As it is written, “He who gathered much had nothing over, and he who gathered little had no lack.” (2 Corinthians 8:15)

What’s he talking about there? Well, he’s alluding to the book of Exodus chapter 16 and the story of the manna. Now I’ve talked about the manna a lot in other videos about the Eucharist, as a prefiguration for the Eucharist. We’ve talked about the manna as a kind of typological prefiguration or Christological for Jesus’ divinity.

This is the bread which comes down from heaven, that a man may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread which came down from heaven... (John 6:50-51a)

He says that in John chapter 6. We talk about the manna as a sacramental prefiguration. Just as the manna is miraculous bread from Heaven, so too the Eucharist is miraculous bread from Heaven. But here, Paul draws out what medievals call the moral sense. It’s a moral typology. What he’s saying here is just as when they went (in the book of Exodus) and gathered up the manna, some people would gather two omers, and they’d only end up with one. Some people would gather less, and they’d end up with the same amount, an omer. Every person gathered, and they all ended up with what they needed. There was a certain equality in the gift that they received from God. So too, he says:

As it is written, “He who gathered much had nothing over, and he who gathered little had no lack.” (2 Corinthians 8:15)

In other words, just as among the people of Israel no one lacked for manna, so too now in the Church, no one should lack for the basic material needs that they have. The rich shouldn’t have two omers while the poor have just a quarter of an omer. It needs to be distributed with generosity and equity among the members of the Body of Christ. So, fascinating... I’ve never seen a bishop’s appeal letter appeal to the manna as an example of why you should be generous, but Paul does, which shows his Jewish way of thinking. He’s thinking in terms of Christology, of Jesus as a model, but also in terms of the Jewish Scriptures and in terms of the Old Testament. So beautiful, beautiful, moral, and spiritual reading of the story of the

manna in the Old Testament that God gives to His people. And when He gives, everybody gets what they need to sustain themselves for their daily bread.

Alright, with that said, in closing, I just want to bring up two quotes from the early Church Fathers. There was a famous commentary that went under the name of St. Ambrose (who baptized St. Augustine), 4th century bishop, which was for centuries was regarded as the writing of Ambrose. By the modern period, scholars began to cast doubts on its authenticity, so they came up with the very creative name of Ambrosiaster. So now if you see a commentary called Ambrosiaster's commentary on the letters of Paul, that is the commentary that scholars think was written by some fifth century Christian whose name is unknown to us but was circulated under the name of St. Ambrose ... and then scholars came up with the name Ambrosiaster.

But it was a very influential commentary, because figures like Aquinas read this (and others) as actually Ambrose's commentary on the letters of Paul. So in Ambrosiaster's *Commentary on 2 Corinthians 8:9*, which was in Latin and very influential in the Latin west, he takes this verse from Paul about Christ becoming poor and uses it to explain the mystery of what the *Catechism* calls divinization. Listen to this:

Paul is saying that Christ was made poor because God deigned to be born as a man, humbling the power of his might so that he might obtain for men the riches of divinity and thus share in the divine nature, as Peter says [2 Pet 1:4]. He was made man in order to take man into the Godhead.²

So in other words, when Paul says that Christ became poor for our sake so that we might become rich, Ambrosiaster interprets that as an explanation of the mystery of being partakers of the divine nature. In other words, that Christ doesn't just become human so He can die on the cross and save us from our sin. He becomes human so that in His humanity, He can take our humanity up into the life of the Trinity and make us partakers of His own divine nature — called in the Latin west, the mystery of deification, and in the east, the mystery of theosis or divinization.

² Ambrosiaster, *Commentary on 2 Corinthians 8:9* (trans. G. Gray)

And if that sounds a little strange to you, we say it all the time — or the priest says it in the liturgy, when he mingles the water and the wine: “By the mystery of this water and wine, may we come to share in the divinity of Christ as He humbled Himself to share in our humanity.” So, beautiful line there ... might be something to pray with and meditate on, just the sheer generosity of Christ, the eternal Son becoming human.

Basil the Great (last quote) takes that a step further and says, “Okay, so what does that mean for the way I live as a Christian? It means that I must live a life of generosity and almsgiving.” Listen to Basil’s words; these are challenging. Buckle up! He says:

If, then, we keep in reserve any earthly possessions or perishable wealth, the mind sinks down into the mire and the soul inevitably becomes blind to God and insensible to the desire for the beauties of heaven.... This, then, is renunciation... It is the transference of the human heart to a heavenly mode of life.... Also—and this is the chief point—*it is the first step toward the likeness to Christ, who, being rich, became poor for our sake*. Unless we attain to this likeness, it is impossible for us to achieve a way of life in accord with the gospel of Christ.³

Now that’s from Basil’s *The Long Rules*. His rules were written for Christian monks, so he’s writing for monastics who are going to give up everything in order to follow Christ. At the same time, though, we’ll see in his homilies to lay people, he’s going to call them to a similar practice in the sense that for him, the practice of almsgiving (of giving to the poor) is a *sine qua non* for Christians. In other words, it’s an essential aspect of the Christian life. If you aren’t giving something of what you possess away to those less fortunate than you, you’re not actually living a Christian life, because you’re not yet imitating Christ, who, though He was rich, became poor for our sake so that He might make us rich with Him.

³ Basil the Great, *The Long Rules* 8 (in G. Gray)