

## The Thirtieth Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	Exodus 22:20-26
<i>Response</i>	I love thee, O Lord, my strength.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 98:2-3, 3-4, 47, 51
<i>Second Reading</i>	1 Thessalonians 1:5C-10
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	Jesus answered him, “If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.
<i>Gospel</i>	Matthew 22:34-40

The thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time for Year A continues our journey into Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians. And here, the Church picks up immediately from where She left off last week with chapter 1, verses 5-10. So this is from the opening chapter of the letter to the Thessalonians. And here’s what Paul says:

...for our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit; so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedo’nia and in Acha’ia. For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedo’nia and Acha’ia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything. For they themselves report concerning us what a welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 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, let's walk back through that and unpack it here. A couple of points. Number one, notice what Paul says here:

...our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.

Now what does that mean? Well, remember, the word Gospel is *euangelion* in Greek. And it just means a good message. *Eu* means good and *angelos* is the Greek word for messenger or message. An angel is a messenger. So an *euangelion* is a good word, a good message, good news...and here Paul says that:

...our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit...

And that's puzzled commentators, but it likely means—this is important—that Paul didn't just preach the Word of God at Thessaloniki, but that he also performed miracles through the power of the Holy Spirit.

And one of the things you'll see in the evangelization of the early Church—you can see this is in the book of Acts, for example—is that the conversion of the pagans will take place not just through telling them, “Hey, the Scriptures of the Jewish people are fulfilled. The Messiah has come”...but also by performing healings. Resurrections from the dead, the casting out of demons—these are things that Paul is going to do in the book of Acts and that are going to be motives of credibility for believing the Gospel.

This is actually the teaching of Vatican I. From the 19th century, one of the ecumenical councils taught that three principal motives of credibility for believing the Gospel are prophecy (the fulfillment of Old Testament Scriptures in the life of Christ), miracles (the performing of acts that require supernatural power) and then the third is the existence and the perpetuity of the Church...so the Church itself becomes a kind of living witness as she passes through time and is—despite all the trials and tribulations—She's never conquered. She's never destroyed...becomes a living witness to the truth of the Gospel. But those first two motives—prophecy

and miracles—are something that Paul himself is going to appeal to whenever he’s preaching the Gospel in the early Church.

And I was recently reading Pope Gregory the Great, his *Dialogues*. So he’s writing in the 6th century, and he had a question from a deacon that was written to him: Why don’t we see as many miracles nowadays as we read about in the New Testament? And Gregory says, first of all (and I’m paraphrasing here)—first of all, we’re not as holy as they were, so we don’t have enough saints. (You know, Gregory was a saint.)

But then the second thing he says is that the miracles of the apostles in the first generation were superabundant, in particular, as they were spreading the Good News to the Gentile nations who had never heard of God before. In other words, this was a charismatic gift given to the apostles in order to bring about the rapid spread of the Gospel amongst people who had never heard of Israel or Judea or the people of Jerusalem. They didn’t know anything about the Jewish Scriptures, but they understood the visible signs of divine power that the apostles manifested. And that opened the door of their mind and heart to listen to the rest of the Good News...to listen to the Gospel.

So Paul begins here by reminding the Thessalonians who, remember, they’re from a Greek city, so they’re pagans who have converted to the worship of Jesus and believe in Christ....that, remember, when we brought you the Gospel, we didn’t just preach words. We used power in the Holy Spirit.

The second thing is Paul praises the Thessalonians by talking about the fact that their faith has become an example to other believers in Acha’ia and then Macedo’nia. So these are Greek territories within the empire. So people in these other Greek cities and Greek regions (pagans) are hearing about what’s happened to the Gentiles (the pagans) in Thessaloniki. They’re hearing about their conversion to Jesus Christ, and so they’re becoming an example—a witness—to others who might be led to faith through them.

The third thing Paul says here that I think is extremely important is he then reminds them about the fact that they have turned from idols to the living God.

Now this is an exhibit A example of the fact that although Paul is successful in preaching the Gospel to his fellow Jews...there are Jews that he will speak to in the synagogue who will become believers in Jesus. He is much more successful among the Gentiles than he is among his fellow Jews. And when he writes his letters to the churches that he founds, although there appear to be Jews (Jewish believers) in some of these congregations, it seems like the vast majority of the audience to whom he's writing are not Jewish Christians (Jewish believers) but Gentile Christians—people who have come to faith in Jesus but who used to be pagans.

And that's really clear here when he says:

...you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God...

So he's addressing former pagans who have now become believers in Jesus. And when he does this, it's fascinating he says that:

...you turned to...a living and true God...

Because that's a standard expression from Jewish Scripture to describe the fact that the God of Israel—He's not a demon, He's not an angel, He's not some made up deity. He is living. In other words, He's the true God. He's the real God. He's the creator of the universe.

And so I thought I would take this opportunity here to just point out that when Paul alludes to this turning to God from idols, he's making moves that are very different than our contemporary context. So in our contemporary context, we live in a very religiously pluralistic context. We are used to there being many Christian denominations and many different world religions and many different people from different cultures and different places who believe a vast variety of things about the afterlife, about the human person, about the soul or whether there is a soul or not, and who express that in all different forms of worship and belief.

We live in a pluralistic context, and Paul did too. The difference, though, is in our contemporary society, there is a kind of relativism that says this group believes this and that group believes that—that's really not a matter of concern to me. There's

no problem there. To each his own—kind of subjectivistic and relativistic way of looking at the world.

But Paul doesn't see the world through that lens. Remember, Paul is an apostle to the pagans, but he's an apostle *from* the Jews. He's a rabbi. He's a Pharisee, and he would have known that the first commandment in the Jewish Scriptures is not "don't murder." It's not "don't commit adultery." It's not "don't steal." The first commandment in the Decalogue—the Ten Commandments—isn't about violations of love of neighbor. It's about violations of love of God. It's the commandment against idolatry.

So when Paul commends the Thessalonians for turning from idols to the living God, he's alluding to Exodus 20:1 and following. So just to refresh your memory there, in Exodus 20—actually verse 2—this is the first commandment in the Decalogue. And I want you to hear something about this. As I'm reading it, ask yourself the question, "Why is idolatry such a problem? What's the big deal? What's the issue with idolatry?" Listen to what Exodus 20 says, and this is what Paul is presuming:

"I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.

"You shall have no other gods before me.

"You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them or serve them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.

So notice, I've highlighted there, what's the issue with idolatry? What's the problem with it? Well, in the first commandment what God is saying is...those who worship idols, who worship creatures rather than the Creator, who make

constructed statues representing Zeus or Aphrodite—of course, this is before that in Exodus 20, but whatever god it might be—Baal, Moloch, Chemosh, whatever pagan deity you might be referring to. To worship another god rather than the Lord—the one God, the living God, the creator of the universe—actually is a problem of the heart, because what God says here is those who worship idols hate me, whereas those who keep my commandments love me.

So when we're looking at the commandments, we tend to put a lot of emphasis on the second tablet—you shall not kill, you shall not murder, you shall not steal—because those are about love of neighbor. But in Jewish tradition, the first tablet—you shall have no other gods before me, keep the Sabbath, don't take the Lord's name in vain—they are not just commandments...they are about the love of God. And so the problem with idolatry is if we worship something other than the creator, we will end up loving something other than the creator...and, well, not just loving a creature rather than creator...we'll end up hating God.

So Paul as a Jew would see idolatry as kind of the lived practice of the hatred of God. That's a very strong way to describe it; we don't tend to think of it that way. But that's the rationale of the commandments, when you look at the commandments in context. And it's also the assumption that Paul would have been working with. So when the Thessalonians turn from idols to serve the living God, when they give up the worship of Zeus and Aphrodite and Bacchus (the god of wine and drunkenness) or Comus (the god of revelry) and they begin to worship the living God of Israel...not only is this a momentous thing to think that pagans would begin worshipping the God of the Jews, but for Paul, it's a fundamental shift in the lives of the Thessalonians. They've turned from hating God (through the practice of idolatry) to loving God in the worship of the one true God of Israel and in waiting for His Son, Jesus Christ.

So just a profound theological point that Paul is making here. I just want you—as you're reading through the letter to the Thessalonians—remember this. Remember that he's talking to people who have only very recently given up the practice of idolatry and begun to worship the one true God. So there's going to still be a lot of confusion. There's going to be things they don't quite understand yet. One of the main issues they're going to deal with is they don't understand personal

eschatology. They don't have a...they certainly don't have a Jewish idea of what happens to you after you die. And so Paul is going to have to either re-catechize them or catechize them for the first time and explain to them some of the details and remind them about basic elements—basic truths—of the Christian faith.

And he does that here in a brief way when he says:

...you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.

So I don't know if you noticed there, Paul is describing the faith of the Thessalonians in a brief way with statements that actually will line up pretty substantially with what will later be contained in the Apostles' Creed. So think about it, just walk through the Creed in your mind:

I believe in God, the Father almighty,  
creator of heaven and earth.

So one of the first articles of the Creed is profession in the one true God, the creator of the universe—the Father, the almighty, the omnipotent—what Paul here has talked about, that they turned from the worship of idols to the one true God, the living God. Next line of the Creed:

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord.

Well, here Paul mentions too to wait for his son from Heaven. And then notice what he says as well if you keep going in the Creed after laying out the mystery of the Incarnation and the passion and death:

On the third day he rose again.  
He ascended into heaven,  
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.  
He will come again to judge the living and the dead.

Well, notice what Paul's laying out here—to wait for a Son from Heaven whom He raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come. Probably a mention there of the tribulation—we'll come back to that, Paul will deal with that in the second letter to the Thessalonians in a great deal of detail—but also just with the basic idea of the *parousia*, His second coming, His final judgment.

So Paul seems to be, in closing, reminding the Thessalonians of the two basic principles that we actually see in the Apostles' Creed. When he talks about the faith of the Thessalonians being known throughout the world, what the Creed would eventually do is take the faith that was preached by Paul and the apostles and summarize them. So what does the Creed tell us? It tells us who God is, and it tells us what He has done for us.

So who is God? He's the one true God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. What has He done for us? He's sent Jesus Christ, His Son, to be our Savior. And what is He going to do for us? He's going to send the Son again to judge the living and the dead. So that's how Paul is beginning this very first letter to the Thessalonians. It's fascinating. There's so much in that first chapter. Paul mentions the Trinity, he talks about the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love, and he even gives a kind of basic summary of key articles of faith that will later appear in the Apostles' Creed.

So he's laying the foundation, and then in the next chapters of the letter, he's going to go into certain more detail about certain pastoral issues that the Thessalonians are facing. But I just think it's fascinating that he begins with the faith of the Thessalonians, and it's the same faith that we profess today whenever we say the words of the Creed.