

The Thirty-first Sunday of Ordinary Time

(Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	Malachi 1:14-2:2, 8-10
<i>Response</i>	In you, Lord, I have found my peace.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 131:1, 2, 3
<i>Second Reading</i>	1 Thessalonians 2:7-9, 13
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	You have but one Father in heaven and one master, the Christ.
<i>Gospel</i>	Matthew 23:1-12

The thirty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time for Year A continues our study of the first letter of St. Paul to the Thessalonians and moves us into chapter 2, verses 7-9 and then verse 13 are the verses that the Church chooses for today. So let's hear what Paul has to say and then we'll try to see what he is getting at, unpacking his words:

But we were gentle among you, like a nurse taking care of her children. So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us.

For you remember our labor and toil, brethren; we worked night and day, that we might not burden any of you, while we preached to you the gospel of God.

And then it skips down to verse 13:

And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers.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 let's pause there. What's going on in this particular passage? Well, the first thing you'll notice there is that Paul compares himself to a nurse taking care of her children. And this is an interesting passage, because it shows Paul as the pastor. It's very easy when you're like me, if you're a professional theologian, to focus on and think about Paul primarily as a theologian—as the greatest theologian in the history of the Church, in the sense that all subsequent theological thought, all subsequent debates about theology in the history of the Church...you can make a case that they're all (in a sense) commentary on the letters of Paul. They're debates about the meaning of Paul's word, about Paul's theology.

So Paul is the great apostle. He's a great theologian. But it's also important to remember that Paul—in his everyday life—is primarily a pastor. He's going around, he's bringing the Good News to the nations, and he's also acting as a shepherd to his flock...shepherding the churches that he founds and guiding them in the spiritual path of faith in Christ. And so here he's describing his pastoral approach to the Thessalonians, which was one of gentleness. They don't know anything. They're pagans. They're coming to the living God, having converted from idols, so he's gentle with them. He's like a nurse taking care of her children. He's desirous that he's ready to share with them not just the Gospel but his own self, because they became very dear to him.

So you see here a little bit of an image here of Paul's paternal love for his flock...paternal love for the believers who he has been teaching the Gospel and preaching the Gospel to. Now in that context, if you want a little idea...well, what does he mean, he brought the Gospel to them? You can again go back to the book of Acts, because in Acts chapter 17, we actually have a description of how Paul brought the Gospel to the Thessalonians.

Now in this case, it's a description of Paul's preaching in the synagogue, but I still think it's interesting for us to read it as background to the letter...and you'll see why in just a second. So if you want to ask yourself: what did it look like when Paul preached the Gospel? Let's look at Acts 17, verses 1-4. This is what it says:

Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. And Paul went

in, as was his custom, and for three weeks he argued with them from the scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, “This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ.” And some of them were persuaded, and joined Paul and Silas; as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women.

So notice a couple of things here. First, Paul’s first preaching the Gospel in this city isn’t to the pagans; it’s to the Jews. He goes into the synagogue. Second, notice...how does he preach the Gospel? He argues from the Scriptures that Jesus is the Messiah. And that’s really important for us to remember. Evangelization should be rooted in the proclamation of Scripture. Again, one of the main motives of credibility that Paul’s going to use for arguing that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, is the fulfillment of prophecy. So he’s preaching the Good News through the Scriptures.

And then third, though, notice...it’s interesting here that it says that not a few of the devout Greeks accepted Paul’s word and became believers. So this is an interesting example of the bridge between Jews and Gentiles. There was this third group, this middle group called the God-fearers, and these were people who were ethnically pagan—they belonged to the Gentile nations—but they had become attracted to Judaism. They were open to Judaism. They would even attend the synagogue. They would listen to the Jewish Scriptures, and they believed in the one God. And some scholars have speculated—and I think this is reasonable—that Paul’s success through those devout Greeks was perhaps a doorway to which he preached to other Greeks in the city who were full-blooded pagans. They weren’t God-fearers; they were worshipping idols. He then used them to bring those pagans into the Church, so his success among the devout Greeks (the God-fearers in the synagogue) might have been an avenue to his reaching out to other pagans in the city.

We don’t know this for a fact, but it would make sense because those devout Greeks are going to have family members who are just regular Greeks, who are pagans, but who live in the city and who would be known to them. So, it’s just speculation, but it’s an interesting point. It gives us a bit of a window into Paul’s proclamation of the Gospels and how he might have branched out in the Church at

Thessaloniki to include other people in the city with whom he was very gentle, he was very delicate...but he led them step by step to faith in the one true God, the living God, and in Jesus Christ His Son.

And one of the things...the second thing that Paul mentions here is that he says...he calls to mind his labor and toil and that he worked night and day while he was among them, that he might not burden them. And this is going to be an interesting point that Paul will bring up in many of his letters—the fact that he was not idle but that he worked and paid his own way. So again, the book of Acts gives us important information. It tells us that Paul was a tentmaker, so he was a tradesman. He could work with his hands. He could make tents and then sell those tents for money, as were Priscilla and Aquila, two of his companions.

So Paul's being able to work with his own hands, his diligence and his labor is an important witness....it's an important clue to the fact that he's not a charlatan who's just trying to make money off of people. In other words, if he would have come into the city and he were idle, and he was preaching a message and getting money for it, it would compromise the integrity of his Gospel. But he's reminding the Thessalonians, "I didn't make any money off of you. I worked with my own hands. I brought you the Gospel because I loved you, and I was with you like a nurse among their children. I wanted to give you my very self, because you became dear to me."

So Paul's willingness to work, his dedication to manual labor, showed that he loved the Thessalonians for who they were, not for what they could provide for him...not for what they could give him. And this is going to be throughout Church history an issue that the Church is going to have to deal with, and it's the question of the relationship between the Church and finances.

So we'll see that throughout Church history, it'll often be the case that reformed movements like the Mendicant orders in the Middle Ages (like the Franciscans or the Dominicans) will frequently take vows of poverty and detach themselves from financial wealth—financial wealth, what other kind of wealth is there? You know, detach themselves from money—in order to show that their principal purpose is not to accrue any wealth or possessions but to simply proclaim the Gospel. And

that dedication to that kind of integrity is going to be a witness. It's going to be a frequent motive of credibility for believing the truth of the Gospel.

And so Paul brings it up here, and I just bring that to your attention, because Paul brings it to their attention. He reminds them in this letter, "Hey, I wasn't trying to make money off of you. I wanted to give you my very self."

And then the third and final thing that he says in this brief passage from 1 Thessalonians 2 is that he commends them, he thanks God because they received the word which they heard from Paul as he's preaching the Gospel...

...not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers.

I cannot overstress the importance of that text of Paul. In its original context, Paul is simply commending the Thessalonians for receiving the Gospel as something that didn't just come from him but that ultimately came from God. But with these words, Paul gives us a theological principle that is extremely important for the Catholic faith and Catholic theology. And it's this: that when we talk about the word of God, we do not just mean the Bible.

So when people say "the word of God" in contemporary context, especially in an American context where we have predominantly Protestant (historically) country, they tend to mean the written word of God in the Scriptures in the Bible. But that's not the only meaning of the word of God in Scripture itself. When we look at Scripture, Scripture itself speaks primarily about the word of God in three manifestations. First, Christ Himself. Christ is the eternal word of God who was made flesh. But then Christ and the message of Christ, the word of God, the word of Christ, comes to us through two principal avenues: through the word of God in Scripture, the written word of God, but then also through the word of God in the apostolic preaching or through the oral transmission of the word of God. And according to the Bible, the word of God comes through both those streams—not just through one but through both.

So when Catholics refer to the word of God, we don't just mean the written word of God, we also mean the preaching of the apostles. And this verse from 1 Thessalonians chapter 2 is a key witness to that. So if you want an example of this, you can turn with me to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. In the *Catechism*, there's a beautiful section in paragraph 75-76 on the word of God and on divine revelation. And it talks about the fact that divine revelation does not just come to us through Scripture but also through tradition.

Now, a lot of times many non Catholics will actually misunderstand what we mean by that. So we'll talk about Scripture as the word of God and then sometimes people will get the impression that tradition is some kind of secret traditions that nobody knows about that we pass on by word of mouth. But what tradition really refers to is the living proclamation of the faith that has been handed down to us all the way from the time of the apostles and the preaching of the apostles. So let me just read these words of the *Catechism*, and you'll see what I'm talking about here. In this section on the apostolic tradition, this is what the *Catechism* says:

Christ the Lord, in whom the entire Revelation of the most high God is summed up, commanded the apostles to preach the Gospel, which had been promised beforehand by the prophets, and which he fulfilled in his own person and promulgated with his own lips. *In preaching the Gospel*, they were to communicate the gifts of God to all men. This Gospel was to be the source of all saving truth and moral discipline.”

In keeping with the Lord's command, the Gospel was handed on in two ways:

— *orally* “by the apostles who handed on, by the spoken word of their preaching, by the example they gave, by the institutions they established, what they themselves had received—whether from the lips of Christ, from his way of life and his works, or whether they had learned it at the prompting of the Holy Spirit”;

— *in writing* “by those apostles and other men associated with the apostles who, under the inspiration of the same Holy Spirit, committed the message of salvation to writing”²

Okay, so why did I just read that? What’s the point? The point is this: the reason Catholics revere Scripture *and* tradition and not just *Sola Scriptura* (Scripture alone) is because of what St. Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 2. Namely, that the word of God does not only come to us through the written testimony of the Scriptures; it also comes to us through the oral preaching of the apostles. So Paul says:

...you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God...

So the reason Catholics accept both Scripture and tradition is that both Scripture *and* tradition—when you understand tradition as the preaching of the apostles—both Scripture and the preaching of the apostles are the word of God, because they both communicate to us the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which He handed onto the apostles and then which the apostles handed onto their successors, and which their successors handed on to their successors, all the way down to the bishops and the pope today, who are the successors of the apostles and who continue to preach that saving word of Jesus Christ, which comes to us both through Scripture *and* through tradition.

² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, par 75-76