

The Twelfth Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	Jeremiah 20:10-13
<i>Response</i>	Lord, in your great love, answer me.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 69:8-10, 14, 17, 33-35
<i>Second Reading</i>	Romans 5:12-15
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	he will bear witness to me; and you also are witnesses
<i>Gospel</i>	Matthew 10:26-33

The twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time for year A continues the Church's journey through Paul's famous letter to the Romans. And in this case, for this Sunday, we look at one of the most consequential passages in the letter to the Romans, and that's Paul's treatment of the origin of sin and death in the world, and its connection to what would later come to be known as the doctrine of original sin. So this is a really crucial text. This passage was one of the foundational texts that led St. Augustine to develop, in particular, the Church's understanding of the sin of Adam and its relationship to the redemption won in Christ and the doctrine of original sin, in particular.

So if you've ever wondered about original sin and the Church's teaching on that, Romans 5:12-15 is a crucial passage. So let's read that together, and then we'll try to unpack it a little. Paul says this:

Therefore as sin came into the world through one man and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all men sinned— sin indeed was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not counted where there is no law. Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam, who was a type of the one who was to come.

But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if many died through one man's trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many.¹

Alright, so let's stop there. The first thing we want to highlight here is Paul's terminology of sin. So whenever Paul uses the word "sin," in Greek the term is *hamartia*. And I've mentioned elsewhere that this term means to miss the mark...to miss the target so to speak. And it's a common way of describing some kind of failure to love God or failure to love our neighbor rightly, which usually manifests itself as a transgression or a violation or breaking one of the commandments of God. You can think here of the Ten Commandments, for example. So if a person commits idolatry, if a person blasphemes, a person commits murder, that's a *hamartia*. That's a sin, because they failed to love God or failed to love their neighbor by breaking one of the commandments of God.

So in this case, Paul takes that term *hamartia*, and he describes it and he almost personifies it, that *hamartia* comes into the world, sin comes into the world through one man...and then death through sin. So the Greek word here for "death," *thanatos*, just means death. It's the same thing as the English word. However, it can be utilized to refer to both spiritual death—in a sense, like the death of a soul which is being separated from God—or physical death, which is the separation of the soul and the body. So death always involves separation. It's one of the reasons we don't like it. And it can either be of the physical or the spiritual kind.

Now when Paul talks about death and sin coming into the world through one man, the one man he has in mind here is of course, the one man who stands at the beginning of the Bible—namely, Adam, the first man in the Bible. And if you read through Genesis 2 and 3 carefully, one of the things you'll notice is that the whole story revolves around sin and death. It revolves around a violation of God's first commandment—which is "don't eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil"—and then the death that results from that. So if you go back to Genesis, God says to Adam:

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.

“You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.”

And then the Hebrew word there is actually like a doubling of the word for death. You should die the death, is what it says. Now if you fast forward to chapter 3, when Adam eats of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil and breaks the commandment of God, he does not physically die immediately. But he does spiritually die through sin. So he’s separated from God, he’s cast out of the garden of Eden, and then eventually that spiritual separation that takes place through the violation of the commandment...that spiritual death is going to manifest itself in physical death. So, as God says to him:

“...you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

And in Genesis 3:22, it actually says that after that happens, God drives Adam and Eve out of the garden of Eden:

...lest he put forth his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever”...

So He drives them out. So in Genesis 2 and 3, God creates Adam and Eve to live in a state of immortality, to live in a state of grace and to partake of the tree of life, which if they would eat, they would live forever. He never forbids them from partaking of that tree. In fact, He says, “You can eat of any tree in the garden,” which would include the tree of life, “except for the tree of knowledge of good and evil.” But once they eat of that tree and enter into a state of sin, they are now separated from God’s grace, separated from God’s presence, which is symbolized by them being driven out of the place of communion with God—which is the garden of Eden.

So Paul’s kind of assuming you know all of this. He’s summarizing this account of the entry of sin and death into the world, in the book of Genesis, with this very first line:

...as sin came into the world through one man [Adam] and death through sin, and so death spread to all men...

...because of that one man's sin. So, it's a very important point, because notice the sequence here. It is sin that comes first and death that comes after. So Paul is presupposing here that—as Genesis says—God makes man good. He doesn't make them in a state of sin. And He also makes them and fills them with life. He makes them to live. He creates them not just to live for a short time but to be immortal, to live forever. But what happens is, because of sin—which the man chooses to do when he abuses his freedom—death now comes into human history. Death enters into human life, and he loses the grace of immortality with which he was created. And then it, of course, spreads to all other men. And then Paul goes on to say:

...sin indeed was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not counted where there is no law. Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses...

So here, Paul is kind of depicting death almost as a kind of king, reigning over the world, through Adam and up to the time of Moses.

...even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam...

Now what's he mean there? It's very important. What he's saying here is, even those who didn't choose to violate the commandment of God—who didn't transgress in the way that Adam did—still bear the consequences of Adam's transgression because they are subject to the dominion of death. And the clearest example of this is the fact that to this day, the unborn and those who are infants and even children, die. It's not through their own fault. They didn't transgress. A child in the womb doesn't even have the ability to transgress. And even a little baby before the age of reason doesn't have the ability to transgress, to deliberately and with full knowledge break one of the commandments of God. Adam is the one who transgresses, but death reigns over all of his descendants, even those who did not commit a transgression:

...even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam, who was a type of the one who was to come.

So what Paul is getting at here is...this is a Pauline biblical way of describing the Church's later doctrine of original sin—namely, that everyone who was born into this world, all human beings are born in a state of spiritual death. They are born deprived of the grace of original holiness with which Adam and Eve in Genesis 2 and 3 were created by God to live forever. So they're all born subject to death, even those who have not, through any fault of their own, committed sin.

And that's why the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* makes it very...it stresses the point that original sin is analogous to human sin, but it's not the same as an actual sin, because it's a state and not an act. In other words, you and I are not culpable for original sin in the same way that Adam is culpable for his transgression. We are born into a state of sin, and as a result, we commit sins, like Paul says here:

...those whose sins...

So he recognizes that all men sin and that all people commit sin. But there's a distinction, because our sins aren't like the sin of Adam. Because he's the only one who was culpable for the first act of disobedience. Well, of course, Eve was too, but I'm trying not to focus on the ladies here. Just keep it focused on the guy. Adam and Eve are both culpable for that original act of transgression, but their commission of an actual sin means that all human beings are going to be born in a state of spiritual death and deprivation of grace that we call original sin.

And the Gospel, or the Good News here, is that the free gift of grace that comes through the new Adam—namely, Jesus Christ—is unlike the trespass.

For if many died through one man's trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many.

So you can set this up as a kind of chart, like a contrast between the old Adam and the new Adam. So the one man, Adam, commits a trespass that brings death and condemnation to humanity, so that everyone else is born into this state of spiritual death and eventually will taste physical death. So his disobedience makes many people into “sinners.” *Hamartoloi* is the Greek. We all miss the mark. Why are we so inclined to missing the mark? Because we are all children of Adam. Because we’re all born into a state of original sin.

One Man (=Adam)

trespass
brings death
condemnation
disobedience
makes many sinners

One Man (=Jesus Christ)

free gift (of grace)
brings life
justification/acquittal
obedience
makes many righteous

By contrast, the one man Jesus Christ on the other side of the chart, the new Adam, gives the free gift of grace that brings life to us. Now, notice that just as death has a double meaning—it can refer to both physical and spiritual death—so does life. Initially, Christ gives us spiritual life, and eventually that will manifest itself as new physical life in the resurrection of the dead. So just as, in a sense, sin starts with spiritual death and ends with physical death, so too redemption begins with spiritual life and ends with the physical bodily life of the resurrection of the dead. So His free gift brings eternal life and justification or acquittal of sin. Through His act of obedience, He makes many people to become righteous.

So what Paul is describing here is this typology of Adam in Christ. And I think it’s really important for us to emphasize this and to realize this—flowing out of the letter to the Romans, this idea that Jesus isn’t just the Messiah. He’s not just the king of Israel. He’s not even just the son of God, the second person of the Trinity who becomes man. Jesus is, for Paul, the new Adam. He’s the new man who’s the beginning of a new humanity that’s not going to be under the power of sin and death, but is going to be under the power of righteousness and life. Just as Adam made many people to be sinners, Christ is going to make many people to be righteous.

Let me stress that point. He's going to make them righteous. It's not just—as some Christian traditions are going to say, especially since the Protestant Reformation—it's not just that He's going to acquit us and forgive us and declare us to be righteous while we actually continue to be intrinsically evil or intrinsically sinful. No, no, no. He actually is—through His grace—going to transform the many who are made sinners, really sinners, by Adam's transgression. He's going to transform them through grace to actually become righteous—not just to be declared righteous but to actually become righteous. And you'll see this, of course, most clearly in the saints in Heaven. Like Hebrews 12 will say:

...the spirits of just men made perfect...

They are no longer sinners. There are no sinners in Heaven. There will be no sin in the resurrection of the dead, because the grace of God will actually make the souls of the righteous to be truly just. So the righteousness that's lost by Adam in the fall is going to be regained by Christ in His cross and His resurrection.

Alright, in closing, I would just—there's so much more I could say about original sin. But I just want to end here with a couple of quotes from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* on the issue of original sin and the origin of death. One of the striking things about Paul's letter here to the Romans is the sequence. It's the fact that he puts sin before death. That death is a consequence of sin, that God doesn't create humanity, doesn't create human beings to live in a state of suffering and death. He creates them good, and according to Genesis and according to Paul here, He creates them to have life—to live—and not just for a short while but forever. So how does death come into the world? Whose fault is death?

Well, if you ask many people, they'd say (especially from a secular perspective) it's no one's fault. It just is. It's just the way things are. And you might even find someone who is maybe a deist who would say, “No, no, no. Death is part of the natural order, and in that sense, it's God's fault because He is the creator. So God is the author of death, so it's His fault.”

But according to Paul, death in both of its forms—spiritual death and physical death, we tend to be more afraid of the latter although we should be more afraid of the former—both of them are not God’s fault. They’re humans’ fault. They’re humanity’s fault. Listen to this paragraph from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. And this is in all italics in the original:

Death is a consequence of sin. The Church’s Magisterium, as authentic interpreter of the affirmations of Scripture and Tradition, teaches that death entered the world on account of man’s sin. Even though man’s nature is mortal, God had destined him not to die. Death was therefore contrary to the plans of God the Creator and entered the world as a consequence of sin. “Bodily death, from which man would have been immune had he not sinned” is thus “the last enemy” of man left to be conquered.²

Very important for us to see it. Notice what Vatican II is saying here, that according to the book of Genesis and according to Paul, the first man and the first woman, although they, by human nature, is mortal—in other words, our nature is not eternal or immortal in the way that God is eternal and immortal in His very nature. We are created beings. We have a beginning, and apart from God’s grace, we are mortal. However, God doesn’t create Adam and Eve (in Genesis 2 and 3) apart from grace. He creates them in a state of grace. He gives them the gift not just of life, but He breathes the Spirit into them, constitutes them in a state of holiness and communion with him (in Genesis 2, in the garden of Eden), and gives them access to the tree of life so that they can live forever.

So He’s destined man for immortality, but what happens is, Vatican II is saying here is:

“Bodily death, from which man would have been immune had he not sinned”...

..comes into the world precisely through the transgression of the first man and the first woman. So death is a consequence of sin. And the reason that’s so important,

² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, par 1008

as the *Catechism* says here, is because the upshot, the conclusion of that implication is that death is the enemy of man that needs to be conquered.

You can put it this way. Think of it in terms of questions of worldview. So sometimes sociologists and anthropologists will talk about different worldviews among cultures. It's the way cultures answer fundamental questions of human existence, like: "Who am I?" "Where did I come from?" "Where are we going?" And then one of those questions of worldview, "What is the problem?" And "What is the solution?"

And by that, we don't mean, "What is my problem?" or "What is a problem?" But what is the fundamental problem of human existence? And lots of people will give different answers to that. Some people will say the problem is economic injustice. Other people will say the problem is sickness and disease. Others will say that it's poverty or hunger or abuse of the environment, pollution of the world—whatever it might be—lack of education. Whatever you might think the problem is, according to the Bible—according to Paul in Romans 5—the problem is death. And the root of the problem of death is sin.

So what the *Catechism* is saying here is that in order for us to understand the Gospel, we really have to understand that the problem is sin and death. And therefore, the solution is going to be the conquering of sin and death by the new Adam, who is Jesus Christ. I was trying to put this better, but I can't put it better than the *Catechism*. If you look, there's one other paragraph, in paragraph 389—this is what the *Catechism* says about the truth that Paul's talking about here. Paragraph 389, it says this:

The doctrine of original sin is, so to speak, the "reverse side" of the Good News that Jesus is the Savior of all men, that all need salvation, and that salvation is offered to all through Christ. The Church, which has the mind of Christ, knows very well that we cannot tamper with the revelation of original sin without undermining the mystery of Christ.³

³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, par 389

So in other words, to put it in my terms, you can't understand the Good News of salvation unless you understand the bad news of original sin. It's the other side of the coin of the Gospel. And one of the reasons many people don't understand what Jesus comes to do, what His mission is, is because they either don't understand or they don't believe in the doctrine of original sin. Once you recognize that death is not God's fault, but death is our fault...and that at the root of the problem of death is sin, it changes the way you see the solution. If you ask many people today, whose fault is death? Many people go through this world thinking, "Well, death is God's fault. It's something He brought into the world." Which can make Him seem rather vindictive, right? Or even repugnant.

But from a Christian perspective and from Paul's perspective, once we understand that sin comes into the world through human agency and then death comes into the world through sin, now we can begin to understand why it is—as the *Catechism* says—that all human beings (because we're all sinners), and all human beings (because we all die) need a savior. We can't save ourselves from our sin or from death. Try it sometime. See it how that goes. It's not going to work out very well. We need some other power, we need someone greater than us to deliver us. That's the Good News of the Gospel that Paul is describing in Romans 5. As sin and death came in the world through one man and all men became sinners, so too through the one man Jesus Christ, the new Adam, there's a free gift of grace of righteousness and acquittal from sin that's going to lead not just to spiritual life...not just to the immortality of the soul...but to the resurrection of the body in a new creation. And that is Good News. That is really the heart of the Gospel.