

The Twentieth Sunday of Ordinary Time

(Year B)

<i>First Reading</i>	Proverbs 9:1-6
<i>Response</i>	Taste and see the goodness of the Lord.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 34:2-3, 4-5, 6-7
<i>Second Reading</i>	Ephesians 5:15-20
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him, says the Lord.
<i>Gospel</i>	John 6:51-58

The 20th Sunday in Ordinary Time for Year B brings us to a brief, but I think, consequential passage from St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians. Let's see what the reading says for today. Paul writes:

Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise men but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart, always and for everything giving thanks in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father.¹

It's a very brief passage, but it is significant for a couple of reasons. The first one is just it's a good example of Paul's exhortation of how the Christian life can be summed up in the imagery of walking. There are two paths you can walk on. You can walk on the way of life or the way of death. You can walk on the way of Christ or use, as Jesus himself describes it, you can follow the way of the foolish man who doesn't listen to the words of Christ, like at the end of the Sermon on the Mount. So this image of walking on a path is standard Jewish imagery, going all the way back to Psalm 1, for our moral lives, right? So Psalm 1 famously begins the Book of Psalms with the imagery of a blessing for the man who "walks not in the council of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of

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.

scoffers”, right? And then it goes on in verse 6 to say, "The Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish." So, the image of the way, and the imagery of walking there is that of walking down a path. There are two paths. You can go down to the way of the wicked or the path of the wicked, or you can go down the way of the righteous or the path of the righteous. And so Paul here is using this Jewish imagery, although he's speaking to the Ephesians, which appear predominantly to be a Gentile community, and says look carefully to how you walk. Notice he doesn't mean look carefully at how he walk in terms of the way, like the manner of your earthly stride, like how you're actually walking. He's using it as a metaphor for our moral decision making and the choices we make about the path we're going to take in our lives. So he says be careful about how you walk, and don't walk like an unwise man, but as a wise man. Again, think here, although it's not a quotation of the Sermon on the Mount, this is basically an echo of what we see in Matthew 7, when Jesus says there are two kinds of men. There's a wise man who built his house on the rock, and there's a foolish man who builds his house on the sand. And the wise man who built his house on the rock is the one who hears my words and does them, and the foolish man is the one who hears my words but doesn't follow them? So Paul's using the imagery of walking down a particular path and a path of wisdom as a way of describing the moral life of the Ephesians.

Why? Because they need to make the most of the time, because the days are evil. There are many temptations at the time Paul's writing for the Ephesians to walk the path of wickedness, to walk the path of evil. The one that he picks out in particular here is drunkenness. Notice, he says:

Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery.

This is a really important point that people often miss, and it's not clear to me why there are many Christians who treat drunkenness as if it's a light matter or that it's not a matter for sin, that it is just a cultural thing. But if you look at Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 6, for example, he's really clear. He actually includes drunkenness among the sins that will exclude a person from the Kingdom of God. He says:

...nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor robbers will inherit the kingdom of God.

So for Paul, drunkenness is what we would call, to use later called moral theology, a grave sin. It's a mortal sin if it's done with full knowledge and deliberate consent.

So Paul is saying don't get drunk with wine, don't walk on the way of the unwise, of the foolish, but walk in the way of the wise, making the most of time because the days are evil. One reason I suspect he's bringing this up to the Ephesians is because in the city of Ephesus there were many different cults of the Pagan gods. And one of the things that would often attend the worship of the Pagan gods were drunkenness and debauchery. Festivals in honor of the Pagan gods, of which drunkenness played a key role. Therefore, when the Ephesians become Christians, they are going to have to change the way they live. They are going to have to change the way that they interact with their culture, with the surrounding Pagan culture, with the surrounding Greco-Roman culture. They're not going to be able to go to certain festivals that the Pagan gods and goddesses would be honored with through drunkenness and other forms of debauchery. But they have to walk the path of the wise, they have to follow the teachings of Christ, and they have to live as though they are members of Christ. And as Paul says:

do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.

The will of the Lord is not to get drunken with wine, for that's debauchery, but rather to be filled with the Spirit. Notice what Paul's doing. He's saying yes, as a human being, you have a desire for a kind of intoxication. You have a desire for satiation, but let your desire be to be filled with the Spirit of God. In a sense, he's saying — Don't, don't use this. Don't repeat me in this, although I guess you will, maybe — But it's saying to get drunk on the spirit of God. In other words, to be inebriated, to be filled with the Spirit, the Holy Spirit of God, and to express that not through the kind of debauchery and revelry that would honor the Pagan gods, but rather “addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart”. So again here, at least if I had to guess, I actually think he's drawing, once again, an implicit contrast with the kind of songs and revelry and singing that would accompany the worship of Pagan deities, right?

He's contrasting that with the songs and hymns and psalms that you would sing by making melody to the Lord. As Christians now, you're going to continue to sing, you're going to continue to praise, you're going to continue to rejoice. But instead of doing that in debauchery and drunkenness, you're now going to do it by being intoxicated with the Holy Spirit, filled with the Spirit, satiated by the Spirit, and singing songs “to the Lord with all your heart, always and for everything giving thanks in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father.” Interesting there, you'll notice the Trinitarian shape of Paul's solution. Instead of living a life of debauchery and drunkenness, that at least arguably has to do with honoring the

Pagan gods, you're going to be filled with the spirit. You're going to sing songs to God our Father in the name of our Lord Jesus. So, see all three persons in the Trinity there? You have the Lord Jesus, you have God our Father, and you have the Holy Spirit.

Okay. There are many things we could say about this passage, but for our purposes here I would like to just highlight verse 19 and those three kinds of sacred music that Paul singles out. This is interesting. The New Testament doesn't give us a ton of descriptions of what music in the early Church was like, right? So there's not like an account of the kind of music that they sang. At least not one as detailed as we might like. It is filled with various canticles, right? You have the Magnificat of Mary, you have the Benedictus of Zechariah. You also have the Nunc Dimittis of Simeon, you know, the hymn of Simeon. And then you have the various canticles in the Book of Revelation that are sung to God in the heavenly liturgy, but we don't get a lot of descriptions of the singing in the earthly liturgy. So this verse is really interesting because Paul mentions three kinds of music that he's enjoining the Ephesians to engage in. The first one is Psalms, right? The Greek word here, *psalms*, is the name for a song of praise like those contained in the Book of Psalms in the Old Testament.

Now we could do a whole study on the book of Psalms. Right now, the main thing I would want to point out is that a psalm is a particular kind of song in that it is often set, or at least it's originally set, to the music of a psalterion, which is a stringed instrument like a lyre. OK, l-y-r-e, not l-i-a-r. In other words, originally the psalms of David, they're called the *Tehillim* in Hebrew, it just means the praises. But when that book of psalms gets translated into Greek, it gets associated with the instrumentation that would accompany the singing of those psalms. The psalterion, a 10 stringed instrument, the lyre. And so it's interesting, Paul here does envision the Ephesians knowing the Psalter, knowing the book of Psalms and singing them.

And you could even make the case that by referring to them as psalms, he envisioned some kind of instrumental accompaniment, although that's actually going to be a controversy in the early Church, and even to this day I don't want to get into the debate over the use of instruments in music, or whether music should just be acapella and just be voices. For example, there are some Christian traditions, like the Church of Christ, which reject all instrumental music as unbiblical because the New Testament nowhere describes them using instruments in earthly liturgy, although, this is a little side note, it does describe them using instruments in heavenly liturgy. So in the Book of Revelation, for example,

Chapter 14, you have this heavenly group known as the 144,000, who sing a new song before the throne of God and who actually play on their harps in Revelation 14:2. Although the Greek word there is *kithara*, and it's more of a string instrument like a lyre, you know, or a sitar, if you want an example rather than what we would contemporarily think of as a harp. So there is instrumental music in heaven, so to speak, according to the Book of Revelation.

But anyway, back to Ephesians for a second. So you have psalms and you have hymns. A *hymnos* is just a particular kind of song in that it's often sung in praise of a deity, right? So a hymn is a song to God, praising God. So a psalm is from the book of psalms, often they are hymns of praise as well, but the Greek word *hymnos* is for a non-psalm song — that's getting very confusing, but I hope you're following — which is sung in praise to God. And then the final kind of music mentioned by Paul are spiritual songs, or *ōdai pneumatikai*, spiritual odes. This would be any kind of song that is about God or about salvation. It's spiritual in some sense. It's a sacred song. And so I think, at least for our purposes here, I think it's interesting that these three kinds of music are mentioned by Paul: Psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. All three kinds of those are mentioned by Paul because they are part of the repertoire of sacred music from the very beginning of the early Church. And so just to draw on the living tradition here as represented by the Second Vatican Council, I would like to highlight the fact that these kinds of hymns and songs are mentioned in Vatican II in the document *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, on the Liturgy. In paragraph 112, there's a passage that describes the role of sacred music in the liturgy, and I'd just like to read that to you for just a moment. This is what Vatican II says about sacred music in general, and I quote:

The musical tradition of the universal Church is a treasure of inestimable value, greater even than that of any other art. The main reason for this pre-eminence is that, as a combination of sacred music and words, it forms a necessary or integral part of the solemn liturgy. Sacred scripture, indeed, has bestowed praise upon sacred song [cf. Eph 5:19; Col 3:16]²

And guess what the footnote quotes? Ephesians 5:19, the passage and the reading for today. So I just think it's interesting that the Second Vatican Council, in its document on the liturgy, referred to this passage from today's reading in Ephesians 5 as a kind of biblical foundation for the fact that sacred music is of inestimable value. In fact, out of all the various arts, right, sculpture and painting, that contribute to the dignity, the solemnity, the sacredness, and the beauty of the

² Vatican II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* no. 112.

liturgy, according to the teaching of the Church, it's the musical tradition of the Church that is the greatest of all the sacred arts because it actually forms an integral or necessary part of the liturgy. From the beginning, you go, all the way back to the very first celebration of the Eucharist in the Last Supper, they may not have had sacred icons at the Last Supper, although they didn't need one because Jesus is there, right? They may not have had sculptures. In fact, they certainly didn't at the Last Supper. But, according to the Gospels themselves, Jesus and his Apostles sang a *hymns*. They sang a hymn. They sang one of the Psalms, the Hallel Psalms, Psalms 113-118, from the Book of Psalms, as an integral part of the liturgy of the Passover meal during which the Last Supper took place, and at which Jesus instituted the Eucharist. So, sacred music, and the Psalms in particular, have a key function as part of the liturgy and are also a treasure of inestimable value, and this is one reason why it's so important in our day and time to preserve the sacred hymns, the sacred songs, and the sacred odes that are part of the patrimony of the Church, that should be passed down from one generation to the next in order to make manifest, through the combination of sacred music and words, the solemnity and the beauty and the transcendence of the liturgy.

So, that's just music in general. I'd also like to end with just one more quote from Vatican II, from the same document, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, and this one is on the role of the Psalms, in particular, in the Liturgy of the Hours. Sometimes, if you've ever prayed the Liturgy of the Hours, one of the first things you'll notice, especially if you're new to it, is, wow, this is a lot of songs, right? We are chanting a lot of songs, whether it's Morning Prayer or Evening Prayer or Night Prayer. The body, the bulk of the Liturgy of the Hours, the heart of it really is the recitation of the Psalter, the recitation of the Psalms from the Book of Psalms in the Old Testament. And so you might have wondered, well, why is this so important? Well, let me just give you, in closing, what the Second Vatican Council says about the singing of Psalms, like Paul talks about, in the context of the Liturgy of the Hours. Listen to these words, and I quote:

Jesus Christ, High Priest of the New and Eternal Covenant, taking human nature, introduced into this earthly exile *that hymn which is sung throughout all ages in the halls of heaven. He attaches to himself the entire community of mankind and has them join him in singing his divine song of praise.* For he continues his priestly work through his Church. The Church, by celebrating the Eucharist and by other means, especially the celebration of the divine office [= Liturgy of the Hours], is ceaselessly engaged in praising the Lord and interceding for the salvation of the entire world. The divine office, in keeping with ancient Christian tradition, is so devised that

the whole course of the day and night is made holy by the praise of God. *Therefore, when this wonderful song of praise is correctly celebrated by priests and others deputed to it by the Church, or by the faithful praying together with a priest in the approved form, then it is truly the voice of the Bride herself addressed to her Bridegroom.* It is the very prayer which Christ himself together with his Body addresses to the Father.³

Now, think about that. That's really powerful. Why are the Psalms so important in the Liturgy of the Hours? Why does the Church, especially her priests and her religious, but also the lay faithful too who participate in it, have these Psalms constantly chanted, morning, noon, evening, night, over and over and over again, until the end of time? Well, it's because Christ himself, in his humanity, prayed the Psalms. Jesus didn't have any of the hymnals we have today. He didn't have the prayer books that we have today. The prayer book of the Jewish people at the time of Jesus was the Psalter itself. So, if you want to pray to God the Father through the inspired words of the Holy Spirit in the very words which Jesus himself prayed in His humanity, then you need to pray the Psalms. You need to do what St. Paul says in the reading for today, sing Psalms with one another. At the same time, the Church is saying here, not only did the earthly Jesus pray the Psalter during his earthly life, but when we take the hymns and songs of the Liturgy of the Hours, and we pray them in unison with one another, as the Church says, we actually join with Christ and along with all the rest of the Church in praising the Lord and interceding for the world and singing the "hymn which is sung throughout all ages in the halls of heaven." So there's a heavenly dimension to the Liturgy of the Hours. When you're praying it on earth, you're uniting with the Saints in heaven and with Christ himself, who sings this hymn of praise to God the Father in the Spirit.

And then finally, there's another dimension to the mystery, which is that insofar as the Church sings the Liturgy of the Hours day in, day out, until the end of time, it's also a way of hearing the voice of the bridegroom, right, and the bride singing together with one another to the Father. So, there's a nuptial dimension to the Liturgy of the Hours, there's an ecclesiological dimension to it. It's a mystery of the Church in that it's not just the voice of the bridegroom, it's also the voice of the bride addressed to her bridegroom as they sing this prayer which Christ himself, with his body, addresses to the Father. So, this passage from Vatican II, it's paragraph 83 and 84, is really worth praying and reflecting on, especially if you pray the Liturgy of the Hours in any way, shape, or form, whether it's a shorter

³ Vatican II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* no. 83.

form like many laypeople do, just Morning and Evening Prayer, or whether you're praying all of the Hours throughout the day as a consecrated religious. Remember, that when you pray the Liturgy of the Hours, especially when you're chanting the Psalms, when you're singing the Psalms, right? And they should be sung if they can, because this is how they were meant. They were, you know...it's fine to recite them, but they were written as songs, right? They were meant to be sung, meant to be chanted. When that takes place, you're not only praying in union with the Church on earth, you're also praying in union with the Church in heaven. And not just with the Church in heaven, but with Christ himself as he addresses an eternal hymn of praise to God the Father.