

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

<i>First Reading</i>	Isaiah 56:1, 6-7
<i>Response</i>	Let the peoples praise thee, O God; let all the peoples praise thee!
<i>Psalms</i>	Psalms 67:2-3, 5, 6, 8
<i>Second Reading</i>	Romans 11:13-15, 29-32
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	And he went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and preaching the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every infirmity among the people.
<i>Gospel</i>	Matthew 15:21-28

The twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time for year A continues our journey through Paul's letter to the Romans with a focus on chapters 9-11, which is the section of the letter that's focused on the salvation of Israel and the relationship between Israel and the Gentiles in all of salvation history. So, as I've mentioned before, this is one of the most difficult sections of all of Paul's letters, and it's a little tough here, because the lectionary skips a lot of it...so much of it that there's no way we can do any of it justice.

However, in the reading for today, the lectionary does take two very important passages that take place in Romans 11 and kind of fuses them together. So before I read them, I just want you to be clear. The reading for today is from Romans 11:13-15 and then it skips all the way down to verses 29-32. So these two texts are really both selections from the beginning and the end of the chapter that have been brought together. So I'm going to comment on them in that way. They're together, but they need to be distinguished here. And a lot takes place in between the two that isn't given to us. So this is just one of the limitations of the lectionary. The lectionary...to remind you here—this is important to remember—in a sense, presupposes your familiarity with the letter itself. And it's meant to be selections that can then be proclaimed and preached in the Church.

But it's difficult today, because there's so much going on in Romans chapter 11 here that I'd love to talk about. One of the most famous passages—which isn't included—is Paul's allegory of the olive tree, which has certain branches cut off and then new branches grafted on. That's what takes place in between the two passages we read for today. So I'm going to try my best to just focus on the verses at hand and see if we can shed a little bit of light on them. So let's look at Romans 11:13-15 and then 29-32, which says this:

Now I am speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry in order to make my fellow Jews jealous, and thus save some of them. For if their rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead?

Now skip all the way down to verse 29. That's where the lectionary picks up:

For the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable. Just as you were once disobedient to God but now have received mercy because of their disobedience, so they have now been disobedient in order that by the mercy shown to you they also may receive mercy. For God has consigned all men to disobedience, that he may have mercy upon all.<sup>1</sup>

Okay, so there's a lot going on here. The first point I want to make is this. Notice how Paul pivots at this section in chapter 11 and says:

Now I am speaking to you Gentiles.

This has led to a lot of discussion by commentators on the letter to the Romans as to the makeup of the congregation that Paul writes this letter to. So you remember, Paul had never actually visited the Church at Rome when he wrote the letter to the Christians in Rome. He's writing as an apostle who's on his way to Rome, so he's sending this letter in advance. And many commentators infer from this statement here:

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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.

Now I am speaking to you Gentiles.

...that Paul is addressing a mixed congregation. In other words, that the Church in Rome consists of both Jews—in other words, Jewish believers in Christ—as well as Gentile believers in Christ. And it's not an exclusively Gentile congregation like, say, maybe his congregation in the Church at Thessalonica or the Church at Corinth—although there is some debate about even in those congregations, about whether there are a few Jewish believers or not. But it's clearly predominantly Gentile, where in the Church at Rome, you can read this as suggesting that there are both Jews and Gentiles, and that Paul is kind of speaking to the Jewish Christians on one section, and then he turns to the Gentiles and speaks to them here.

I am inclined to that latter interpretation for a number of reasons—one is that there's a large Jewish population in Rome. We know that from ancient historians...Greco Roman historians as well as archaeological evidence from the various synagogues in Rome. But also because it would actually make sense of why Paul spends so much time in the letter to the Romans, Romans 9-11, addressing the question of the relationship between Israel and the Gentiles, between Jewish believers and Gentile believers, between Jewish people who don't believe in Christ and the status between them and Gentiles who do believe in Christ. It would make sense if he's addressing a congregation that has both Gentiles and Jews—who both believe in Jesus—that he would need to take up that question of the relationship between Israel and the Gentiles.

But again, we don't know for certain, and there's a lot of debate about it. In any case, Paul explicitly addresses the verses he's now writing to the Gentiles. In that context, he says:

Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles...

Pause there. What does that mean? Remember, although Paul—in the Acts of the Apostles, for example—always goes to the synagogue first and then he goes to the Gentiles, he does see himself as having a specific mission of bringing the Gospel to

the pagan peoples of the world. And you can actually see this in Paul's letter to the Galatians.

So if you just hop over to Galatians for just a minute, to Galatians 2:7-9, listen to these words, and I want you to get a sense of what's going on...or what's behind Paul's statement in Romans 11. In Galatians 2:7-9, Paul says this about his visit to Jerusalem. You might recall, there's some division about Paul's ministry, so he goes to Jerusalem to meet with Peter, James, and John, and have a discussion with them about the Gospel. Paul writes:

...when they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel to the circumcised (for he who worked through Peter for the mission to the circumcised worked through me also for the Gentiles)...James and Cephas and John, who were reputed to be pillars, gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised...

That's the background here to Paul's statement. So when Paul talks about himself as the apostle to the Gentiles, he's actually reflecting the division of labor that you see that took place when he went to Jerusalem and met with James and Peter and John—the pillars of the Church there in Jerusalem. I bring this up because we don't often think of it this way, that just as Paul was primarily (but not exclusively) the apostle to the Gentiles, so too Peter and James and John were primarily (though not exclusively—think of Cornelius here) the apostles to the circumcised...to the Jews. So you had this dual mission that was universal in scope. The apostles were going to bring the Gospel to all nations, as well as all peoples—both Jews and Gentiles.

And Paul's particular mission was to bring it to the pagans, and Peter and James and John had a particular mission to bring it to the Jews—which by the way, would make sense of the ancient historical tradition that Peter goes to Rome very early on. Because as I just mentioned and as commentators have shown, there was a very, very large Jewish population in the capital city of Rome by the time of the first century AD. Many of them actually had been brought when Pompey

conquered Judea—earlier on at the end of the first century BC. He brought back many captives—captive Jews from Judea—and they populated the Roman city. That was one potential source for the large Jewish congregation and population and multiple synagogues that you had in Rome in the first century AD. So it would make sense that Peter would go there if he saw himself as an apostle to the circumcised, that he would have gone there ahead of Paul to establish the Church there.

And then Paul's coming on the tail end and writing a letter to prepare for his visit to this Church in Rome. In any case, that's a lot of historical background. I think it's fascinating. But the point is, when Paul says:

Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles...

...that's what lies behind his words there, his statement of his particular mission. Now what he says here is:

Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry in order to make my fellow Jews jealous, and thus save some of them. (Romans 11:13b-14)

So what's that talking about? Well, that's Paul saying what I just said in his own words. Although Paul's mission is *primarily* to the Gentiles, it's not exclusively to the Gentiles. Paul has not cast his fellow Jews aside in his mission of bringing the Gospel. And you can see this with another quote from 1 Corinthians—another letter of Paul. So it's not in Romans, but this is the background. Listen to these words from 1 Corinthians 9:19-22, about Paul's universal mission. He says this:

To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews; to those under the law I became as one under the law—though not being myself under the law—that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law—not being without law toward God but under the law of Christ—that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some.

That's Paul's missionary strategy. He wants to save everyone. He wants the Gospel to come to everyone. So in Romans 11, what he's saying is, I'm magnifying my ministry among the Gentiles, not because I've rejected my Jewish brothers and sisters, but because I want them to see the conversions that are happening among the Gentiles to make them jealous, so to speak—he's speaking a little hyperbolically there—so that I might save some of them.

So you see, Paul's mission to the Gentiles is not a rejection of his fellow Jews and of his fellow Israelites. That's the first point I want to make here, because again, there's a pernicious error that runs around out there...and has run around at least since the second century AD at the time of Marcion, who was one of the first great arch-heretics in the early Church. And what Marcion did was he pitted the Old Testament against the New Testament. And he pitted the God of Israel against the God of the Christians. And he said...he basically described the Old Testament God as a god of wrath and judgment and as a different god than the New Testament God.

And one version of that Marcionite heresy of two different gods has been, and I've encountered this before in certain students who will assume "Well, in the Old Testament God chooses the Jewish people, the Israelites, and reject the pagans. And in the New Testament, He changes His mind and He chooses the Gentiles and rejects the Jewish people." So it's kind of schizophrenic god who is capricious in his election or rejection of different groups of people.

And this is a common—actually, it's not just my students. Contemporary atheists will often have that kind of a view of the Bible—think of the God of the Bible as this capricious god who's just picking certain favorites among the human race and then rejecting other groups of people. That is totally, totally wrong and totally a caricature...more than just a caricature. It's an egregious misinterpretation of the Bible itself. Already in the Old Testament, you can see that God has His sights set on all the peoples of the world being saved through Israel.

And the same thing is true in the New Testament. Paul himself in Romans is emphasizing that God has not rejected His people, the Chosen People are not

rejected, because the Gospel is now going to all—both Jew and Gentile. It's not a reversal of the election of Israel in the Old Testament. But some people think that's what Paul is saying because of the next verse. So if you look at the next verse, what does Paul say? He says:

For if their rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead?

Okay, notice the expression “their rejection.” You could read it in two ways. You could read it as them (meaning Israel) being rejected by God, like they're the object of His rejection. Or you could read it as them rejecting the Gospel or the Good News about Christ. In other words, they're the subjects of the rejection. And many people who take up that caricature that I brought up earlier would read it the first way. They would argue: “Ah, look, see Paul says that the Jewish people are rejected by God.”

But we know that's not what Paul means, because Paul himself—at the beginning of the chapter, Romans 11—says this:

I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means!

Okay, so a little rule for you. If you want to know what Romans 11:15 means, it's helpful to go back to the beginning of the chapter and read it in context. So if at the beginning of the chapter Paul says God has not rejected His people, and then he makes an ambiguous statement about their rejection, then you've got two ways you can read it. You have to take the second one, meaning them rejecting Jesus' Messiahship, not God rejecting them as a people, because he's already made clear that that's not the case. In fact, he's emphatically insisted on that not being the case at the beginning of Romans 11.

So what he's talking about here is—what he *is* saying is—if the rejection of Jesus' Messiahship by the majority of the Israelite people meant the reconciliation of the world. In other words, if that becomes the catalyst, the springboard, for the Gospel going out to the pagans, then what will their acceptance of Jesus' Messiahship mean but life from the dead?

In other words, Paul here is laying the foundation for the common eschatological expectation in the Church—in the history of the Church—that before Christ’s second coming, before the final resurrection of the dead, there would be a kind of mass conversion or acceptance of Jesus’ Messiahship by a large number of the Jewish people. That’s where that tradition—if you’ve ever wondered where that comes from—that comes from in part from this verse right here...Romans 11:15.

So in Paul’s mind...in other words, what Paul is saying is, “If I’m the apostle to the Gentiles, I’m trying to get as many Gentiles to become Christians as possible so that my fellow Jews will see it and recognize and accept Jesus as the Messiah.” And in doing so, that mass acceptance of Jesus as Messiah will usher in or, so to speak, inaugurate the final coming of Jesus, the final resurrection of the dead.

Okay, so that’s the first part of the lectionary reading for today. And then after it, Paul launches into this long allegory of the olive tree, where he compares Israel to an olive tree, and he compares the Gentiles to wild olive branches that have been grafted on to the stock of the original olive tree. And if you’ve ever done any gardening or grafting, you know that this is a pretty standard thing that you can do. You can take branches from one kind of tree, graft them onto another tree, and they’ll grow into one. And they’ll actually be able to bear fruit, and they’ll make a new tree out of two different kinds of trees. So that’s the allegory that he uses there.

Unfortunately, the lectionary skips that, and I say unfortunately just because it’s a beautiful and really powerful allegory of the unity of Jews and Gentiles in Christ and in the new covenant. But the Church skips over that and goes down to verse 29 and picks up there. And it says:

For the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable. Just as you...

...and he’s still speaking to the Gentiles here...

...were once disobedient to God but now have received mercy because of their disobedience...



...he means the majority of the Jews of his day...

...so they have now been disobedient in order that by the mercy shown to you they also may receive mercy. For God has consigned all men to disobedience, that he may have mercy upon all.

So the reason the lectionary put these two together is that Paul is kind of picking up where he left off with that earlier statement. What's he trying to say here? He's trying to explain the mystery of why so many of his fellow Israelites haven't accepted Jesus as the Messiah. And in Paul's explanation here, what he's saying is, it's part of God's divine providence, that just as you (Gentiles) were once disobedient—in paganism and all of your various cults, worshipping your gods and goddesses, and rejecting the one God of Israel—while they had mercy shown on them (receiving the covenants and the glory and all that stuff) so now they have rejected the Messiah and you are receiving the grace to accept it...so that God, in a sense, has made everyone equally disobedient so that He can have mercy equally on all. It's kind of a mystery—a paradox—of His providence of divine mercy. And it shows that no matter who you are, whether you're of Jewish descent or of Gentile descent, whether you're a pagan or an Israelite, that all human beings, every single human being, needs the mercy of God. It depends upon the mercy of God and the grace of God in order to be saved through the new covenant, which is in Christ Jesus. That's really the heart of what the Church is getting at here in choosing these two readings, these very beautiful readings.

So I'll close with two points from the living tradition—actually, three points from the living tradition. The first one is from the Second Vatican Council. And I just want to make sure I add this in here. In the Second Vatican Council, there was a document *Nostra aetate*, declaration on non-Christian religions, and the relationship of the Church and non-Christian religions. And one of the things that document condemned was anti-Semitism. And in that document, one of the classic features of anti-Semitism in the history of the Church is to speak about the Jewish people as a whole as being accursed or condemned or rejected by God. This is a staple of anti-Semitism.

In the Second Vatican Council, the Church rejected that and then quotes it again. So if you look at the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraph 597, it says this about the Jewish people:

...The Jews should not be spoken of as rejected or accursed as if this followed from holy Scripture.<sup>2</sup>

So Vatican II is emphatic about that, because there was in the history of the Church a definite tendency to misinterpret Paul's words and to speak of the Jewish people as a curse, especially by certain heretical movements like Marcionism, for example, which were very anti-Semitic in the way they described the Jewish people. But Vatican II is saying the Jews should not be spoken of in that way, and in part, that's precisely because of what Paul is saying here. Because the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable. That's the first point. So I just want to highlight that, because it is such a pernicious error that has plagued the Church in different periods of history to greater or lesser degree. And it's something that the Church in Her teaching has clarified and needs to be reiterated.

The second thing...at the same time, the living tradition has also pointed to the very same text here to highlight that according to Paul, there is still an expectation that at some point before the second coming of Christ, there will be a conversion or an acceptance of Jesus' Messiahship by the Jewish people at large. And this is a great mystery. This is one of the mysteries of Christian eschatology, Christian doctrine about the end times. So let me give you two examples of this. The first one is from St. Thomas Aquinas. In his *Commentary on Romans*, he looks at that line:

...what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead?

And this is what Aquinas says:

[G]entiles are the believers who will grow lukewarm [Matt 24:12]...

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<sup>2</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church* par 597

And here he's alluding to Jesus' statement that before the Son of Man comes again, the hearts of many people will grow cold and lukewarm. And Thomas says that's a reference to Gentile believers—in other words, the majority of Christians, Gentile Christians.

...or will fall away entirely, being deceived by the Antichrist. These will be restored to their primitive fervor after the conversion of the Jews.... [A]fter the conversion of the Jews, the end of the world being then imminent, there will be a general resurrection, through which men will return from the dead to immortal life.<sup>3</sup>

That's Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Romans*, paragraph 890. And following on that, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, in a very interesting section—paragraph 674—interprets Romans 11 the same way. Listen to this. It's talking about the second coming of Jesus, and it says:

The glorious Messiah's coming is suspended at every moment of history until his recognition by "all Israel"... "For if their rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead?" [Romans 11:15] The "full inclusion" of the Jews in the Messiah's salvation, in the wake of "the full number of the Gentiles," will enable the People of God to achieve "the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ," in which "God may be all in all."<sup>4</sup>

...*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 674. So that's an interesting point here, that the *Catechism* and the official teaching of the Church follows Thomas Aquinas in interpreting the reading for today's Gospel—I'm sorry, today's second reading—as a prophecy of the fact that somehow in some way unknown to us, before the final coming of Jesus, there will be both a mass apostasy amongst Gentile Christians—a falling away from the faith...Paul talks about this elsewhere in 2 Thessalonians. He actually talks about the great *apostasia* or the great falling away. At the same time, the *Catechism* is saying here there will be a great recognition by all Israel so

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Romans* no. 890

<sup>4</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church* par 674

that God might be all in all, so that salvation will come to the Jew and to the Gentile alike. And this mystery of fulfilling Paul's words—which the lectionary didn't give us in Romans 11:26—he says:

I want you to understand this mystery, brethren: a hardening has come upon part of Israel, until the full number of the Gentiles come in, and so all Israel will be saved; as it is written,

“The Deliverer will come from Zion,  
he will banish ungodliness from Jacob”;  
“and this will be my covenant with them  
when I take away their sins.”

Very beautiful, very powerful, very mysterious—what Paul calls the mystery of all Israel being saved. And that's really what Romans 9-11 is all about.