

The Twenty-fifth Sunday of Ordinary Time

(Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	Isaiah 55:6-9
<i>Response</i>	The Lord is near to all who call upon him
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 145:2-3, 8-9, 17-18
<i>Second Reading</i>	Philippians 1:20c-24, 27a
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	The Lord opened her heart to give heed to what was said by Paul.
<i>Gospel</i>	Matthew 1:1-16a

The twenty-fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time for year A starts the Church's journey through a new letter of St. Paul, and that letter is his letter to the Philippians. And so every year in year A for four weeks, the Church reads through St. Paul's letter to the Philippians—in the 25th through the 28th Sundays in Ordinary Time. So in this video, what we're going to do is look at the first selection from the letter to the Philippians, but I also just want to introduce the letter as a whole...give you a little bit of background about it so that as we're journeying through it in the lectionary, you might want to read the letter and study it in its entirety. Because this is one of those letters of Paul where the Church is very selective in what passages She chooses to read from in the lectionary itself.

All of them are selective, but Philippians just gets four passages. And it's not a long letter. It's only four chapters, but there's a lot in it that—a lot, everything that Paul writes is that way. But there's a lot in it that we don't get to cover. So what we're going to do is we're going to focus on those four passages. I'll give you a little bit of background in this video about the letter as a whole, and we'll look at the selection of the reading for today.

So for the 25th Sunday in year A, the Church chooses—this is a little bit different. Usually what She'll do is she will start a letter from Paul by beginning with the actual opening verses of that letter. In this case, She actually doesn't do that. She begins with chapter 1, verses 20-24 and then 27. So She begins a little bit later in the letter to the Philippians. So this is the opening selection. I'll read it, and then

we'll back up and introduce the letter as a whole. So in Philippians 1:20 and following, we read these words. Paul says:

...Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. If it is to be life in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account.

Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ...¹

Okay, so what's going on in this particular passage? And what's the broader context? Let's start with the second point on the broader context.

So this is a section from the first chapter of Paul's letter to the Philippians. And we'll just walk through a few points about it. First, in terms of authorship, there really is no debate about Paul's authorship of this particular letter. It's one of the undisputed epistles of Paul. But it is interesting to note that in verse 1 of the letter—which we didn't read for today but which I'll read to you now—it actually says that the letter is co-authored. It says in Philippians 1:1:

Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus,

To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the bishops and deacons:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Alright, so if you press pause there, you'll notice two key elements here about the letter. First, the authorship is attributed to the apostle Paul and his coworker Timothy, who is very famous. We see Timothy in the Acts of the Apostles. Also, have two of the letters of Paul in the pastoral epistles are addressed to Timothy. So

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.

the authorship here is a co-authored letter of Paul and Timothy, and it's written to the Church at Philippi. And it's interesting here, you'll notice that Paul makes a distinction in the audience of the letter between the laity (what we would call the laity) and then the leadership, the ordained leaders. So he says:

To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the bishops and deacons...

So just gives me another opportunity to emphasize something I've said before, but I'll say it again—that whenever Paul uses the terminology of “the saints,” he doesn't mean it in the way Catholics today tend to use the term. We tend to use the term to speak of believers in Christ who have died in Christ and who now are in glory in Heaven and who are holy and whose holiness has been proclaimed by the Church, whether they're canonized or not—but all the saints in Heaven.

Paul uses the word “saints” to refer to the holy ones on Earth, to refer to those who are in Christ living in this world and preparing for the next world. So Paul addresses the letter to the laity, the saints, but also to the bishops and deacons. And this is important for you to see, because this is actually a contested point. It's important to recognize that already during Paul's lifetime, there were ordained leaders within the Church, there was an emerging hierarchy of leadership. And two of the offices that Paul mentions are *diakonos* (deacons) and *episkopos* (bishops or overseers)...which is where we get that terminology from to this day.

So I just bring this up because sometimes some people will actually claim that the episcopacy wasn't developed until after Paul, but we actually have evidence in Philippians itself that there were overseers being appointed in local churches during the apostolic period, during the time of Paul himself...and they were known as bishops.

Alright, so that's the audience of the letter. In terms of the dating...this is important. All the letters of Paul, the exact date of the letter is a matter of dispute. Scholars have all kinds of different opinions. But just for the sake of this video, I'll just give you the traditional date. The traditional date of the letter to the Philippians is usually regarded as having been written sometimes between 61 or 63 AD. So this is

towards the end of Paul's life in ministry, because he's usually regarded as having been martyred around 64-66 AD in Rome under the persecution of Nero.

Philippians is traditionally regarded as having been written around the same time as the other "prison epistles." So these are letters of Paul that were written while he was imprisoned in Rome. So if you look at the Acts of the Apostles 28, for example, once Paul and Luke and his companions arrive at Rome, he begins preaching the Gospel there, and eventually he's arrested and put on house arrest. He's in prison in Rome in Acts 28. And so traditionally, this is the time period during which Paul is regarded as having written several of the epistles of his that are clearly written from prison—Philippians, Colossians, and Ephesians being the three principal ones.

And you can actually see this in Philippians if you look at chapter 4, verse 22. At the end of the letter, listen to how Paul ends it. He says:

Greet every saint in Christ Jesus. The brethren who are with me greet you.
All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar's household.

So this is one clue that Paul writes this while he's under house arrest in Rome, and he's being kept by Caesar's guards until such time he has a trial and able to have a hearing. If you remember in Acts, he appeals to Caesar. He appeals to the emperor when he's under trial. And so he's brought to Rome for that purpose.

So just to give you a little bit of a context here of Paul's situation, where he's writing from, he appears to be writing to the Church at Philippi while he's in the Church at Rome under house arrest in Caesar's household. So Paul's writing from a place of imprisonment, of persecution, of suffering...and he's going to be addressing this letter to the Church at Philippi, which is also undergoing some difficulties. So you're going to see that one of the themes in the letter to the Philippians is the theme of being joyful and content no matter what the circumstances, no matter how difficult the situation might be that you find yourself in.

So lots of people love the letter to the Philippians precisely for that reason. It's a very joy-filled letter, but it's joy in the face of persecution, joy in the face of tribulation. It's the secret of how to be content even when your circumstances are filled with suffering and difficulty. So if that's the kind of letter you're interested in from Paul, Philippians is definitely going to be a letter that's very consoling, just on a spiritual level.

Alright, now one last point here. So what about Philippi? Where is the Church at Philippi? Okay, so if you look at the book of Acts, in Acts 16, and you look in Acts 16:11 and following, we actually have a narrative in the book of Acts of Paul's journey to and visit to the city of Philippi and his founding of the Church there. So a great way to read the letter of the Philippians in an informed manner is to go back to Acts 16 and just read the whole chapter and its account of Paul's time in the city at Philippi. So I'm just going to read the opening verse of that just to give you a little bit of background, and it'll give us some clues into the nature of this city. And this is what it says:

Setting sail therefore from Tro'as, we...

The "we" there is Luke and Paul and their other companions.

...we made a direct voyage to Sam'othrace, and the following day to Ne-ap'olis, and from there to Philippi, which is the leading city of the district of Macedo'nia, and a Roman colony.

So pause there. So we already see something about Philippi. Philippi is a major city in Macedonia, in Greece. It's obviously a Greek city. *Filippos* is a Greek name, but it's also a Roman colony. In other words, it's a leading city. It's an influential city. It has an imperial presence, and it's well-known among the cities of the region. It's an influential place.

And what's interesting here, if you keep reading in the book of Acts, what you'll learn is that there's actually a Jewish community there too. So it's not just Greeks, it's not just Romans. There are also Jews living in Philippi. And in keeping with Paul's standard method of evangelization, when he gets to the city of Philippi, the

first thing he does is not to go evangelize the Romans or evangelize the Greeks. The first thing he does is go to the local Jewish synagogue—the local Jewish house of prayer—and begins to preach the Gospel there to the Jews who live in the city.

So it's a very cosmopolitan city. One of the first converts that he has there is the famous figure of Lydia, who was a seller of purple goods and a worshiper of God. So she's a Gentile who is attracted to and interested in the teachings of Judaism, who has accepted those teachings but hasn't become a full fledged Jew.

And some other events happen in Philippi that are fascinating, just as background to the letter. It's in this city that Paul actually ends up being arrested because he performs an exorcism on a girl who has a spirit of divination. So she's possessed, and the people who own her will use her to basically give prophecies and oracles for money. So she keeps following Paul around in the city, and he gets aggravated with her and he ends up casting out the demon. And then those who were making money, profiting off of her spirit of divination, end up bringing him up to have him arrested, because he's teaching "what is not lawful for Romans to believe."

So the real motive behind the arrest is Paul has basically taken away their source of income. But it's very fascinating here that in Acts 16—it's in 20-21. Listen to what they say about Paul...verse 19:

But when her owners saw that their hope of gain was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the market place before the rulers; and when they had brought them to the magistrates they said, "These men are Jews and they are disturbing our city. They advocate customs which it is not lawful for us Romans to accept or practice."

Alright, so what does that mean? Well, most scholars think that this is actually reflecting a law or a tenant that we see in the work of Cicero. I'll give you a quote here. The great Roman orator Cicero said this:

No one [=no Roman] shall have gods for himself, either new or foreign gods, unless they are officially recognized.²

So in other words, at the time of Paul in the first century AD, there was a large influx of Eastern religion and Eastern ideas and Eastern beliefs into these Roman colonies and into these Roman cities. And there was a lot of prejudice on the part of the Romans toward these Eastern people who were coming in—Greeks and stuff and Semites and Jews as well—who were coming into Roman colonies and bringing with them their foreign divinities, which weren't recognized by the official empire.

So what happens here is when Paul casts out this demon from this girl, her owners bring him up basically on a trumped up charge of teaching about foreign divinities—that's not the real matter, that's not the real issue at hand. But they use it against him, because he's going around proclaiming *Iésous Christos*, Jesus Christ, this strange God that is not known to the Roman pantheon.

So, in any case, all that to say, Paul ends up in prison in Philippi, and then they escape through a miraculous earthquake. Actually, they escape because once it becomes clear that Paul is a citizen, the magistrate has to come out and apologize to him and let him out of prison. But they actually have a miraculous earthquake that happens first, and Paul baptizes the Philippian jailer. There's a lot of famous episodes that are associated with the Church at Philippi. But they eventually have to leave the city. It just gets a little too hot for them there, and they move on in their proclamation of the Gospel.

But what happens is...once Paul eventually gets to Rome, he writes the letter to the Philippians out of concern for them. While he's in prison, he's concerned for the sufferings that they might be facing in his absence. So the whole letter to the Philippians is just a beautiful treatise. You really hear Paul's heart in this letter. And speaking out of that context of imprisonment and go back to what he actually says, the Church gives us here these opening words from the first chapter of Paul where

² Cicero, *De legibus* 2.8.19

he talks about the fact that Christ is going to be honored in his body whether in life or in death.

Well, now you understand the context. Why is he saying that? Well, because he is in prison. He's awaiting trial, and he might be released...but he also might be executed. That's one of the possibilities that he's going to face. So Paul says, whatever happens to me, whether I live or whether or I die, the important thing is that Christ will be honored in my body. And then he gives his rationale for saying that when he says:

For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. (Philippians 1:21)

What does that mean? Well, he's saying, whether I live or whether I die, I'm going to be in Christ. I'm already in Christ now as a baptized believer who has faith, but if I die, it's not going to be a loss. It's actually going to be gain, because the life I now live in the flesh is going to lead me to life eternal where I will be with Christ. And here Paul says one of these famous words. He says:

If it is to be life in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account.

Okay, so this is a fascinating window into the mind of a saint. I'd venture to guess that for most of us, if we had the choice between life and death, especially if that meant being released from prison or remaining in prison and possibly being executed, we would probably be inclined to choose being released from prison and continuing to live. That's the natural human inclination.

But that's not how Paul feels about it. There's a deep part of him that actually would desire martyrdom. "I'd prefer to die. It would be gain, because to depart would be to be with Christ." And this is a very important point of what theologians call personal eschatology or particular eschatology. In other words, we can talk about general eschatology—what's going to happen at the end of time, what's

going to happen at the end of the world, what's going to happen at the final judgment? Those are more general eschatological topics.

But particular eschatology means: what's going to happen to *me* at the end—*eschaton*, the Greek word for end—of my life...what happens at the moment of my death, what's the fate of my particular soul after death. And although the New Testament is very clear that the ultimate eschatological hope of Christians is the resurrection of the body, it's also clear—and Paul is very clear here—that the particular hope of the individual person before the final resurrection on the last day is that if we die in Christ, we will be *with* Christ. This is usually articulated as the doctrine of the immortality of the soul—that Paul expects (long before his body is raised on the last day) that his soul will be with Christ after his death.

And this is important because there are different errors about particular eschatology. Some Christians will say—non Catholic Christians will say—oh, after we die, we just go to sleep, and we don't know anything, and we won't really be united with Christ until the final resurrection at the end of time. It's sometimes called “soul sleep.” That's not Paul's view. He wants to be with Christ, and that is what he expects to experience after his death. However, remaining alive, as he says here:

...is more necessary on your account.

In other words, if God chooses to allow him to remain in this world, to remain alive, it's so that he could continue his apostolic work of preaching the Gospel to the nations. And one of the cities of the nations that he preached the Gospel to that he truly loves is the city of Philippi. So he ends...and the Church skips down to verse 27 here, and he ends with this exhortation here:

Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ...

So after reflecting on his own desire to depart with being with Christ, he ends by directing his words to the Philippians and saying, “Whatever happens to me (or whatever happens to you), the important thing is that you let your manner of life be worthy of the Gospel, be a worthy witness to Christ.”

And as we'll see over the next couple of weeks as we journey into the letter to the Philippians, this is going to be a key theme in Paul, which is (in this letter) the imitation of Christ. It's that the life of a Christian should be modeled on the life of Christ. The mind of a Christian should be modeled on the mind of Christ. The heart of a Christian should be modeled on the heart of Christ. And as we'll see when we get to Philippians 2, the principal example of the heart and mind of Christ is going to be both His incarnation, but also His passion and His death and His resurrection.

So Christ did not avoid suffering. In fact, as we'll see, He lowers Himself. He accepts suffering. He accepts the cross, and through that is exalted to the glory of the resurrection. So Paul's ultimate message here to the Philippians is to imitate him (Paul) but also to imitate Christ, who accepted the cross for the sake of the glory of the resurrection. And in that acceptance of God's will, we're going to find the secret of contentment in his circumstances. No matter what happens in life, Paul—and then Christians also—are to have the same joy and the same mind that Christ has in the face of His passion, His death, and His resurrection.