

## The Twenty-first Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	Isaiah 22:19-23
<i>Response</i>	thy steadfast love, O Lord, endures for ever. Do not forsake the work of thy hands.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 138:1-2, 2-3, 6, 8
<i>Second Reading</i>	Romans 11:33-36
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it.
<i>Gospel</i>	Matthew 16:13-20

The twenty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time for year A focuses on the crescendo at the end of Paul’s famous chapters, Romans 9-11—his famous discussion of the relationship between Israel and the Gentiles, and the salvation of Israel and the Gentiles in the new covenant through Christ. And at the very end of that beautiful chapter—very powerful and mysterious chapter—the lectionary selects for us verses 33-36. And this is what Paul says, after describing this mystery that all Israel will be saved and describing the mystery of the olive tree, where Paul describes the Gentiles being grafted onto the one tree of Israel. He says this:

O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!

“For who has known the mind of the Lord,  
or who has been his counselor?”

“Or who has given a gift to him  
that he might be repaid?”

For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory for ever. Amen.<sup>1</sup>

Okay, so you can almost hear there...it almost sounds like Paul is singing a hymn rather than writing a letter—a very poetic crescendo, a very poetic climax to his great discussion of the mystery of divine providence...the mystery of God’s plan of salvation for Israel and the nations. So let me make a few points about this short second reading for today.

The first term you might want to highlight there is the term of wisdom:

O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!

Elsewhere in Paul’s letters, he talks about the fact that God’s wisdom, God’s plan of salvation, is hidden from us. Much of it has been revealed, but there is still a mysterious element. There’s an aspect of God’s plan of salvation that we’re just not able to comprehend, because we don’t possess His wisdom. We don’t possess His divine point of view.

In a previous lecture, we talked about the mystery of predestination, in Romans 8, when Paul talks about:

For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son... (Romans 8:29a)

And I was doing my best to explain that the Church’s teaching on predestination and divine providence and divine foreknowledge and how it reconciles with human free will...but at the end of the day, there’s a real mystery to that, because in order for us to understand how God can both foreknow and foreordain all things and yet, we be free actors in the drama of salvation, we really would have to see them from God’s perspective, which is eternal. It’s outside of time. And that’s precisely what we can’t do. We can’t wrap our brains around that, because we only think in linear

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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.

categories. We can't conceptualize what it even means really to be outside of time, to be in eternity.

And so that element of mystery is very important to emphasize—that there is an incomprehensible and inexhaustible profundity to God's knowledge of His plan that we can never...we can understand certain parts of it, we can accept what's revealed about it, but we can't comprehend it fully.

And you see this in Paul's own emphasis on the terminology of mystery. So for example, in 1 Corinthians 2, verse 6-10, here's a parallel passage from Paul that sheds light on the reading for today. Listen to what he says:

Yet among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away. But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God...

...in mystery. The Greek word there is *mysterion*, so our English word is directly borrowed from the Greek.

...which God decreed before the ages for our glorification....But, as it is written,

“What no eye has seen, nor ear heard,  
nor the heart of man conceived,  
what God has prepared for those who love him,”

God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. (1 Corinthians 2:6-7, 9-10)

That's 1 Corinthians 2:6-10. So notice what Paul is saying there—that Paul is a teacher of the wisdom of God. But it's the wisdom of God in *mysterion*, in mystery. A *mysterion* in Greek is something hidden that has to be revealed.

And here, Paul is saying that the wisdom of God in mystery was decreed by God before the ages—in other words, in eternity. See, that's why it's mysterious to us,

because God's plan of salvation is eternal. It's outside of time, and we are in time, so we can receive that mystery. We can have faith. We can believe that mystery, but we can't fully plumb the depths of the eternal mystery of God's plan of salvation. The only person who can do that is the Spirit...Paul says the Holy Spirit. Because the Holy Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. This is another clue that for Paul, the Spirit isn't just a power but a divine person, that the Holy Spirit is equal to God the Father. He knows everything just as God knows all. But *we* don't. We can only receive and believe the mystery.

And so if we come back to Romans 9—I'm sorry, Romans 11—what Paul is saying here is, in the wake of describing this mystery of salvation and the relationship between Israel and the Gentiles and the olive tree and the branches...some cut off, some grafted in and all Israel will be saved when the deliverer comes...he just kind of ends with this hymn of praise:

O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!

We can't really fathom it, so it's a hymn of humility in the face of God's omnipotence and omniscience. And in that, it's not actually surprising that Paul (in the reading for today) quotes three Old Testament texts. So when he says:

“...who has known the mind of the Lord,  
or who has been his counselor?”

He's quoting Isaiah 40. So if you look at Isaiah 40, you go back in context. What does Isaiah 40 say? Here is the quote Paul is alluding to. Isaiah says:

Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand  
and marked off the heavens with a span,  
enclosed the dust of the earth in a measure  
and weighed the mountains in scales  
and the hills in a balance?  
Who has directed the Spirit of the Lord,  
or as his counselor has instructed him?

So Isaiah there is doing this hymn about the mystery of creation. So God—we got to get our brains around this—He’s not just the God of this mountain or that river or this ocean. He’s the creator of everything, so He’s omnipotent. He’s the omnipotent creator. And Isaiah is saying, who has instructed Him? He is the one who teaches us all, so we bow before His knowledge—before His wisdom, before His might—as creator of the universe.

If He’s weighing the mountains and the scales...just think about that. If you’ve ever climbed a mountain—we don’t have a lot of mountains down here in Louisiana. Monkey Hill at Audubon Zoo is about as big as we get. It’s a little tiny hill. But if you’ve ever been to real mountains, whether it’s the Rocky Mountains or Himalayas, whatever it might be, the first thing you feel is how small you are in the face of this massive, massive mountain. Well, Isaiah says, He holds the mountains in a balance. God is to the mountains like a trader is to a scale—puts the coins on a scale, puts it into balance to weigh it. That’s how great He is in comparison to creation. So Paul, in his hymn of praise at the end, quotes this passage from Isaiah that kind of describes the mystery of creation and the mystery of God’s omnipotence.

Then he quotes another line when he says:

“...who has given a gift to him  
that he might be repaid?”

There he’s quoting from the book of Job. So in Job chapter 35, verse 5 and 7, Job says:

Look at the heavens, and see;  
and behold the clouds, which are higher than you.

If you are righteous, what do you give to him;  
or what does he receive from your hand?

Or then Job 41, God Himself says:

Who has given to me, that I should repay him?  
Whatever is under the whole heaven is mine.

Okay, so here it's talking about the mystery of God's divine providence, as well as the mystery of His omnipotence and fact that He is Lord over all creation. So in Job's book, what Job is basically saying is, what can I actually give to God? He owns everything. Everything that exists comes from Him. So Paul takes these two quotes—one from Isaiah and one from Job—that point up the majesty of God, the mystery of His identity as creator, but also His omnipotence and His sovereignty over all things. And then he brings it to a close with his own expression:

For from him and through him and to him are all things.

And the Greek word there is *ta panta*, and it means everything that is created. So all created things have their source—their origin—in God. And that's why He's inscrutable. That's why His judgments are unsearchable. That's why there's a transcendent element to God that we can never fully comprehend. In other words, God in Himself is a mystery. He's mysterious.

And I think that this is helpful for us to remember, especially in the study of theology. Sometimes it can be a temptation when you're reading the Bible or when you're studying theology to want to figure out every single thing and to want to answer every single question in a way that is completely satisfactory. And on the one hand, we don't want to end up in a kind of blind fideism, where we say, "Oh, I believe something even though I know it isn't true." That's not what Christianity does. We believe in faith and reason.

At the same time, there are limits to human reason, and there are limits to human knowledge. And Paul is making those limits really clear here, as he faces the mystery—which he himself calls a mystery—of the relationship between Israel and the Gentiles and the drama of salvation. He is pressed, so to speak, to the limit of what he himself is even able to express and comprehend, and that's why he ends by saying:

How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!

And he quotes Job precisely because how does the book of Job end? What does God say to Job famously?

Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?

So there's a certain presumption in a human being demanding answers for every single mystery without realizing that God is God and we're not. And He is infinite, and we are finite. And everything that exists comes from Him, and we are creatures—very small creatures—in the midst of a very large creation. And so Paul ends there with:

To him be glory for ever. Amen.

Which, by the way, just to throw this out here...this is another one of those verses that proves that for Paul, Christ is divine, that Christ is God, that He is equal with God. Because notice what he says about God. He says:

...from him and through him and to him are all things.

So this is Paul's way of describing God as the creator. Well, if you skip over to 1 Corinthians chapter 8, verse 6, listen to what Paul says about God and about Christ. He says:

...for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

So did you see what Paul just did there? He took the Jewish affirmation of the shema:

“Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.  
(Deuteronomy 6:4-5)

He took the Jewish affirmation of monotheism, of one god, and he wove Jesus Christ into it. He says:

...for us there is one God...

So it's still monotheism. God...

...the Father, from whom are all things...

So He's the creator.

...and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

So some scholars have said when they've looked at that, some have said, "Oh, well, no. Paul is putting Jesus on a secondary status, because although God the Father...it's:

...from whom are all things...

When it comes to Jesus, Jesus is just an agent of creation, because "through whom" all things exist. But that's not true, because you go back to Romans 11:36, the verse for today. When he's talking about God the Father, he says:

...from him and through him and to him are all things.

So in other words, as Dr. Michael Barber and I—and John Kincaid—show in our book, *Paul, A New Covenant Jew*, for Paul, there's a creator/creature divide. So on the one side, you have the creator, and on the other side, you have all creation—everything that exists, *ta panta*. Which side of the line is Jesus Christ on for Paul? He's on the creator side, because as he says, through him all things exist.

And I just think that's really important for us to remember, that when Paul's talking about the inscrutable and unsearchable ways of the omnipotent creator, he doesn't



just mean God the Father. He also means the Lord Jesus Christ, the one who becomes man. So in other words, Romans 11, verse 36—the passage for today—and 1 Corinthians 8 are key texts for Paul’s...some scholars would call it christological monotheism. In other words, he’s affirming the oneness of God, but he’s also recognizing a plurality of divine persons. You’ve got one God the Father, but you also have one Lord Jesus Christ, and you also have the one Spirit...although that’s another topic for another time.

Alright, so in closing then, what can we say about Paul and the mystery of God? Because that’s what this passage is. He ends Romans 11 with the mystery of God. The *Catechism* gives us an interesting take on this in paragraph 268. It says this:

Of all the divine attributes, only God’s omnipotence is named in the Creed...

I believe in God the Father Almighty. That’s omnipotence.

...to confess this power has great bearing on our lives. We believe that his might is universal, for God who created everything also rules everything and can do everything. God’s power is loving, for he is our Father, and mysterious, for only faith can discern it when it “is made perfect in weakness.”<sup>2</sup>

I bring this up, because in my experience, just over the last couple decades of teaching, I’ve noticed that it’s not always clear to some students. The doctrine of God’s omnipotence is not always clear. And I think there’s a kind of deism that runs around in the world today, an idea that God is the highest being and maybe has control over creation but He’s not necessarily omnipotent. He’s kind of limited in His power. And there’s a lack of real belief in the fact that He not only made everything, but He actually...notice what the *Catechism* says:

...for God who created everything also rules everything and can do everything.

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<sup>2</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church* par 268

So not just His omnipotence but His providence...that He's actually guiding everything that happens in history, even though we might not be able to see clearly how that's possible. The modern view of history is that it's just one thing after another, a series of earthly causes and earthly effects, whether they be economic cause and effects to political effects or personal causes and effects...and that there's not a provident God ruling over it. This is kind of the view of the deists, that "well, maybe there's a god but he's a watchmaker, a distant watchmaker who set the world in motion and then leaves it to itself."

That's not Paul's view of God, that's for sure. Not only is He omnipotent and an omnipotent creator, He's also the providential God who's guiding all of history to a purpose and to an end...but who is also mysterious in His ways. It's not self-evident to us exactly what that purpose is. We need it to be revealed to us. And as the *Catechism* says, that's where faith comes in. God is our Father, but He is mysterious, and only faith can discern the ways of God—those inscrutable ways that are guiding history to its last end, which is Christ Himself.