

The Twenty-fourth Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	Sirach 27:30-28:7
<i>Response</i>	The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
<i>Psalms</i>	Psalms 103:1-2, 3-4, 9-10, 11-12
<i>Second Reading</i>	Romans 14:7-9
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another.
<i>Gospel</i>	Matthew 18:21-35

The twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time brings our journey through Paul's magisterial letter to the Romans to a close. Although Romans does go on for another couple of chapters, the lectionary stops here with a short quotation from Romans 14:7-9, focused on the lordship of Jesus Christ...which is a great place to end. Romans 14:7 through 9...this is what it says:

None of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.¹

So what is Paul getting at here? And why does the lectionary give us this quotation as the final quotation of Paul's letter to the Romans? Well, the first thing Paul is saying here is that the goal of our existence, the goal of those who live in Christ, who are Christians, should be Christ Himself. He's our reason for living. And you can actually see this elsewhere in Paul. In 2 Corinthians 5:14-15, he makes a similar point using similar language. Listen to what he says:

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.

For the love of Christ controls us, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. And he died for all, that those who live might live no longer for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.

So notice...why does Christ die on the cross, according to Paul? It's not just to atone for human sins. It's also to give us a model of human selflessness. This is very important. In a previous video, we were looking at Romans 13 and how Paul says that love of neighbor fulfills the law, fulfills the second tablet of the Ten Commandments. And love of neighbor can be defined as choosing the good for the sake of another, for the sake of the other person. Well, the antithesis to that is selfishness, which is: "I choose the good for myself to the detriment of the other person."

So the human tendency to sin can be boiled down to the human tendency to selfishness. "I want what I want, and if I don't get what I want, I'll do X, Y, or Z. I'll either dishonor my parents or take someone else's life or take someone else's spouse or take someone else's property or lie in order to get what I want." This is the commandments against adultery and murder and theft and false witness and covetousness. All of them are ultimately rooted in human selfishness. So Paul is saying here that once a person has faith and is baptized and is in Christ, Christ dies for us so that we might no longer live for ourselves but for Him, who loved us and gave Himself for us. So He shows us the ultimate model of selflessness by laying down His life for us on the cross even though He Himself is without sin.

For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

That's 2 Corinthians 5:21, another saying of Paul. So if we go back to Romans, what he's saying is:

None of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself.

So this is the ultimate antidote to individualism as well. Christianity should be the ultimate antidote to individualism. Paul is saying, "Yeah, you live, and yes, you're

an individual...but you don't live for yourself or to yourself. You live—you should live—for Christ, because He lived for you. You should die for Christ because He died for you.” He gives us the model of love when He lays down His life for our sake.

And you can think of Jesus' words here in the Gospel of John:

Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. (John 15:13)

That's the ultimate act of selflessness...is to give up your own life for the sake of someone else, for the sake of your friends.

Okay, so Paul is saying here that none of us lives to himself. He doesn't mean that factually; he means that as a goal, as the ideal. None of us *should* live to himself. Because the reality is that:

If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. (Romans 14:8)

So notice the second point here. Not only is Paul calling Christians to selflessness, he's calling Christians to submission to Christ as the Lord. Now, the Greek word for “Lord”, *kyrios*, as I've probably mentioned elsewhere, has two connotations. On the one hand, it can be a title for a king or an emperor—like Caesar was called *kyrios* in the first century AD. It can be a title for a local lord who is the master of servants. So you can have a *kyrios* who is the master and then the servants, the *doulos*, the servant...or the *diakonos*, ministers who do his bidding.

But it can also be the name for God. So in the ancient Greek translation of the Jewish Scriptures, *kyrios* was the name for the Hebrew tetragrammaton. The four letters YHWH, the sacred name of God, would be translated into Greek as *kyrios*, because they didn't pronounce the Hebrew name. It was too sacred to be pronounced.

So when Paul calls Jesus *Kyrios*, on the one hand he's implying His divinity. And I think that's how most Christian readers, when they read Paul, they think about, "Oh, Christ as the Lord means Christ as God." And that's true. But the second—or in this case, the first—definition of *kyrios*, the Roman one, also implies...because when Paul calls Jesus *kyrios*, he's also calling him Master or King or Caesar, in the sense of he's calling Him the ruler of all those who belong to Him...who are in Christ. So he says:

...whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's.

...which means we belong to Christ and not to ourselves. Now that's a really difficult pill for a lot of modern people, even modern Christians, to swallow. We tend to think of ourselves as autonomous beings, a law to ourselves, free thinkers, free deciders. I choose to be a Christian, right? I choose to be a disciple of Jesus. And that's true; we are free. We're free agents, so to speak. But once a person is baptized—Paul will make this very clear—you no longer belong to yourself. You belong to Christ. You're like a member of the Roman empire, so to speak. A person who is a citizen of the Roman empire had to be subservient and obedient to Caesar, because Caesar was Lord. So it was implied...in the lordship of Caesar was implied the obedience of his citizens and obedience of his subjects. They were subject to him.

Paul's idea of a Christian works on the same principle. I don't just get to decide for myself what's right and what's wrong, what I do and what I don't do. I actually have to obey my Lord, who is Christ. I live as a member of His kingdom. And in a kingdom, there's a hierarchical arrangement. The king makes the laws, and the subjects follow the king. The subjects owe allegiance to the king. The subjects owe obedience to the king. And when a person disavows that allegiance or disobeys the king, a person can be cast out of the kingdom. So Christ's kingdom for Paul is not a democracy. It is a monarchy, and Christ is the *Kyrios*, and we are members of the kingdom. And therefore, we don't only have to believe in the king. "Okay, I believe Jesus is king. Now I'm going to go about my merry way."

No, we also have to express our allegiance to the king by following the king's laws and by following the king's rules. In other words, obedience is implied in faith if Jesus isn't just the Savior but is the Lord, that He's the *Kyrios*.

And you can actually hear this to this day. In contemporary, secular, mainstream news media, you might hear a news report where the reporter talks about God...maybe in doing a news report on a religion. But it'd be very rare to have a reporter refer to God as the Lord, because "the Lord" implies not only the deity of the god in question, but it also implies a kind of subservience to that God. So you'll notice this even just to this day, if someone says "God," they may or may not believe. They may or may not follow.

But if someone in conversation says "the Lord said this," it usually implies a subject or subservience or submission to God as God, in obedience to Him. So the same thing is true in the Greek terminology. There are similar implications there. And so what Paul is saying here is that we belong to the Lord. In other words, we are the subjects; He is the king. And then he closes with a third point:

For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living. (Romans 14:9)

What does that mean? There are lots of titles for Jesus: Messiah, Savior, Son of God. Most of us don't go around calling Jesus "Lord of the dead," but that's what Paul calls Jesus here. So what does he mean:

...Lord both of the dead and of the living.

Well, here, Paul is making a third and very important and final point about Christ—namely, that He's the cosmic Lord. In other words, He's not just the king of Judea or of Galilee or of Egypt or of Rome. He's the king of the universe. In fact, He's not even just the king of the world, of those who are alive. He's the king of the dead *and* the living. He is the Lord over all.

And you can see this in Philippians 2, another parallel passage in Paul where he uses the title *kyrios*—the famous hymn. After describing how Christ is crucified on a cross, He takes the form of a slave, in Philippians 2, verse 9, Paul says:

Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Now when Paul makes that statement in Philippians 2:9-11, that every tongue shall confess and every knee bow; that Jesus is Lord, he's actually alluding to a passage from Isaiah. One of the most famous passages in Isaiah about what we call monotheism—the oneness of God—is in Isaiah 45:21-23 when God says:

Was it not I, the Lord?

And the Greek translation here is *Kyrios*.

And there is no other god besides me...

'To me every knee shall bow,
every tongue shall swear.'

Now hold on a second. According to Jewish Scripture, God gives Himself the name Lord and says that every knee is going to bow to *Him* and every tongue will confess *Him*. This is the one God. There is no other God, Isaiah says. And then, yet, Paul takes that same passage from Isaiah and applies it to Jesus Christ, who is not only the Son of God but also fully man. He takes the form of man.

So what's Paul doing here? He's using the language of Isaiah to reveal not just the divinity of Christ but the lordship of Jesus. In other words, the one God that Isaiah talked about everyone in the universe bowing to, is the man Jesus Christ, who through His passion, death, and resurrection has been exalted to the right hand of God the Father and who's been given the name that is above every other name.

He's been given the name of Lord. He is Jesus Christ the Lord. He is the cosmic Lord of the universe.

So...one reason this is important is because again, in our day and time, it has become customary—especially in a kind of pluralistic context—to describe Christ as a good moral teacher or maybe a great prophet, one of the great leaders of a world religion. That is not Paul's Gospel. I mean, Paul definitely thinks Jesus is a good moral teacher. He definitely thinks Jesus speaks the word of God as a prophet. He definitely thinks that Jesus is the founder and the establisher of the new covenant.

There is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3:28)

But for Paul, Jesus isn't just *a* Lord or *a* Savior. He is *the* Lord of the universe. And there is a great passage from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* that points this up...in paragraph 450. I'll close with this:

From the beginning of Christian history, the assertion of Christ's lordship over the world and over history has implicitly recognized that man should not submit his personal freedom in an absolute manner to any earthly power, but only to God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Caesar is not "the Lord." "The Church ... believes that the key, the center, and the purpose of the whole of man's history is to be found in its Lord and Master."²

That's *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraph 450. Wow. So what does that mean, "Caesar is not the Lord"? Well, in a first century setting, a case can be made that if Caesar was being called *kyrios* by lots of citizens in the Roman empire, and then Paul comes along and starts calling Jesus *kyrios*, you can see there'd be tension, wouldn't there? So wait...who is the *kyrios*? Well, the emperor is the lord. And Paul is coming and saying, "Jesus is the *Kyrios*. Jesus is the Lord."

² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, par 450

So the implied negative here, the *Catechism* is saying, is that if Christ is the Lord, if He's the real Lord, then Caesar is not. Which means that as Christians, none of us should give absolute allegiance or submit our personal freedom in any kind of absolute manner to any earthly power, because the reality is (as Paul will say elsewhere) although I might belong to his country or this nation or this earthly people—which can be good things in themselves. The reality is, as Paul says in Philippians, that my *politeia*—my politics, my city, my citizenship is in Heaven. And the reason for that is because my *Kyrios*, my Lord, is in Heaven.

So my ultimate allegiance as a Christian has to be first and foremost to Jesus the Lord over any earthly Caesar. As Jesus Himself will say:

“Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's...

Here, you can have the coin if he wants it. And give...

...to God the things that are God's.” (Mark 12:17)

And that's Paul's theology too. So for Paul, Christ isn't just a Messiah. He's not just a Savior. He is the master of the universe. He is the Lord of all creation. He's not only the king of Paul or the king of Christians, but He is the king of *all* created beings—both those in Heaven, those on Earth, and those under the Earth.