

17th Sunday in Ordinary Time

II Samuel 11:1-15; Psalm 14; John 6:1-21; Ephesians 3:1-21

II Samuel 11:1-15 is the story of David's sin of adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband, Uriah. This event inaugurates the most troubled period of David's reign, not only for himself, but for his family and kingdom, as well. David's actions in this incident, in which he breaks four of the Ten Commandments (murder, adultery, lying, coveting your neighbor's spouse), sets off a series of events that plunge both himself, his family and the nation he has so carefully built into chaos, conflict and disintegration. That action leads eventually to death, rape, murder and then a rebellion that split his family and his nation. In this story, it is clear that David's success as a leader and king of Israel has gone to his head, so that he acts more like an oriental despot than the "man after God's own heart", so that he ends up using and manipulating the very people he has built into a nation. Consequently, this story reveals David's inadequacies, failures and sinfulness as a leader. It is the story of the radical abuse of unilateral power. And thus, it illustrates the saying, "What goes around comes around"!

The story is well known. David's army was at war with Ammon, and his standing army was besieging that nation's key city, Rabbah. David should have been in the field with his troops, but instead he had assigned that responsibility to his commanding general, Joab. He remained behind in Jerusalem (incidentally, the first time that David had not led his army into battle, and thus, the first time he acted like an oriental despot). The king was walking on the roof of his palace that occupied the highest promontory of his capital city. The text tells us that "he saw from the roof a woman bathing; the woman was very beautiful" (6:2). Because of the height of the palace, David could look down into the courtyard or central garden of the homes around the palace, and there he saw a naked woman, bathing – and she "was very beautiful"

In essence, David was invading the privacy of Bathsheba's house by being a "Peeping Tom". Bathsheba was taking her bath, believing that she was entirely concealed from the prying eyes of anyone except her female attendants, safely bathing in the enclosed garden of her home and surrounded by the rooms and walls of that home. In fact, there is not a single word in the account that suggests that Bathsheba was a willing participant in this act of adultery by the king. David simply decided to have her, and that was that. The man of Bathsheba's family is away at war; David demands her attendance upon him. She is powerless. And therefore, what happens between them is a rape.

Further, the text tells us "She was purifying herself" (11:4) (i.e., following the regulations of the Law as given in Lev. 15:19-24 for a woman following her period that clearly demonstrated that she was not pregnant). Therefore, when she notifies David, "I am pregnant" (11:5b), there is no doubt that it is David who has impregnated her.

An intriguing footnote to this story is the introduction of Bathsheba, which tells us that she was "the daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite" (11:3). According to II Samuel 23:34, Eliam was the son of Ahithophal. Years after this incident, Ahithophal betrays David and becomes a primary supporter of David's son, Absalom in his conspiracy to overthrow David (1:12; 16:15). Of particular note is Ahithophal's advice to Absalom to rape David's concubines (16:20-21). Thus, Ahithophal waited many years to get his revenge, but when the opportunity

availed itself through Absalom, he sought to punish the rapist of his granddaughter both by seeking to turn him out of office and to have his concubines raped. What was once done in the darkness was now to be done in the light! And what goes around comes around!

David's exploitive act of unilateral power in his use of his office and position to rape Bathsheba is compounded by his effort to cover up the resulting pregnancy. He calls Uriah back from the battlefield ostensibly to report to him about the war but in reality to sleep with his wife so that the pregnancy can be attributed to him. That, in itself, is highly deceptive action on David's part. But he never imagines that Uriah will not return to his home and his beautiful wife. Instead, Uriah refuses even to see his wife, much less sleep with her. This should not be interpreted as any lack of desire on Uriah's part. Rather, he was keeping the laws of purity required of every soldier who was in warfare (Deut. 23:9-11; I Samuel 21:4-5), and was seeking to be loyal to both his commander Joab as well as David. But his loyalty and zeal would cost Uriah his life.

David returns Uriah to battle with a written message to Joab telling him to expose Uriah to enemy attack so that he would be killed. That is exactly what happens (11:14-21). And when Joab reports to David of the army's defeat in that skirmish and of Uriah's death, David cynically writes back to the commander, "Do not let this matter trouble you, for the sword devours now one and now another; press your attack on the city, and overthrow it" (vs. 25). So David has now complicated his sins of rape and covetedness with lying and murder. He brings Bathsheba into his household and marries her. And David's cynical use of unilateral power now seems to be safely covered up. But he had reckoned without a prophet who would expose David's sin and force his repentance (12:1-15). But that's another story!

Psalm 14 is a fitting psalm to be used in conjunction with the Old Testament lesson of David's lustful and murderous actions toward Bathsheba and Uriah, for the Psalm reminds us that "there is no one who does good, no, not one" – not even "a man after God's own heart"!

The psalm begins, "Fools say in their hearts, 'There is no God'. They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds; there is no one who does good" (vs. 1). But then the psalmist continues, thus amplifying his argument. "The Lord looks down from heaven on humankind to see if there are any who are wise, who seek after God. They have all gone astray, they are all alike perverse; there is no one who does good, no, not one" (vss. 2-3)!

There are those who are, through-and-through, evil. But the fact is that no one is truly good. Even one who is called in scripture "a man after God's own heart" can act in indescribably evil ways!

"Evildoers" are given several titles in Psalm 14, which in its naming, describes the breadth of their sin. They are "godless" (vs. 1), "corrupt" (vs. 1), "not good" (vs. 1), "perverse" (vs. 3), "evildoers" (vs. 4). They deny the existence of God by their actions, even when they might affirm God with their lips. Because they deny God in their lives, they have no ground of being and therefore abuse and exploit those most vulnerable (whether they are the poor or whether they are a woman who can't be defended by her husband because he is away at war) (vss. 5-6). But,

worst of all, such evil people are not occasional nor are they the exception to the rule. Rather, they are everybody (“there is no one who does good, no, not one” vs. 3b)!

What is being expressed here is one of the dark but profoundly true convictions throughout scripture – the reality of total human depravity! A consistent biblical assertion is the capacity for evil that lies in even the very best of us humans!

Total depravity is the biblical belief that sin permeates all that we do and are. Sin, like a virus, permeates every part of us – our body, our soul, our mind, our will – and everything we create – our relationships with others, our families, our labor, our schooling, our neighborhood, our church, our city, our culture, the world! It is not that we can’t act in good ways or even have good motives. It is not that we can’t act in a noble manner or to seek justice – for we can. But it is that none of us ever acts out of a purely benevolent motivation; there is always a little bit of us that act out of selfishness or wanting the advantage or to serve our own ends. Sin permeates everything that we do.

Because depravity permeates all that we are and do and thus is “total”, we are unable to do anything to bring about our salvation. We can be made right *with* God only *by* God! Our good deeds, our obedience to the Law of God, our performance of the proper rituals and worship, even our best intentions can’t make us right with God. Even our own faith, if it is not created by the grace of God, can’t make us right with God because it is therefore our good work. Sin so permeates all that we are and all that we do that it stands between us and God. Therefore, only God can act to save us!

So the moral of the story of David, Uriah and Bathsheba and the point of this psalm is: “Don’t ever underestimate sin!”

With even the best of us totally depraved, what hope is there, then, for us? The Psalmist begins to hint at an answer to such a desperate question. “O that deliverance for Israel would come from Zion! When the Lord restores the fortunes of his people, Jacob will rejoice; Israel will be glad” (vs. 7). The only redemption lies in “Zion”; the only redemption for us all and for all human society rests in God’s saving action!

John 6:1-21. The Gospel lesson for the 17th Sunday in Ordinary Time presents two stories: the feeding of the 5,000 and Jesus walking on the water. But the way John nuances each of these stories is of particular note, in the light of the unique message of the Gospel of John. The essential theme of the Gospel of John is that of the “Countercultural Christ” who is building a New Community that will replace the old order of the Law and the Temple of Israel.

The Gospel of John deals with three primary themes, woven through story after story. One theme is the blindness of the religious, political and economic systems of Israel, called by God to build God’s shalom community on earth but instead actually committed to their domination of the people. The second theme is of the alternative community being built by Jesus, a countercultural effort that is seeking to capture for that century the social structures God has always desired for humanity. The third theme is of Jesus as “God-in-the-flesh” in order to incarnate

God's presence in this corrupt world by transforming people and their institutions and bringing them into God's counter-cultural community. It is with the second and third themes that these two stories deal.

The Feeding of the Five Thousand is the only miracle story that appears in all four gospels (Matt. 14:13-21; Mark 6:30-44; Luke 9:10-17; John 6:1-15). But it is nuanced in John in a way that develops at some depth the themes of that book – Jesus' creation of an alternative, counter-cultural community.

The first reality that strikes one when one reads this account of the feeding of the 5,000 is the very intentional way John parallels his telling of the story with the story of God's provision of manna to the Israelites in their wilderness wanderings under Moses. The text tells us that Jesus "went up the mountain" as Moses went up Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments (Exod. 19:20-25; Deut. 18:15). The Israelites complain of hunger in the desert as do the people gathered in the wilderness to hear Jesus (Num. 11:1-6; John 6:5). God tests Moses on how to feed this great multitude, as Jesus tests the disciples regarding the same (Num. 11:10-15; John 6:5-7). God asks of Moses the same question Jesus asks of the disciples, "Where are we to get food to feed all this people" (Num. 11:13; John 6:5)? God miraculously provides manna and quail for the Israelites in the desert, and Jesus multiplies the fish and loaves of a little boy in order to feed a multitude (Num. 11:7-9, 31-35; John 11-12). The parallels are both obvious and highly intentional. Just as God used food so that Moses could build the Israelite community in the desert, so John has Jesus using food to build God's new community in the wilderness, God's alternative to a now-corrupt Jewish nation.

One of the most important parts of John's telling of the feeding of the 5,000 is its Eucharistic moment. The text states, "Then Jesus *took* the *loaves*, and when he had given *thanks*, he *distributed* them to those who were seated; so also the *fish*, as much as they wanted" (6:11). Jesus "took", "gave thanks" and "distributed". And he did this in two elements: "loaves" and "fish". The Gospel of John would have no Eucharistic moment at the Last Supper, as do the other three gospels. It is here in the feeding of the 5,000 that the Eucharist is celebrated. And John combines the story of the feeding of the 5,000 with the inauguration of the Eucharist because it is that act that is the symbol of the "new Israel" being birthed in the "wilderness" and becoming God's new "community". That community would come into existence, not through the disciples' efforts to build it, but through the work of divine grace through a Christ who multiplies loaves and fishes.

Finally, the story ends with John's report that out of the "five barley loaves", "twelve baskets" are filled with the abundance from the feast. In Moses' Israel, there were twelve tribes. Now there are twelve baskets of abundance. A new Israel is being born in the wilderness through the intervention of the grace of God through the servant who is greater than Moses – Jesus! For "the law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (John 1:17).

The third theme of the Gospel of John is presented in the next story of this Gospel lesson – John 6:16-21. That theme is that Jesus is "God-in-the-flesh" in order to incarnate God's presence in this corrupt world by transforming humanity and bringing them into God's counter-cultural

community. The story of Jesus walking on the water in the midst of a great storm reveals to us who Jesus is and what He has come to do.

The depth of this story is caught only if John's careful use of specific Greek words is examined. He tells us that Jesus' disciples began a trip across the Sea of Galilee. But he then writes, "It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing" (6:17-18). But that is not quite what the Greek actually says. A more accurate translation is, "Darkness already had come to be, and not yet had Jesus come to them, and the sea was blowing with a great wind and was awakened!" Now, that's an entirely different – and far more powerful translation. Let's look at it carefully.

First, "Darkness already had come to be." It is not simply a statement that evening had moved into dusk and then into nighttime. John is stating that "darkness already had come to be" upon the earth. Darkness had descended upon Israel and the world. It is a direct reference to the opening words of the Bible, "In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind swept over the face of the waters" (Genesis 1:1-2). It is, as well, a reference to the words with which the Gospel of John begins, "In God was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it" (1:4-5).

Israel, and the world itself, lives in darkness – a spiritual darkness of greed, lust for power and centered in ego rather than in God. That darkness has settled down upon the earth and has permeated every person, every institution, every structure, every government and business and religion. Then John goes on. "Jesus had not yet come to them, and the sea was blowing with a great wind and was awakened" (6:18). Jesus is absent from the disciples, from Israel and from the world. A great "wind sweeps over the face of the waters", as the writer of Genesis stated it. And the sea was "awakened".

That word, "awakened", is a very powerful word. In this setting, it is normally translated in this context, "the sea became rough". But the Greek word, *diegeireto*, is far more profound than that. It means "to awaken from sleep" and is used in both the Bible and in contemporary literature to describe the awakening of an evil monster, a storm dragon that comes forth from his lair and attacks unsuspecting and unprotected sailors – in this case, Jesus' disciples. All the powers of the Evil One, of the primary antagonist to the newly birthing Christian community, comes forth to do battle with the disciples!

But then Jesus comes! And he comes *walking on the water*! He comes walking on the back of the awakened monster, and in total control of it. He tells the disciples – his church – not to be frightened with the storms of evil they will repeatedly face. And then he says an absolutely remarkable thing. The text reads, "But he said to them, "It is I; do not be afraid!" Except that is not what Jesus says in this Greek passage. He doesn't say, "It is I". He says, "I AM"! He uses the words no Jew is supposed to use, the words considered so holy that they were never to be spoken and when written, required the writer to stop his writing and bathe himself. He refers, in Greek, to the words spoken in Hebrew at the burning bush, "I AM WHO I AM" (Exodus 3:14). In other words, Jesus declares, not only to the disciples but to the raging sea monster below them, "I am Yahweh!" And the sea immediately becomes still!

Jesus strides upon the awakened antagonist, the evil monster, the personification of darkness and evil infiltrating the entire world, all its people and all its systems. And he declares to it as well as to his disciples – who are caught up in fear at seeing Jesus conquering this most elemental force – “I AM” – the name of Yahweh, attributing that name to himself! This is the first of eight times in the Gospel of John that the disciples hear Jesus use this term for himself. And they realize why it is that Jesus can conquer even primal evil.

The story then reaches its conclusion. The sea becomes still. And then the traditional translation of this passage states, “Then they wanted to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the land toward which they were going” (6:21). But that’s not what the Greek says. The Greek actually says, “They were willing therefore to receive him into the boat. And immediately the boat came to be on the earth to which they were going.” What’s the difference?

First, the disciples are “willing to receive him”, not “willing to take him in”. The disciples aren’t simply going to haul Jesus into their boat. They are willing to receive him for whom he actually is – Yahweh incarnate, the One who can bring light into primordial darkness, the One who can still the awakened beast within the world. Seeing Jesus bestride the archetypal chaos, in control and proclaiming himself as “I AM” – “Yahweh”, the only appropriate response of those who follow Jesus is to “receive him” as such.

This is the difference between the disciples and all other people. The disciples “receive” him. The rest of the world doesn’t. Thus, this verse alludes to the opening Prologue of John, “To his own he came, but his own did not receive him. But as many as did receive him, he gave authority to become children of God” (1:11-12).

Second, this story concludes, “the boat came to be on the earth”, not just “reached the land”. The inevitable result of the disciples’ receiving of Jesus is that “the boat came to be on the earth to which they were going”. Jesus and the disciples didn’t just move towards the land and beach there. They immediately found themselves on the sure, firm ground of God’s earth – the sure ground of authentic faith in Christ. The gospel “had come to be on the earth”! As Wes Howard-Brook so magnificently states the truth of this passage,

“For the fourth gospel, this scene offers the basic model of what it means to become a Johannine community “in the boat”. Without Jesus, life is darkness, chaotic, stormy, out of control. With Jesus’ presence within the community, the possibility of living through to the other side of fear is revealed. In an incredibly compact six verses, the fourth gospel has expressed in powerful images the reenactment of the voyage from bondage to freedom, from being a ragtag bunch of frightened escapees to becoming a community of God’s children, from seeing Jesus as a teacher whom the crowd wants to make a worldly king to the epiphany of Jesus as the one who incarnates the Holy One.”¹

¹ Wes Howard-Brook, *Becoming Children of God: John’s Gospel and Radical Discipleship* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), p. 150. I have depended much upon Howard-Brook’s exegesis of this passage in the material I presented above.

In a profound sense, this Gospel lesson is much like the Old Testament lesson for this 17th Sunday in Ordinary Time. But whereas the Old Testament passage was about the abuse of unilateral power, here it is about the caring and committed use of relational power – of power designed to establish and build up an alternative community to the “normal” society that is operating upon an oppressive lust for power, exploitive greed and the need to dominate and to control humanity. It is about the world as God designed it to be, under a Lord who seeks not to dominate people as much as to transform them, who works for institutions and structures that recognize the uniqueness and grace of people and seeks to empower all to live life to the fullest without detracting from anyone else. In both the Old Testament and the Gospel scenarios, “what goes around comes around”. For if, like David, what one wants is simply to meet one’s own cravings and desires irrespective of who they damage, that will be what will happen to you. Or if, like Jesus, one is centered on the transforming of people and their societies into the world as God would intend it to be, one will find that world being created as chaos is defeated, darkness is lifted and people are fed.

Ephesians 3:14-21. What Paul has taught us thus far in Ephesians is that the primary mission of the church is to be engaged for Christ and His Kingdom in public life. Our objective for engagement is to bring about the submission of every nation and economy, as well as every individual, to Christ. All of human existence, he taught, is intended by God to be centered in Christ.

The way we, the church, are to bring about the submission of the world’s systems to Christ is to work in public life toward the end of changing the systems into systems as God created them to be. We are to do that by getting systems to break down the divisions between the systems and individuals that make them compete against each other and instead reconcile them to each other as parts of “Christ’s Body”.

Now, in chapter three of Ephesians, Paul drives this argument home by calling the church to do what appears to be an impossible mission in a world dominated by an empire that will resist that mission with all its might. Toward that task, therefore, Paul offers a profound prayer for the church that is, in reality, our Epistle lesson for this 17th Sunday in Ordinary Time. But in order to appreciate the depth and breadth of that prayer, we must first look at Paul’s opening argument in chapter three.

Paul begins this chapter by reminiscing about his own ministry – not to become nostalgic as he recognizes he is approaching its end, but because the examination of the purpose of his own ministry will help the churches Paul has founded to more clearly discern and embrace their mission. For the primary task of the church will be to pick up and continue to carry out the mission of Paul and of Peter when execution will make them lay it down.

In Ephesians 3:1-9, Paul tells the reader that he sees himself as being commissioned by Christ (3:1-3). That commission was to bring “the mystery of Christ” to the Gentile world (vs. 4). In previous generations, Paul states, this “mystery” was known only to Israel. But now that mystery is being shared with the Gentile world who are receiving it and becoming sharers with Israel in that mystery (vss. 5-6). Paul has become obsessed with this mission, he tells us,

because he is the least of the apostles and yet has been given this richest of all assignments (vss. 7-8). His objective, therefore, is to get the Gentile world to embrace this mystery that was previously known only to Israel (vs. 9). Now, as Paul recognizes that his death is fast approaching, that mystery God gave to Paul to bring to the Gentile world must now be passed on to the church. What is the church called to do by God with this mystery?

The first step in understanding Paul's message here is to comprehend his concept of "mystery", for that concept is essential to the understanding of this passage. In fact, that word is used four times by Paul in this section to describe his mission and the mission his churches must now embrace (cf. 1:9-10). So it is obviously a very important term. We must therefore ask, "What did Paul mean by the word 'mystery'?"

The word, "mystery" means in today's American context a crime that baffles or perplexes the police or authorities that can only be solved by someone who has amazing detective skills, whether it is a Sherlock Holmes, Miss Marple or Monk! This understanding of mystery is totally foreign to what Paul – or any Roman, Greek or Jew of his time – meant by that word.

The word "mystery" was coined by the Ptolemaic emperors of Egypt in the 3rd century BCE; it was used as a military term for plans that had been drawn up by the royal family for military conquest which they kept secret even from the generals who would be prosecuting the battle; the "mystery" of the emperor's plans would not be revealed to the commanding general until just before the battle (in enough time for him to draw up and execute appropriate battle plans to implement the emperor's plan, but not enough time for a spy to get that information to an agent of the opposition).

By Paul's time, the word "mystery" had taken on a less specific meaning. Picking up on the concept of secrecy, a "mystery" in Graeco-Roman religious practice was the secret information that only an initiate would learn that would lead him to immortality. In the Qumran community of Judaism, "mystery" was used of God's wise providence, the mystery of salvation hidden by God from the average Jew but revealed to the initiates of the Qumran community.

Paul's usage of the concept of mystery would center mostly upon that Jewish understanding. "Mystery", for Paul, had to do with God's secret actions and intentions that had formerly been hidden within Judaism but were now being made known to the world through the church (cf. vvs. 4-6, 9-10). And that mystery could be summarized in two propositions:

1. The Gentiles are included among God's chosen; chosenness is no longer confined to Jewish initiates;
2. The church is to make known that mystery, as they work in oneness with God for the transformation of the world.

That is most clearly stated in what is a jarring and utterly surprising statement in Ephesians 3:9-10. The work of the church, Paul writes, is "to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things, so that *through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places*" (3:9-10, italics mine).

This is an utterly shocking and totally unexpected statement. First, Paul declares that the work of the church is “to make everyone see what is (God’s) plan”. The baton is now being passed from Paul to the Church, so that they recognize that they are not primarily receivers of the gospel but initiators of it; they are to be as proactive in sharing with the world God’s intentions for humanity as Paul has been.

But what is shocking about this passage is the next line. Paul states that “through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety now (is to) be made known to . . .” One would expect, if one embraced the highly individualistic theology that now dominates American Christianity that Paul would have completed the sentence “might now be made known to the Gentiles” or “to the people” or “to individuals”. But that is not what Paul says at all. What Paul writes is that “the mystery of the wisdom of God” is to be made known “*to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places*”.

What Paul is clearly stating here is that the essential task or mission of the church is to “speak (and hopefully act out) truth to power”! When he speaks of “rulers and authorities in the heavenly places”, the only possible thing Paul could mean by that is what we explored in Ephesians on the 15th and 16th Sundays in Ordinary Time. He is referring to the spiritual forces that underlie, permeate and build the power of the political, economic and religious systems of Paul’s day. In other words, Paul is stating that the work of the church is to engage, confront and work for the transformation of the interior spirituality of the political, economic and religious systems of Rome! Their job is nothing less than to convert the Roman Empire itself to Christ!

Thus, what Paul is saying is that the new role of the church that they are inheriting from him is *to proclaim to the world’s systems the reality of a new vision for society – a world with its political, economic and religious systems living in God’s shalom community!* The church is to work in the Gentile world to bring it to the place where it is embracing for its corporate life as well as its individual life the intentions of God for society.

But the Roman Empire is so vast and so powerful. And the church is so small and insignificant. In the light of such an overwhelming job for such a small and uninfluential church as the first century church, Paul prays for them. That prayer is the Epistle Lesson for the 17th Sunday in Ordinary Time. Here it is:

“For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.” (3:14-21)

Paul prays for the church that they may have the strength to undertake such an enormous and overwhelming task (vs. 16), that they will be able to “get their heads around” such a task and vision (vs. 18), that they may be centered in Christ when undertaking such an assignment (vs. 17), and that Christ’s love will fill and empower them for the task (vs. 19). Such an assignment as Paul has given to the church is patently impossible to accomplish, unless . . .

- ? unless they rely on God,
- ? unless they gain a comprehensive understanding of God’s design for the world and the role they are to play in the implementation of that design,
- ? unless they center themselves in Christ so that it is Christ working through them rather than they taking on the work in their own strength,
- ? unless they allow Christ’s love to fill and empower them for that task.

Yes, the task is too great! There is no question about that! It is too great, if the church takes on that task in its own strength. But if, in essence, it is God who is at work through them, using them as his “hands and feet”, then nothing is too impossible to do – even transforming Rome into the City of God!

Paul then closes the theological section of this great essay of Ephesians with a benediction. And it is a powerful benediction, because its entire focus is that of dedicating the church to the new mission which God has given to it through Paul – the mission of engaging in the public life of Rome in order to bring it, in practice as well as in theology, under the love and authority of Jesus Christ, practicing a politics of justice, an economics of sharing so that poverty is eliminated, and the fostering of a people in a loving relationship with God and with each other.

This is the remarkable public theology of St. Paul – his essential belief that gave the direction and drive to his ministry. And it is obvious in this book that he wants the church to embrace the same. Paul believed that the very future of the church depended upon whether or not it would assume a corporate public role. If it hunkered down and sought to make itself either invisible or acceptable to Rome, retiring in fear to the nurturing only of its congregations, then it would eventually die. Its future lay in engaging Rome directly with a vision far superior than the Roman vision. Over the past three Sundays, we have explored Paul’s theology of public life and the church’s engagement in it.

Starting next Sunday, the 18th Sunday in Ordinary Time, we will begin examining what Paul believed the church should be about in living into its new call. How should the church concretely and specifically live out its life in the public arena in an empire that was opposed to it and would seek to destroy it? What practical strategies would Paul give to the church, not only to survive the intense persecution that would be coming upon it, but that would enable them to win the day? What would the church need to be about in order to “turn the empire upside down”? That is what we will begin to explore next Sunday.

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