

ORDINARY TIME

Ordinary Time is the season for the last half of the Christian Year. It runs from Trinity Sunday (the Sunday after Pentecost) through Christ the King Sunday (the Sunday before the First Sunday in Advent), and is the longest of all the seasons of the Christian Year. Its liturgical color is green, except for Trinity Sunday, All Saints' Day (or the first Sunday in November) and Christ the King Sunday, when the color is white. It has also been called Trinity Season or Kingdomtide.

Why is this season called “ordinary”? This longest season in the Christian Year is centered on a change in direction from the focus of the first part of that year. Beginning with the first Sunday in Advent, the first half of the Christian Year is focused upon Jesus – upon an Old Testament looking forward to him, to his anticipated advent in a politically-dominated Israel, to his birth, his life, his ministry, his teachings, his miracles, his triumphal procession into Jerusalem as the announced “king of the Jews”, his last week with his disciples, his betrayal, trial, scourging and crucifixion, and then his glorious resurrection that brings new purpose, hope and direction to his followers – the earliest Church. The “Jesus” half of the Christian Year then ends with Pentecost, as the Holy Spirit descends upon and fills the church as they seek to be Christ’s disciples to the world. That six months of the Christian Year is a most extraordinary season of celebrating the One who is liberator, redeemer, savior and Lord to the world.

The second season of the year is much more “ordinary” in theme and in nature. It deals with the church “militant” – the church, sent forth by Jesus through these extraordinary events to become Jesus alive today in a very ordinary world. It is about the church getting down to the business to which it has been called by Christ. So, from June through November, God’s people encourage and seek to motivate one another to be deeply engaged in the world as Christ called us to be engaged. That engagement includes bringing good news in our words, in our work for social justice, in our effort to empower people, and in the very quality of our life together. What “ordinary time” is about is our effort to motivate and encourage each other as the church of Christ to work for the transformation of the world into the world as God intended it to be. That is the focus of the season of “Ordinary Time”.

Trinity Sunday (or the 8th Sunday in Ordinary Time):
Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31; Psalm 8; John 16:1-15; Romans 5:1-5

Trinity Sunday is the first Sunday in Ordinary Time, and is the Sunday following Pentecost. It is possible, when there is an extremely early Easter, for there to be a 9th Sunday in Ordinary Time that is distinct from Trinity Sunday (thus making Trinity Sunday the 8th Sunday in Ordinary Time rather than the 9th). Scripture is assigned for that anomaly in the standard lectionary. However, if one so chooses, one can intermix the scripture, using any of the scripture – as long as there is an Old Testament lesson, Psalm, Gospel Lesson and Epistle lesson. To cover all possible eventualities, we are included all the scripture for both Trinity Sunday and the 9th Sunday in Ordinary Time under the Trinity Sunday heading.

The observance of Trinity Sunday is of rather late origin. It was established by Pope John XXII in 1334 to mark the transition from the first half of the liturgical year and its commemoration of Christ, to the beginning of the second half of the liturgical year that concentrates upon the church in the world. Trinity Sunday has been particularly important to churches that come out of the English tradition because it was the Sunday on which St. Thomas Becket was consecrated as the Archbishop of Canterbury in 1162.

In a most profound way, Becket symbolizes what the season of Ordinary Time is all about, with its primary emphasis on the Church Militant. A chancellor of King Henry II and a layman, Becket was rushed through ordination as a priest in order to be consecrated as Henry's choice for Archbishop of Canterbury and head of the English portion of the Roman Catholic Church. Henry, who was in constant struggle with the papacy over supremacy in England, believed that by putting his "chryon" on the archbishop's throne, he would have his way over the papacy. That was not to be the case. Becket took his responsibilities seriously, and called Henry to accountability. When, in 1164, Henry sought to bring the church in England and its priests under his control, Becket opposed him, forcing him by his skillful use of the powers he had as a priest and archbishop to release political power over the church. This caused such a breach between Henry and Becket that it resulted in Becket's assassination at Henry's behest¹ in 1170. But Becket, though dead, won the day because he was canonized as a saint in 1172, Henry was forced to repent and Becket became one of England's most popular saints.

What the struggle between Becket and Henry was all about was whether Christianity was to be under the authority of the political power of the day or whether it was to stand over against that power, calling it to moral and just accountability. With his martyrdom, Becket won the day as the church became free of the constraints of the political order, instead calling it to social responsibility. *That* is what Ordinary Time is all about!

Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31 is a part of the "wisdom" literature of the Bible. This passage, in itself, states the "mission" of "wisdom". There are two Hebrew words often translated as "wisdom", *chokmah* and *binah*. The Greek word for "wisdom" used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament and in the New Testament is the well-known *sophia*. The word *binah* has the sense of "understanding" or "consideration" to it. *Chokmah*, and its adjective *chakam*, on the other hand, has the sense of sagacity, discernment or even technical proficiency that results in action. Thus, "wisdom", to the Hebrew, was not so much an accumulation of knowledge as it was the skill in making thought to issue in action. The Greeks had the same understanding of wisdom; this was seen in the regulation in republic Athens that no one under the age of 50 could participate in public decision-making within Athens' political arena because they lacked *sophia*; they lacked political judgment.

In Proverbs 8, "Wisdom" is a woman who is seated at the gates of the city, at its crossroads and at its "high place" or center of decision-making. The choice of places where "Wisdom" has taken up residence is significant: the gates of the city was where the judiciary and the legislative

¹ Henry never admitted to arranging the assassination of Becket, but he did eventually publicly repent of it. What happened was that Henry, in a fit of anger at being defied once again by Becket, stormed "Where is there a knight who will rid me of this man?" Several of his knights heard Henry, and obliged him.

body of a city sat to make judgment; it was the political center of the city. The crossroads was the city's market square where items were bought and sold and the city's commerce occurred; it was the economic center of any Hebrew city. The "high place" or "the heights" was the physically highest point of the city and was where the Temple or religious edifice of either Yahweh or Ba'al would be built; it was the religious center of the city. Therefore, the author of this Proverb is telling the reader that "Wisdom" – contemplative and thoughtful decision-making ending in just action for the common good – must occur at the center of Israel's political, economic and religious life. And that wisdom that is most godly for any city is best understood as the contemplative, reflective action of a woman!

The woman, Wisdom, is standing at the center of that Hebrew city's political, economic and/or religious system. And she cries to it, to those who shape and manage it and to all who participate in it, "To you, O people, I call, and my cry is to all that live. O simple ones, learn prudence; acquire intelligence, you who lack it. Hear, for I will speak noble things, and from my lips will come what is right; for my mouth will utter truths; wickedness is an abomination to my lips. All the words of my mouth are righteous; there is nothing twisted or crooked in them" (8:4-8).

As the Greeks demanded *sophia* of anyone who would participate in politics, so the Israelite woman, Wisdom required the same of anyone who would participate in the city's political, judicial, economic, educational or spiritual life. She calls to all who would set themselves to mold the social ethics, public morality or political or economic decisions of her city to do so with a sober regard for the seriousness of the task which they are undertaking.

Wisdom continues her declaration to the "movers and shakers" of her city or nation. "My fruit is better than gold, even fine gold, and my yield than choice silver. I walk in the way of righteousness, along the paths of justice, endowing with wealth those who love me, and filling their treasuries" (vss. 19-21). Do you want your city to be wealthy and profitable? Then, don't make as your aim the making of profit. Instead, make as your aim justice for all your citizens, equity in your treatment of them, stewardship of your city's common wealth and an equitable sharing of that wealth so that there are no poor among you (Deut. 15:4). Do that – and you will prosper! By acting for the public good rather than for your private benefit, your city will be enriched and all will equally benefit. This is what Wisdom (rather than cunning or self-service) tells you.

In verses 22-36, the author of this wise saying takes his argument two steps further. First, he points out that the existence of wisdom is co-eternal with God. "Wisdom" is speaking in this proverb, and she declares, "The Lord created me (i.e., "Wisdom") at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of long ago. Before the mountains had been shaped, before the hills, I was brought forth – when he had not yet made earth and fields, or the world's first bits of soil. When he established the heavens, I was there" (vss. 22-27). In other words, what the author is declaring is that the world as God intended it to be – a world in which all humanity and the environment itself lives in equitable justice toward all and a stewardship of the world's resources so that poverty is eliminated so that humanity is at one with both God and each other – was the very world that God created and that was his original intention. This was God's "Wisdom" personified and made alive in the very act of creating the world. Greed, lust for power, and the need to control and dominate are all later accretions upon the world. But God's "Wisdom" of

stewardship of the earth, equitable distribution of wealth, justice and the maintaining of a relational culture was God's intentions – from the very beginning!

The writer of Proverbs continues. “And now, my children, listen to me: happy are those who keep my ways. Happy is the one who listens to me, watching daily at my gates, waiting beside my doors. *For whoever finds me finds life and obtains favor from the Lord; but those who miss me injure themselves; all who hate me love death*” (8:32-36)!

This statement, of course, is another “Choose you this day whom you will serve” (Josh. 24:15)! In this case, the choice is put in terms of Wisdom or self-serving (which is foolishness). Choosing to join God in God's intentions for the world – justice, equity, relationships – means that Israel as a nation and each Israelite as a person and as part of a community will “find life and obtain favor from the Lord”. Choosing, instead, to seek to dominate your society, to use its politics, economics and/or religion to build your personal wealth at the expense of others, or to build your power, or to use your office to control and manage others is for you to “injure yourselves” and to court death! Here is the ultimate outworking of Wisdom. How, then, can any person be so foolish as to choose domination?

Psalm 8 is, next to the 23rd Psalm, probably the best known hymn in the Psalter. It begins and ends with the refrain, “O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth” (vss. 1a, 9). If there is anything this psalm is about, it is about the sovereignty of God – that all that exists (including humanity) owes its existence to Yahweh who, as the God of creation and sustenance, is sovereign over all the earth. “You have set your glory above the heavens. Out of the mouths of babes and infants, you have founded a bulwark because of your foes, to silence the enemy and the avenger” (1b-2).

The psalm then presents three primary points. First, as Creator, God is responsible for all creation from the cosmos itself to the smallest microbe. “When I look at your heavens; the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them” (vss. 3-4)? The psalmist moves from the greater to the less. He begins with praising God for creating the entire cosmic order, the universe of the stars, the moon and then, presumably, our planet”. All this is “the work of your fingers”, the fingers of a creator molding from clay the universe in which we exist.

Second, the Psalm deals with the exalted place given to humanity by God. If one looks at the vastness and complexity of God's creation of the entire cosmos, then, in comparison “What are human beings that you are mindful of them (or) that you care for them?” We seem like the puniest of objects in the universe.

“Yet you have made humans a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor” (vs. 5). We may be small, but we are mighty! The phrase “a little lower than God” can also be equally translated “a little less than the gods”; the Septuagint translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek translates this reference as “the angels”. In other words, what the Psalmist is saying is that humanity doesn't lie at the apex of creation; we are not the last word in evolution. We are just the most advanced of what has been. There is higher – “angels” or “the gods” or even

“God”. But we are only “a little lower”, with amazing God-like capacities within ourselves, capacities we need to respect and hold in awe rather than to exploit.

In a very profound sense, this is an ecological psalm. That becomes clear in its third point. “You have given humanity dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet, all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas” (vss. 6-8). The Hebrew word that is used to describe humanity’s capacity is “dominion”; it is not “domination”. There is a profound difference between the two.

“Domination” means “supremacy over a person or thing”, a “controlling influence”, “top-down authority”, even the right to exploitation. It is essentially a negative word. “Dominion” in the Old Testament tradition, however, means “rulership over”; that is, humans are to rule over the environment in the way that a king of Israel rules over the nation; it is not about supremacy but about the exercise of responsibility.

How did an Israelite king rule? Deuteronomy gave the clearest instructions on the office of the Israelite king (Deut. 17:14-20). The king was not to be the “regent” of the nation, its supreme monarch. That position was reserved for God, and God alone. Rather, he was to be the “vice-regent”, serving under the authority of God and in a manner consistent with God’s continuing creation and improvement of the world.

Thus, the king as “vice-regent” was to be a commoner, an ordinary person whom God would select to be monarch. His reign was not to be passed on to his heirs (this was one of the unresolved tensions between the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah in the south’s commitment to the Davidic dynasty). Rather, each new monarch would be chosen from the people. The reward of the Israelite king for wisely ruling his nation was not in the accumulation of wealth for himself or his family or even his tribe, nor was it to increase his power. He was to live frugally. He was not to have a harem or many wives. He was not to enslave his subjects or sell them into slavery to another king. Finally, he was to keep a copy of the book of the Law before him and have a portion of it read to him each day in order to remind himself of his obligations as a king (not what were his privileges). Kingship, as described in Deuteronomy, was unlike any other monarchy existing anywhere else in the East in the millennium before Jesus’ birth.

Deuteronomy communicated to the nation and those in the political system that the system exists, not to build self-serving power but to dispense justice. Justice is to be the continual and inevitable outcome of a monarch’s reign, the only measurement by which that king’s rule is to be evaluated. His rule exists to serve the people, and he is not to perceive the nation as his personal property for him to use to further his own ends or to increase his wealth. A nation and culture built on relationship with God and each other requires a government that will seek justice in all it does.

The primary point I want to make in this exposition of Psalm 8 is that the only context in which an Israelite could conceivably understand this Psalmist’s proclamation that God has given dominion to humans over nature would be for that Israelite to liken our responsibility toward

nature to the responsibility the Israelite king has to his nation. And that means, not domination and exploitation of nature, but rather assuming responsibility for its care and stewardship! That means treating the environment with justice! Thus, being given “dominion” is for humanity to become “vice-regent” of God’s creation by continuing to participate in the ongoing act of creation by taking care of that environment, not exploiting it!

It is in the light of this significant assignment to humanity to be stewards of God’s world that the Psalmist can then proclaim, “O Lord, our Sovereign (that is, king of the Universe as humans are kings of justice over their environment), how majestic is your name in all the earth”!

John 16:1-15 is an integral part of a larger teaching by Jesus (14:1-16:33) on the evening before his betrayal, trial and crucifixion. It is therefore Jesus’ final word to his disciples. Thus, it is called “The Farewell Discourse”. It follows the literary form of that day of the farewell or last testament of a famous man as he prepares his followers for his departure. Examples of this farewell form in scripture are found in Genesis 49 (Jacob), all of Deuteronomy (Moses) and I Chronicles 28-29 (David). The purposes of such a farewell discourse are to comfort the followers of the great men by helping them understand the significance of his life and death, and to lay out future directions or directives for the community he has founded. That is exactly what happens in this Farewell Discourse of Jesus. John 16 deals with the second purpose – to lay out future directions/directives.

Jesus began laying out these directives early in his teaching (14:15-31) by introducing the person and work of “the Paraclete”. He speaks of the mission of the Paraclete five times in this farewell discourse – 14:16-17, 14:26, 15:26-27, 16:5b-11, 16:12-15. It is therefore a dominant theme in this final speech by Jesus.

Jesus identifies the Paraclete with the Holy Spirit (14:16-17). In some translations, the Greek word used for the Holy Spirit (*parakletos*) is translated “comforter”, “counselor” or “helper”, but the closest translation of the word is the NRSV’s “advocate”. The Greek word, “parakletos” is a legal term. In the Roman law court, the accused didn’t hire a lawyer to present his defense. Rather, he was responsible for defending himself. Thus, in Acts 26:1-23, it is Paul himself who speaks in his own defense before King Agrippa and the governor of the Roman province of Syria, Festus.

But how could an ordinary Roman citizen know enough about the subtleties of Roman law to argue his own case? To do so, he hired a “parakletos” – an expert in Roman law who would literally “stand alongside him” during his trial and whisper into his ear what he needed to know so that he could present his best defense. Later Jewish writers, such as Philo, then picked up this concept of “parakletos” to write about the Temple priest or the Pharisee as being a Jew’s “advocate” before God!

So what Jesus was saying in his Farewell Discourse is that God has provided another “parakletos” than himself to come alongside the Christian community and each individual Christian to advise, advocate, instruct and comfort them or him as they or he faithfully sought to carry out the mission to which their original “parakletos”, Jesus, had called them. In other words, this Holy

Spirit is an extension of Jesus alive and at work in and among Jesus' community today, enabling Jesus' people to carry out the work to which God and Jesus (as one Lord) has called them!

In today's Gospel Lesson, Jesus begins with his prediction of the trouble into which his community of faith will get with "the powers that be", and then states two ways the Holy Spirit as Paraclete will work within and among his community to sustain them in the midst of such trouble. He begins, "I have said these things to you to keep you from stumbling. They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, an hour is coming when those who kill you will think that by doing so they are offering worship to God. And they will do this because they have not known the Father or me. But I have said these things to you so that when their hour comes you may remember that I told you about them" (16:1-4b).

By its very nature – *if it is faithfully proclaimed and acted out* – the Gospel will alienate the powerful. The Gospel, by its very nature, is about the replacement of the present social order with a new social order. A politics of power will be replaced by a politics of justice, of the marginalizing and oppressing of those considered a threat by a politics of inclusion and acceptance. An economics of greed will be replaced by an economics of stewardship of the environment and the people's wealth, of the exploiting of the poor by the elimination of poverty. A religion of control will be replaced by a religion of loving relationships, in which all people will be held dear and humanity will find its fulfillment in being at one with God and all peoples. Therefore, it is inevitable that those who provide leadership to the political, economic and religious systems (i.e., education, social welfare, entertainment, communications) will perceive the church – *when it faithfully proclaims and acts out its mission* – as the greatest threat facing them, and will seek to eradicate it. In Jesus' day, the systems he confronted in everyday life were "the synagogues" and "those who think that by killing Christians they are offering worship to God". Today, the systems might be quite different. But whether ancient religious systems or present-day political and economic systems of greed and domination, the very opposition of the world's systems to the church is proof positive that the church is doing the job given it by God!

What, then, can the church do in the face of such corporate opposition? What can God's people do when they are *persona non grata* before the world? Jesus continues in this discourse penned by John. "Now I am going to him who sent me (to you). And because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your hearts. Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Paraclete will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you" (16:5-7).

The church will survive the effort of the political, economic and religious systems of a given generation and location to eliminate God's community because of their empowerment by the Paraclete. Whether they are on trial for their opposition to the domination tactics of the powers, whether they are standing before those powers to call them to accountability or whether they are engaged in working to build the people-power of the poor, the Church will have standing next to them their Paraclete, the Holy Spirit, whispering instructions into their ears and equipping them to lovingly demand accountability on the part of the systems. And the Holy Spirit will do this strategic work in two ways.

First, the Paraclete will speak the truth through God's people. "When the Paraclete comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment; about sin, because they do not believe in me; about righteousness, because I am going to the Father and you will see me no longer; about judgment, because the ruler of this world has been condemned" (16:8-11).

Through God's people, the Paraclete "will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment". The author envisions the systems of the world being on trial with the Paraclete as the prosecuting attorney who is about to "prove the world wrong". The first wrong is the way that society (its rulers and leaders, its structures, its values and its people) perceive "sin" (vs. 9). Sin, to Jesus, is not actions or intentions of immorality (that is, the naughty things we do) but "because they do not believe in Jesus. That is, the people and their political, economic and values-creating systems refuse to embrace Jesus as savior and Lord of the world – the one who brings a permeating shalom to this world through justice and equitable sharing of wealth and dynamic personal relationship with God.

"wrong about righteousness" (vs. 10). The word "righteousness" is being used here in its legal sense of "vindication". That is, it is in Jesus' death that he is vindicated before God, his defeat is victory, and the "rightness" of God is revealed (in other words, "he is going to the Father and you will see him no more"); it will be that vindicating death that will release the systems and people from their need for domination, greed and control and will free them to embrace the new reality in God that can be theirs.

"wrong about judgment" (vs. 11). The "ruler of this world" is not Satan, but rather the world's political, economic and religious systems.² These systems are exposed through the unjust death of Jesus as the unethical and dominating systems that they are. That, in turn, will lead to those systems and their rulers being condemned, if they do not choose to repent and embrace the vision of the shalom community.

Jesus promises the disciples that God isn't through with them yet! They will face persecution, expulsion and death by the systems for what they have experienced, believed and proclaimed as Christians about Jesus. But God will use such persecution to come alongside them in the person of the Paraclete in order to equip and motivate them to engage and even confront the systems, and seek to convince those systems that God is, in reality, committed to the creation of the shalom community throughout the world, and will consequently lead his people to victory!

Second, the Paraclete will guide God's people in their work of transformation. Jesus concludes this section of his Farewell Discourse with the words, "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you" (16:13-15).

² See the exegesis for John 12:20-33 on the 5th Sunday in Lent, Cycle C, for the argument that in the Gospel of John, the term "the ruler of the world" is not a reference to Satan but to the political, economic and religious systems of Israel and those who manage them.

How are God's people to assume the great work being given them by God – the works both of exposure and replacement? God's people are called to expose to the systems that what the world perceives is sin, justice (righteousness) and judgment are wrong and are designed to maintain their systems in oppressive and exploitive dominance? Likewise, God's people are called to replace dominating and unilateral exercise of power with the power of shalom – the world as God intends it to be in its political, economic and spiritual life.

But how are we to do this great work? The answer is given in 16:13-15. And the key to unlocking that answer is found in the Greek word translated “guide”. The word used is “*hodegesei*”. That word is not used elsewhere in the Gospel of John; this is the only place it is used (and it is used only four times throughout the New Testament). To “*hodegesei*” is to lead in “the way” (*hodos*). This is clearly a reference to Jesus' earlier declaration in the Farewell Discourse, “I am the way, the truth and the life” (14:6). But how is Jesus “the way, the truth and the life”. Here is how. The “Spirit of truth” will take on Jesus' task of being “the way” to Jesus' “way, truth and life”. Just as Jesus spoke only what he had heard from the Father (cf. 8:28, 12:49), so the Paraclete will now speak to the hearts of Jesus' followers what the Spirit has heard from Jesus. And then the followers of “the Way” are to speak to humanity and its systems what they have heard from the Spirit. A perfect conduit is being described here from Father to Jesus through the Spirit to the disciples. And now, we are to “declare the things that are to come”. Thus, the way that God will convict the world “of sin, of justice (righteousness) and of judgment” will be through the Spirit who will use Jesus' disciples and followers to announce God's truth to the world (16:15) – whether they want to hear it or not!

Romans 5:1-5 builds Paul's concept of grace. That recognition of grace reaches its climax in 5:12-21, where Paul points out how God's forgiving, redeeming grace has come upon us through “the one man, Jesus Christ.” He then concludes with the powerful words, “where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, just as sin exercised dominion in death, so grace might exercise dominion through justification leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord” (5:20b-21).

But I particularly want to concentrate upon the opening lines of Romans 1: “Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand, and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God” (5:1-2).

Paul begins by stating, as an accomplished reality of life, that we are already justified by faith. The Greek tense used here is a completed state of action – something that God had already done even before we chose to believe. The work of redemption has already been accomplished by Christ on the cross, and has been achieved, once and for all. It is an accomplished act, a completed state of action in which all believers can be fully confident.

Because God's act of redemption is already done and need not be done again in order to be efficacious to us, then “we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ”. The text is not saying that we, as those who have received God's mercy, are responsible to make peace, to build the shalom community of justice, equity and union with God. It is instead saying that “peace”,

like “grace”, is an accomplished act on God’s part, and we become “peace-absorbing”, accepting “shalom” as a gift of grace from God to be both received by us and allowing that peace to so permeate and infuse us that we become “peace-makers” or “peace distributors” to the world!

So in what can we, as Christians, “boast” if we can’t take pride in our actions that bring about world peace? We can take pride in only two things, Paul suggests. We can boast in God’s redemptive work in Christ that brings us into a community of peace and makes us peace-makers. And we can boast in our sufferings. Paul writes, “We boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us” (5:3-5).

In what do we take pride? It is not in our obedience to the Law of Moses (that is, our keeping of the Ten Commandments), nor is it in our good works. Obedience or conformity to such will not win us eternal life. Eternal life has already been won for us through the gracious work of Jesus Christ on the cross. It is that work that is already done for us and is offered to us to receive or reject. If we are chosen by God, we will find that gracious work irresistible and will receive it. If our hearts are closed to God’s redemptive action toward us, we will remain closed to that grace, our rejection being a self-fulfilling prophecy. So the only pride we can take is in a God who loves us so much that he will offer us abundant life through Christ, whether we are opened or closed to it.

But the other thing in which we can take pride is in the way that God goes about forming those who are responsive to God into the creation God intends us to be. And this God does through hard times!

Living with abundance, success and surrounded by love never built character in anyone! Only suffering, difficulties and pain shape us into a person of spiritual character. How is that so, one might ask? And Paul answers, “Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us” (5:3b-5a). Like Abraham and Sarah (Romans 4:20), we mature in and grow strong in our trust and faith in God only by suffering! We should pray for suffering, for it is suffering that is the greatest indication of God’s loving commitment to us – a commitment that doesn’t only comfort but exercises our capacity for faith by trying that faith! This is so because, as “peace-makers” who are seeking to live out the peace God has placed in our hearts, we will respond to suffering with a receptivity and even a searching for what God is seeking to do through that pain or difficulty.

All human beings suffer. Salvation in Christ is no warrantee against suffering. But salvation in Christ opens us to a receptivity to see God’s will and work in all that happens to us. And approaching suffering from that perspective will enable God to turn that suffering into good in our lives, as we grow in faith and love through its discipline.

When our attitude is a receptive, grace-filled attitude, then our suffering will sharpen our capacity to endure. And the steady accumulation of the capacity to endure will, in turn, result in

a strengthening and sharpening of our character. And as our character matures, we will increasingly become a person of hope.

In the light of what he has just written, Paul now moves to the theological zenith of this passage. “For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person – though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us” (5:6-8).

When we, as budding people of faith, suffer and feel at our wit’s end, it is precisely at that “right time”, “while we are still weak”, while we are still wrestling with our resentment or anger or dismay over the hard times in which we find ourselves – it is precisely then that “Christ died for the ungodly” (that is, us). Yes, in one sense, one can interpret this passage to say that Jesus’ death took place “at the right time” of the divine timetable for the world’s redemption (e.g., John 17:1; Acts 2:23; Gal. 4:4). But, in a more profound sense, it is precisely when we are in the moment of our deepest need and are crying out to God in our pain and suffering, that it is precisely at that time that Christ has come to die for us! It is only this interpretation that makes sense of Romans 5:6-8 being placed by Paul immediately following Romans 5:3-5, as the apostle seeks to explain how our suffering can become redemptive to us. It becomes redemptive to us because it is precisely when we need Christ the most that he – who historically died at a single point of time and at precisely the “right time” – now spiritually becomes life-and-death to us, at our “right time”, so that we might rely upon him to enable us to endure and thus build our character and hope!

It is at this point that Paul writes the clearest and most pithy statement of the gospel. “But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners (struggling with our own suffering and depression), Christ died for us” (vs. 8). Here is the gospel in a nutshell. “Christ died for us”. The cross was not a misfortune for Jesus nor a blunder by God. Rather, it was ordained by God, as the epitome of suffering, pain and rejection by the systems, values and priorities of human society, to occur at the right time. For, Paul writes, “Christ died for us”.

At one and the same time, Paul makes an historical statement and a theological statement. “Christ died” – this is an historical fact. “For us” – this is the theological significance of that death. For Jesus’ death is God’s gracious action to meet us at the point of our deepest pain, suffering and despair, and to transform that moment so that we can become, in and through Christ, the mature, perfected human beings that God has called and intends us to be. This is the power of the Gospel. “Christ died for us!”

9th Sunday in Ordinary Time:

I Kings 18:20-21, 30-39 is one of the most dramatic stories in the Bible that deals with the task of God's people toward those who hold the political, economic and religious power within their country. To fully appreciate this story, one must place it within its context.

King Ahab ruled over Israel from c. 869-950 BCE, and was a man obsessed with power. His marriage to Jezebel, the daughter of the king of the Sidonians and priest of Asherah (I Kings 16:31) and his consequent willingness to allow her to bring Ba'al worship (Asherah or Astarte was the consort of Ba'al) and priests of Ba'al into the court, guaranteed that Ahab's reign would be marked by syncretism. As a result of wanting to please his wife, Ahab built a house of worship for Ba'al in his capital city of Samaria and erected an altar there (16:32-33), so that Ba'al worship was no longer confined to the court but was available to all Israelites who wished to take advantage of it.

But Ahab was more than an advocate of Ba'al. To truly understand his motives, one must recognize what monarchy was supposed to be in Israel. Deuteronomy names two systems for ordering the public life of Israel: the judicial system and the monarchy. Deuteronomy is the book that best presents the office of the king to Israel.³ In essence, Deuteronomy significantly limits the rights and privileges of the king of Israel so that he is seen as a vice regent under Israel's true king, Yahweh (Deut. 17:14-20). In all nations other than Israel, the king was an absolute monarch, the sole voice of authority in the land. There was no other authority but his, because he was a total despot. The judiciary was an instrument of the king, adjudicating the laws he himself had set, and adjudicating those laws in ways that would favor the king.

The king was allowed such power by nobles and common people alike in most nations contemporary with Israel because he was seen as the incarnation (as in Egypt) or manifestation (as in Assyria and Babylonia) of that nation's chief god. The king was their god "enfleshed". The king controlled not only the political life of the nation, but its religious and economic life as well. He operated under the assumption that all the wealth of the land belonged to him. And it belonged to him because he was a god, and not a man! Therefore, the king was, in his single person, the religious, political and economic systems personified.

Israelite kingship, as defined by Deuteronomy, was profoundly different. The king was to be a commoner, an ordinary person whom God would select to be monarch. His reign could not be passed on to his heirs. Rather, each new monarch would be chosen from the people. The reward of the Israelite king for wisely ruling his nation was not to accumulate wealth for himself or his family or tribe. He was to live frugally. He was not to have a harem or many wives. He was not to enslave his subjects or sell them into slavery to another king. Finally, he was to keep a copy of the book of the Law before him and have a portion of it read each day to him in order to remind himself of his obligations and responsibilities as a king (not his privileges). Israelite

³ For the past 200 years, there has been great disagreement between biblical scholars regarding the dating of the book of Deuteronomy. That dating covers a spectrum from 1200 BCE to 622 BCE (the latter date is the date when the "Book of the Law" – or, in other words, Deuteronomy – was uncovered in the Temple (see II Kings 22:3-20); therefore, the book obviously existed before its discovery). According to the dating one chooses (I personally prefer a 900 BCE date for its creation), Deuteronomy either prescribes or describes Israel's common understanding of the office of the king. What is significant, however, is that Israel's kings ruled under this understanding of their reign as being that of a vice-regent of Yahweh, likely as far back as David himself.

kingship, as described in Deuteronomy 17:14-20, was unlike any monarchy existing anywhere else in the Middle East.

Deuteronomy communicated to those in the political system that the system exists to dispense justice. The judiciary is to be separate from the authority of the king so that it can adjudicate cases with justice (and not enforce the king's agenda). For the monarch, justice is to be the inevitable result of rulership that exists to serve the people, and he is not to perceive the nation as his personal property or domain for him to use to further his own ends or increase his wealth. A nation and culture built on relationship with Yahweh and each other requires a government that will seek justice in all it does.

This was not an understanding of kingship that Ahab intended to embrace. Although he gave lip service to this understanding of king as servant to the nation, his actions were all carefully calculated to enable him to rule as an oriental despot. And in no arena of the life of the nation was this more obvious than in his actions in regards to religion.

Ahab realized that it was from their religion that the people of Israel believed that the king existed to legislate and implement justice in the nation that would seek everybody's good and not just his own. It was their belief in Yahweh and in Yahweh as a relational and just God who was their true king (reducing the king to a vice-regent) that would cause the Israelites to place upon the king expectations and limiting conditions that no other monarch in the Middle East had to bear. If Ahab were ever to rule Israel as a total despot, he had to destroy the religious foundations of Israel. And that meant demonstrating that it was Ba'al and not Yahweh who was supreme in Israel. And that, in turn, meant dealing decisively with Elijah the Tishbite.

Elijah was the outstanding voice for Yahweh both before the people and before the court of Israel. He quickly discerned Ahab's intentions and immediately set to work to undermine the king's actions. He knew that Ahab intended to ignore all the laws of Israel regarding the limitation of the monarchy in his quest to become a despot. He realized that Ahab recognized that he could not do so without destroying the foundation of Yahweh worship in Israel. And so Elijah decided to publicly challenge Ahab to a contest that would prove, once and for all, which god ruled Israel.

Ahab is in a public place when Elijah confronts him, so that what is said is said before the people and consequently can't be withdrawn. Ahab's first reaction when seeing Elijah is to say, "Is it you, you troubler of Israel?" Elijah shoots back, "I have not troubled Israel; but you have, and your father's house, because you have forsaken the commandments of the Lord (i.e., disobeyed the political requirements of Deuteronomy) and followed the Ba'als. Now therefore have all Israel assemble before me at Mount Carmel, with the four hundred fifty prophets of Ba'al and the four hundred prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel's table (i.e., are in the court leading Ba'al worship and undermining Yahweh's authority)" (18:17-19).

So they assemble on Mount Carmel – the 850 priests of Ba'al and Asherah, versus one single prophet of Yahweh, Elijah – and Ahab and "all the people". Elijah places the challenge. "How long will you go limping between two different opinions? If Yahweh is God, follow him. But if Ba'al is god, follow him! Let two bulls be given to us; let the priests of Ba'al choose one bull for

themselves, cut it in pieces and lay it on the wood, but put no fire to it. I will prepare the other bull and lay it on the wood, but put no fire on it. Then you call on the name of your god and I will call on the name of Yahweh. Then, the god who answers by fire is indeed God” (18:21-28)!

And why would it be that “the god who answers by fire is indeed God”? Both Yahweh and Ba’al were “fire gods”. That is, the worshipper of Ba’al believed that Ba’al controlled thunder, lightning, and storms. And Yahweh had made his presence known to Israel both in a burning bush and in a law code given to the people from the midst of a burning mountain (Exodus 3:1-6; 20:1-19). So Elijah’s challenge struck at the core of the supposed power of both gods.

The contest is now joined. The priests of Ba’al and Asherah go first. As agreed to, they pick a bull, build an altar, slay the beast and lay it upon the wood. Then they begin to pray to Ba’al to accept their offering with fire. They pray and pray and pray for Ba’al to respond. For six hours, they pray to Ba’al. They pray, they plead, they cut themselves, they practice self-flagellation; they do everything they can think of to get Ba’al to answer by fire (18:26-29). And nothing happens!

Elijah isn’t above publicly mocking them and making them look like fools. “Cry aloud”, he cries. “Surely he is a god; either he is meditating, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened; maybe he has wandered away” (vs. 27). Myths of Ba’al present him as deep in reflection (“he is meditating”), traveling to the underworld (“he is on a journey”) and even dying and coming back to life (“he is asleep and must be awakened”), so Elijah is mockingly “de-mythologizing” those beliefs about Ba’al, showing them as false. But then he adds insult to injury; “maybe he has wandered away”, he declares (and everybody likely gasped at his effrontery). You see, to “wander away” was a polite euphemism for one relieving himself. Therefore, Elijah is saying, “Maybe your god had to go take a crap!”

The priests of Ba’al “raved on until the time of the offering of the oblation (3:00 p.m.), but there was no voice, no answer, and no response”! Ba’al had not responded to his priests’ desperate cry for help.

Now it is Elijah’s turn. He simply says to the people, “Come closer to me”. The people (and likely even Ahab and the disgraced priests of Ba’al) gather around him to see what he would do. He first repairs the altar to Yahweh that was on Mount Carmel, that altar that had been destroyed by the Ba’al worshippers as a way of claiming the land for Ba’al. He uses twelve stones in that stacking of a restored altar, obviously representing the Israelite kingdom built upon the twelve tribes of Israel living in fealty to their true king, Yahweh. Then he digs a deep trench around the altar, puts wood on the altar, slays the bull, cuts it in pieces and lays it upon the altar. The sacrifice is now ready for the contest.

But first, Elijah has the people gather four large jars with water and pour it on the sacrifice – not once, but three times “so that the water ran all around the altar, and filled the trench also with water” (vs. 35). Thoroughly inundated, there was no way this sacrifice was going to burn! And then Elijah prayed one, simple, quiet prayer.

“O Yahweh, God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, that I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at your bidding. Answer me, O Yahweh, answer me, so that this people may know that it is you, O Yahweh, who is God, and that you have turned their hearts back” (vs. 36). It is nothing but a short, simple and quiet prayer – only two sentences long. But, immediately, the fire falls from heaven, consumes the burnt offering, burns up all the wood and even the stones, and even “licks up the water in the trench”.

“And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and cried, “The Lord indeed is God; the Lord indeed is God” (vs. 39). The Hebrew is even stronger – even though terribly ungrammatical. The people actually cried, “Yahweh, he is the God; Yahweh, he is the God”!

The contest had been joined. Yahweh had won. Ba'al had lost. And with the loss of Ba'al, so Ahab and Jezebel had lost. This defeat didn't stop Ahab's efforts to sabotage Israel's understanding of kingship. But he would never attempt to destroy Yahweh worship again. Instead, he “came out of the closet” and openly manipulated and sought to control Israel's economic and political practices (e.g., I Kings 20:1-34; 21:1-26) in order to build as much power as possible for himself. But Israel would never return so thoroughly to Ba'al worship as they once had under Ahab, because it was now indisputable to them that “Yahweh, he is the god; Yahweh, he is the god!”

Psalm 96 is directed to the praise of God. It stresses the creator role of God, which in turn, stresses the universality of God rather than his tribal emphasis. It presents God as a monarch, sitting in judgment (i.e., acting as a judge) towards his people, who “is coming to judge the earth, he will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with his truth” (96:13).

Psalm 96 praises God in a way that centers on God's liberating action for all the nations of the world. “O sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth. Sing to the Lord, bless his name; tell of his salvation from day to day. Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the peoples. For great is the Lord and greatly to be praised; he is to be revered above all gods” (96:1-4).

It is traditional for Psalm 96 to be used both for Trinity Sunday and for Christmas Eve. That is so because it reminds us that God is acting to do a new thing. And that new action is one of the bringing of truth, liberation and judgment upon the earth (according to what is appropriate), an action that “tells of his salvation from day to day, his glory among the nations”. “Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to those with whom he is well pleased!”

Luke 7:1-10 deals with the question, “What is the extent of God's love? How wide is it?” In this story of Jesus' healing of a Roman centurion's servant, it is part of a much larger story of Jesus' mission as framed by Luke.

In Luke 4:16-30, Jesus presents his mission as bringing good news to the poor, proclaiming release to captives, recovering the sight of the blind, setting free the oppressed and proclaiming the advent of God's new economic order (the jubilee). The result of that proclamation of his

mission is that the peasants hear him gladly while the powerful religious and political leaders seek to eliminate him.

Luke then develops further how Jesus is executing his effort to bring liberation to Israel's poor both through word and deed (4:31—6:11), and in the Sermon on the Plain (meant to parallel Matthew's Sermon on the Mount). In that sermon, Jesus presents the new values and commitments ("blessed are you poor", "blessed are you when people exclude, revile and defame you on account of me", "woe to you when all speak well of you") upon which God's kingdom will be built (6:12-49). Then Luke moves into three magnificent stories (7:1-10, 7:11-17; 7:36-50) that embody the salvation Jesus is bringing to humanity through Jubilee. We will examine each of these three stories over the next three Sundays.

In the story of Jesus' healing of a Roman centurion's servant (7:1-10), we are introduced to a remarkable Gentile (in fact, all centurions mentioned in the New Testament are people of character, in contrast to the Jewish authorities [Luke 7:4; 23:47; Acts 10:2; 27:43]). This centurion's slave is ill and close to death. The centurion, greatly troubled by his slave's condition sees the miracle-working Jesus as the means for healing his slave. But he feels he is not of sufficient status to come himself and plead his case (that is, he is a Gentile asking a Jew for help). So he has some Jewish elders come to plead his case. That these leading men among the Jews would agree to plead for him is an indication in what respect this Gentile centurion was held ("he loves our people, and it is he who built our synagogue for us"). So these Jewish leaders come to Jesus to plead this centurion's case.

Jesus agrees to come with them to heal the servant. But he doesn't need to do that. The centurion sends some "friends" with this message, "Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; therefore I did not presume to come to you. But speak the word, and let my servant be healed" (7:6-7).

These words reveal the profound faith of this centurion, and his utter trust in the integrity of Jesus. And because it so beautifully captures the essence of faith, that prayer has become a part of the celebration of the Eucharist in many Christian liturgical traditions. But it was what this centurion next said that, though obscure, most particularly captures his great faith.

"For I also am a man set under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes, and to another, 'Come,' and he comes, and to my slave, 'Do this,' and the slave does it" (7:8).

In other words, the centurion is saying to Jesus, "I am a man set by Rome to be under its authority and therefore to dispense that authority. And when, as a man under authority, I give a command, I expect it to be obeyed. You, too, are a man under the authority of God. As such, when you command, you expect to be obeyed. If you will command this illness to leave my servant – even if you are miles away – that illness will obey you and my servant will be healed! I believe that with all my heart."

And Luke tells us, "When Jesus heard this he was amazed at (the centurion), and turning to the crowd that followed him, he said, "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith"" (7:9)!

Therefore, just as the centurion postulated, his servant was immediately healed, though miles away.

Only twice in the gospel accounts does it tell us that Jesus “was amazed” at someone – in this incident, as he marvels at the faith of a Gentile and in Mark 6:6, when he is amazed at the unbelief of the people in Nazareth.

The question with which we began this examination of Trinity Sunday’s Gospel lesson was “What is the extent of God’s love? How wide is it?” In this story, Jesus demonstrates that God’s love is to be extended even to a Gentile – and not only a Gentile, but a commander of the military force that is occupying the Jewish nation against their will. Thus, Jesus has demonstrated what he had earlier commanded – that love is to be extended even to the enemy (6:22-23). God’s love is as wide as the earth itself, to all the peoples of the earth, no matter who they are. And Jesus is rewarded in extending God’s love to a conqueror who exhibits unconditional faith and trust in Jesus, a faith that Jesus has never seen demonstrated by any theologically informed, orthodox, law-abiding, practicing Jew!

Galatians 1:1-12 is a most unusual, and in some ways inappropriate beginning to the letter Paul wrote to the church in Galatia. In Roman society, there was a stylized way to start a letter (comparable to our heading of the letter with the name and address of the person to whom it is being sent, followed by a “Dear Sir” or “Dear Name”). To depart from that stylized format is most unusual, and would be done in only the most extraordinary situations. And yet that is precisely what Paul does here.

The stylized opening of a letter began with the name of its author, a statement of his credentials for writing this letter, the person or group to whom the letter was written, a greeting and then a prayer of thanksgiving for them (see I Cor. 1:1-9 or Phil. 1:1-11 or any of the other letters of Paul for samples of this correct form).

But that is not what happens in Paul’s letter to the church in Galatia. Rather, after opening it with his name, his credentials, the name of the church and a brief greeting, Paul does what is clearly a breach of etiquette. Rather than giving thanks for the Galatian Christians, he admonishes them (1:6-12). It is as if he is so driven to confront them on their misdeed that he can’t even go through proper protocol but must immediately call them to accountability. He states “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel” (1:6). And then his attack begins.

About what is Paul so exercised? He is writing to a group of churches spread across the territory of Galatia, including but not confined to the Roman province of Galatia. Galatia included the entirety of what today are Turkey and the Kurdish area of Iraq, made up primarily of people of Celtic origin. We know of churches in Antioch-in-Pisidia, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe but also likely Ancyra, Pessinus and Tavium which Paul visited over all three of his missionary journeys (Acts 13:4—14:28; 16:6; 18:23).

The Galatians had responded enthusiastically to the gospel preached by Paul and had created churches to sustain their life together. But we can surmise, from reading between the lines in the book of Galatia (1:7-10), they were apparently visited by Christian Jews after Paul had left them. Those Christian Jews argued that the Galatians had not fully embraced Jesus as Savior and Messiah unless they obeyed the Mosaic Law, symbolized by the males being circumcised. The Galatians had believed what they had just been told, got themselves circumcised and began following the prescriptions of the Mosaic Law. This enraged Paul because, from his perspective, they were unthinkingly betraying the very essence of the gospel in that they were sacrificing its very essence of Christ's act of mercy that saved them in order to substitute good works as the ground of their salvation. Therefore, Paul wrote the book of Galatians to address this betrayal of faith by the Galatian churches.

Paul's statement to them is quite clear. "If anyone proclaims to you a gospel contrary to what you received (from me), let that one be accursed!" I did not proclaim to you this gospel of God's grace, Paul continues, because I was interested in gaining your approval or making Christianity easy (vs. 10). Nor am I in rebellion against the leaders of the Christian church (the Jerusalem Council) who gave me this authority to preach. Rather, Paul contends, my authority comes from God alone, and the gospel I preach I received as a direct revelation from God (e.g., Acts 9:3-5; 22:6-10; 26:13-18; I Cor. 15:8) that the Jerusalem Council carefully examined and endorsed as an accurate statement of the gospel! So I come with God's authority, and with theirs (1:11-12).

By presenting this argument at the very beginning of his letter, Paul has set the dimensions of the book of Galatians. This will be a book that thoroughly explores the doctrine of God's irresistible grace that demonstrates that a person is not justified before God by obeying the Law or by doing good deeds but by God's undeserved and freely given love through Jesus Christ. We are already accepted by God. We don't have to make ourselves acceptable. Our problem is not that we are not accepted, but that we cannot accept that we are accepted. Thus, the entire book of Galatians is Paul's call to the Galatians Christians to embrace the God who already loved them so much that he gave his Son to die for their redemption.

(Copyrighted 2009 by Partners in Urban Transformation)
(Cycle C Ordinary Time 08 TS.doc)