

18th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Last spring when the Vatican realized the vastness of the pandemic, its worship office issued a formula for a special Mass that parishes may use to assist our prayer. We've used it here at a daily Mass. It includes recommended readings from the bible, and the passage it selected from the letters of St. Paul is the one we heard as our second reading today. It opens with the rhetorical question, "What will separate us from the love of Christ?"

Over the past few Sundays, we've heard from Paul's Letter to the Romans excerpts that have been building to this moment. Paul showed the contrast between Adam and Christ: The sin of Adam was a grave offense, but the grace of Christ is a stronger remedy. He wrote about how we might do a favor for a friend, or even for an enemy who repented. But God showed his great love for us by not waiting for us to change our ways; instead, God sent us a Savior while we were sinners to overcome our sin. We also heard how the Holy Spirit works within us to keep us prayerfully in tune with the Father.

Today Paul brings these arguments to a head with this question. It's a frightening question to ponder: "What will separate us from the love of Christ?" For many people, the answer is a long list. Lots of things may separate them from the love of Christ, or at least from feeling the love of Christ. You may experience anguish over someone's death, distress over a diagnosis, persecution by a competitor, inadequate food or clothing because you've lost a job, the peril of racism, or the weapons of those who aim to steal your safety in the streets. We face separation every day. Paul asks, "Will anguish, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or the sword [separate us from Christ]?" No, he says. None of it can do that. The love of Christ not only conquers every adversity —it conquers "overwhelmingly". Paul declares there's really no contest. The Vatican wanted us to remember this message as the pandemic spread.

The church recommends this reading on other occasions too. For example, it is one option both for weddings and for funerals. At a wedding, it seems to proclaim to the couple, "You may think you know what love is, but there is a greater love than the one you feel for your fiancé: It is the love that Christ has for each of you." This passage effectively challenges the couple to maintain their love for each other in spite of whatever misfortunes the future may bring. At a funeral it carries a message of hope for all who grieve. For many of the mourners, a love in their life has died. This passage does not deny that, but it affirms that a greater love survives: The love of God in Christ for each of us.

Life can take a lot of things away from you, even without a pandemic. Those losses are indisputably real. Saint Paul suffered his share of hardship: attempts on his life, desertion by his friends, three shipwrecks, abandonment at sea, sleepless nights, hunger, thirst, chills, stoning, beatings, whiplashes, multiple imprisonments, poverty and misunderstanding. But he was still able to write these sweeping words that we never tire to hear: Paul says, "I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor present things, nor future things, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Sunday, August 2, 2020