

## 25th Sunday in Ordinary Time

With the pandemic threatening college campuses, students are having to ask themselves what is worth the risk. Is a pizza party with friends worth the risk of an infection? Probably not. What about going to the classroom, or showing up for work, or visiting grandparents? Is that worth the risk? Maybe. Any activity can be dangerous, but avoiding inessential ones minimizes risk.

Saint Paul found himself in an even riskier situation. He spent a good part of his preaching career in the prisons of different cities—overcrowded, infested prisons. He had to choose between preaching the gospel, which could lead to his arrest, and not preaching the gospel, which would disturb his conscience.

Today is the first of four Sundays when our second reading comes from Paul's Letter to the Philippians. The most famous of these excerpts is the one we'll hear next week, where Paul proclaims the death and resurrection of Christ. This week we learn the circumstance that caused Paul to write. He is in prison. He doesn't say where, but probably Ephesus. He's not writing to say, "Get me outta here," but to keep preaching the gospel however he can.

Paul had personally visited the city of Philippi. He first preached in modern day Syria and Turkey. But on his second missionary journey he traveled west to the other side of the Bosphorus and crossed into Greece. Entering Philippi, he and his companions went to a place where Gentiles worshiped to tell them about Christ. They encountered some women, among whom was Lydia, a prominent businesswoman and head of household. As Paul spoke, the Lord opened her heart, and she and her household were baptized. She was the first of several women with prominent roles in the Church of Philippi. And, as you can deduce from your geography, she became the first convert to Christianity in Europe.

Paul stayed with her a bit, moved on to continue preaching, returned to Asia, got arrested, and wrote this letter back to Lydia and others in the Philippian church he had founded. He is torn between life and death. He writes, "I long to depart this life and be with Christ, for that is far better. Yet that I remain in the flesh is more necessary for your benefit." He writes as if he has some choice in the matter, as if his guards were giving him opportunities to escape if he did who-knows-what? Paul really doesn't care if he lives or dies. As he writes, "For to me life is Christ, and death is gain." He's in prison on principle. He's not recklessly engaging in frivolous swordplay with drunken friends, no future ahead, not caring if he lives or dies. His situation is different: both options are good. If he gets out of prison, he will evangelize; if he is put to death, he still evangelizes. People will know that he died for his principles. Paul sums it up in the first line of today's reading: "Christ will be magnified in my body, whether by life or by death."

If our activities at home, work or college put us in peril of disease, division, or death, it's OK if those activities are worth the risk, but not if you are living dangerously because you are irresponsible. If you are at risk because you live for Christ, you sacrifice all for a greater good. You magnify Christ. As Paul advises at the end of this reading, "conduct yourselves in a way worthy of the gospel of Christ." That should guide our decisions about where we go and how we pass our time.