

Predestination is one of those words we don't use a lot in the Catholic Church, so it's a little surprising to hear the idea when it comes up in the bible as it does today. Paul says to the Romans, "Those whom God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son. And those whom God predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified." The usual quick Catholic opinion is that we don't believe in predestination, so it takes some maneuvering to reconcile that with the words of St. Paul.

In our lives the question comes up in different ways. Most people I know believe that our behavior plays some role in our salvation. If we are good, we will be rewarded; if we are bad, we'll get punished. Other people hold predestination in its colloquial sense; namely, that God has decided ahead of time which individuals will be saved and which will be lost. In their opinion, there's nothing you can do to influence the final judgment. Your good behavior is simply a sign that God has predestined you for glory, and your bad behavior is a sign that you're heading for eternal damnation. To these people God's judgment is somewhat arbitrary. Still others think the whole idea of life after death is hogwash. They believe you just live to be as happy as you can in this life. If you can get away with something, do it; if you get caught, too bad. Such nonbelievers hold that reward and punishment is something you experience only while you're alive.

As the word "predestination" appears in the scriptures today in our Catholic liturgy, it has a slightly different meaning than the way people typically use it. The bible (at least as Catholics interpret it) doesn't really say that individuals are subject to a predetermined judgment. Instead, the bible almost defines predestination as God's providence. We believe that God created the world, has a plan for the world, has made a promise of redemption for the world, and will deliver on that promise. When Paul speaks of predestination, he basically means that when God makes a promise, that promise is predestined to be fulfilled. So think of predestination in the bible not as it pertains to one individual's salvation, but as it pertains to the salvation of the world, to our collective place in God's plan. Individuals have free will; God offers salvation, but we can reject the offer.

When we meditate on life after death, we wonder how and if we will enjoy eternity. When we reflect on our moral decisions -- what is right and what is wrong, we wonder what difference does it really make if we choose what is wrong when nobody gets hurt. Well, how we live our lives does make a difference for our own happiness, for the benefit of the community, and for the promise of eternal life. God has taken the first step; through our baptism God has predestined us for glory. That gift is ours resist or receive.