

Homily for the 15th Sunday in Ordinary Time

July 10-11, 2021

Readings: Amos 7:12-15; Ephesians 1: 3-14; Mark 6:7-13

Preacher: Susan K. Roll

One wonderful result of the liturgical reforms from the Second Vatican Council is that Roman Catholics and mainline Protestants now share almost the same readings of the Word of God on the same Sunday, or at least the same Gospel. This Sunday is an exception though. The Gospel reading in the Roman Missal is Mark 6: 7-13, Jesus' instructions to the disciples that he sent out on mission. The Revised Common Lectionary uses the text that follows, Mark 6: 14-29, the beheading of John the Baptist. (I can hear Catholic preachers sighing in relief!)

But the second reading, the New Testament reading from Ephesians, is identical. The passage this Sunday plays out on nothing less than a cosmic scope and presents us with some breathtaking theological and spiritual imagery. It's not without its problems however. Let's take a closer look to see what value we can mine for our own lives of prayer and work to bring the life of Christ to bear fruit.

Ephesians was not written by Paul, possibly by a follower of his, and does not carry the heading "To the Ephesians" on all ancient copies. This suggests that it was a sort of open letter to be sent around to a number of late first-century Christian communities.

And in Greek, our eleven-verse reading, Ephesians 1: 3-14, is all one sentence. (It needed an editor.)

We can begin by pulling out some of the beautiful phrases that identify us, first-century Christians and 21st-century Christians. "God ... has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavens ... chose us in him, before the foundation of the world, to be holy and without blemish ... destined us for adoption through Jesus Christ...for the praise of the glory of the grace ... granted us in the beloved." And that's just the first section. "In [Christ] we have the forgiveness of transgressions" (Greek scholars translate this simply as "lapses"),

“in accord with the riches of his grace that he lavished upon us. In all wisdom and insight, he has made known to us the mystery of his will ... as a plan for the fullness of times, to sum up all things in Christ, in heaven and on earth.”

The theme of adoption or being chosen by God recurs throughout this reading, and can be a stumbling block if we assume that only a select number are chosen. This is not about God’s favored few surviving the end times; in fact it’s not about the end times at all. It’s about baptism. We are baptized as a result of an invitation. A baptized baby receives lifelong membership in the community intimately identified with Christ, supported by loving family, teachers and companions. An adult who chooses baptism has normally made a personal journey of faith, and responded to the invitation of a living faith community to “Come and see.” The invitation ultimately comes from God, and is open to all. We know that baptism is meant here by the last part: “In [Christ] you also, who have heard the word of truth ... and have believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit which is the first installment of our inheritance toward redemption as God’s possession, to the praise of [God’s] glory.”

Repeat, the invitation is open to all. Predestination is for the whole of humanity, for the whole of God’s creation. This may be about as close to a universal call as we can find in the New Testament.

Look at the unabashed lavishness of God’s generosity: “every spiritual blessing... the riches of [God’s] grace lavished upon us.” An old hymn speaks of God as a “spendthrift God.” This is what our sacraments should look like—not token, barely-there symbols, but a rush of water, a drizzle of sacred oil, followed by a generous banquet represented by the bread and the wine by which Christ promised to remain with us.

Wisdom and insight, although divine in origin, can be subject to the conventions of time and culture. Later in Ephesians we find the infamous household codes (“Wives be subject to your husbands.”). Ephesians stresses ecclesial community like a family, but a patriarchal family limited by the perspective of its own time. It need not limit us, not when we allow our spirits to soar with the “praise of the glory of God’s grace, granted us in the Beloved.”

