

# 14<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time – A

## July 6, 2008

### LESSON: St Paul and the Dynamics of Spiritual Warfare

We owe a large **chunk** of the New Testament to **St Paul**. In fact, of the 27 books of the New Testament, 13 of them are attributed to St. Paul. We do well, during this Year of St. Paul, to focus on the life and influence of St. Paul.

- ✍ Paul spent the better part of his Christian life **traveling** around the Roman Empire preaching the Gospel and **starting local church communities**.
- ✍ Once he got a church started, he would travel to **another** city and start **another** church there.
- ✍ And he would **keep in touch** with all these young Christian communities through **letters**.
- ✍ At least **thirteen** of these letters were later recognized by the Magisterium as **inspired sacred scripture**.
- ✍ Each letter is known by the name of the **city** (or person) to which Paul was writing - "Ephesians" is his letter to the Christian community in **Ephesus** for example.

The **longest** of St Paul's New Testament letters is his letter to the **Romans**.

- ✍ It's different from all the other letters because it is the **only** one he wrote to a Christian community that he had not **started**.
- ✍ Christianity had **taken root** in the city of Rome **long before** St Paul ever travelled there.
- ✍ But he **wanted** to go there, since it was the **capital** of the great Roman Empire.
- ✍ And so he wrote the **Letter to the Romans** as a way of **introducing** himself and his **teaching** to that much-respected Christian community.
- ✍ As a result, it is the most **theologically organized** of all his letters.
- ✍ Other letters addressed problems **specific** to the community he was writing to, but Romans is a clear and detailed presentation of **St Paul's Christian wisdom and vision**.

The passage we have just listened to touches on one of Paul's **favorite themes**: the **dynamics of spiritual warfare**.

The **better** we understand this theme, the better we will understand our own **struggles** as Christians, and simply as human beings.

### ILLUSTRATION: Part I: Life in the Spirit

St Paul began his *Letter to the Romans* with a detailed discussion about our **need for salvation**, and the role played by **faith** in receiving that salvation.

In Chapter 8, from which today's Reading is taken, he begins to focus on the experience of someone who is **already living** that life of faith.

- ✍ By faith we receive **God's grace**, and God sends us his **Holy Spirit**, which makes us **children of God, new creatures** in Jesus Christ - in other words, **Christians**.
- ✍ As a result, we **feel within us** the **power** of that grace, the **attraction** of living a **Christ-like life**, full of courage, wisdom, kindness, joy, and self-sacrifice.
- ✍ This **impulse** to follow Christ and to reflect his goodness in our own lives is the **action of God's Holy Spirit within us**.
- ✍ As St. Paul says, we are "**in the spirit**," we belong to Christ because we "**have the Spirit of Christ**," and this Spirit "**dwells**" in us.

Life in the Spirit - this is one of St Paul's **common phrases** for summarizing the Christian way of life.

- ✍ Like an **acorn** planted in good soil, our **Christian identity** was planted in our souls at baptism.
- ✍ The acorn slowly but forcefully grows into a **mighty oak tree, irresistibly impelled** by its own inner nature.
- ✍ In the same way, each one of us **feels God's grace at work** deep within us, impelling **us** towards Christian maturity, which is nothing less than **holiness**.

## **ILLUSTRATION: Part II: Life in the Flesh**

And yet, we all know that merely **being a Christian** doesn't make it easy.

- ✍ We all **believe** in Christ; we have been **baptized** and **confirmed**; we feed on the **Eucharist** and are forgiven and strengthened by the sacrament of **Confession**.
- ✍ But even with **all these spiritual benefits**, every single day we all experience the **strong pull of selfishness**, laziness, lust, greed, discouragement, and all the other temptations that belong to the **world of sin and death**.
- ✍ The **life of the Spirit** is active in our souls, in the **very depth** of our souls, but this **other** force is at work as well.
- ✍ Our **fallen human nature** weighs us down and **resists** the tug of the Spirit.

This **resistance to God's grace** in our life, due to our **fallen human nature**, is what St Paul refers to as "**the flesh**."

When we **give in** to this downward pull, we **turn away** from life in the Spirit and give ourselves over to **life in the flesh**.

This idea of the "flesh" is one of St. Paul's most **misunderstood** terms.

- ✍ When Paul writes about our "bodies" and "the flesh," it is his way of referring to this **sinful, selfish tendency** that we all carry around with us.
- ✍ He is not saying that our **bodies** are evil, or that the **natural pleasures** that we experience in our bodies are evil.

- ✍ Rather, he is pointing out that because of original sin, we all have within us a tendency to **overindulge** in those pleasures.
- ✍ We all have an **inclination towards selfishness** that **resists** the action of God's Spirit within us.
- ✍ When we **let ourselves** follow that inclination, we "live according to the flesh."
- ✍ And of course, the **devil** and the **sinful patterns of behavior** all around us are constantly trying to **convince us** to do just that.

## ILLUSTRATION: Part III: It's Up to Us

But it is **life in the Spirit**, not life in the flesh that will lead us to a **deeper communion with God**, which is the source of **true, lasting** happiness.

And so, St Paul encourages us and all Christians to **prefer** life in the Spirit and **leave behind** life in the flesh:

"For if you live according to the flesh, you will die, but if by the spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live."

We who are Christians have **two possible roads** to follow at **every moment of our lives**:

- ✍ the **flesh** or the **Spirit**, (as early Christian documents put it: the "way of life" or the "way of death.")
- ✍ the **self-centered** road or the **Christ-centered** road,
- ✍ the road of "**me first**" or the road of "**God's will first**,"
- ✍ the road of **self-indulgence** and **self-glorification**, or the road of **self-giving generosity** to God and neighbor.
- ✍ Our fallen nature **pulls** us towards the easy, self-centered path.
- ✍ But at the same time **God's own Spirit** is always at work **deep within us**, encouraging us to follow the **narrow and steep road** of our Lord Jesus Christ – to "take His yolk upon our shoulders," as we heard in today's Gospel.

But it's up to each one of us to choose which road to follow.

- ✍ When the **tug of laziness**, egged on by the devil, pulls us away from our **duties and responsibilities**, we are free to give in or resist.
- ✍ When the **tug of arrogance** incites us to **criticize and wound** those around us, we are free to give in or resist.
- ✍ When God's grace and the **tug of the Spirit** inspire us to **forgive and begin again**, we are free to give in or resist.
- ✍ When the **tug of the Spirit** inspires us to take a little bit of **time** out of our busy schedules to **pray**, to **be with** our Lord and Savior, to **read** his Holy Scriptures, we are free to give in or resist.
- ✍ Tom & Jerry have it right – there really IS a little devil on one shoulder and a little angel on the other.

## **APPLICATION: Conclusion: Courage for the Fight**

This is **spiritual warfare** – a constant battle that goes on in the depths of our souls.

This is where the **drama of salvation** is played out every single day, in each one of our lives, as the Spirit and the flesh battle for our **allegiance** – sometimes we lose a battle and give in to evil – but, if we remain “in Christ,” we know who ultimately will win the war!

Today, as Christ once again **strengthens** in our hearts the life of the Spirit by feeding us with the **Holy Eucharist**, let's **renew our trust and faith** in him, and ask him to help us **fight** for this spiritual battle by **courageously** living, this week and every week, not the life “of the flesh”, but the fullness of life in the Spirit He offers us.