

30A SML 2017
1THESS 1:5c-10

When writing a Sunday homily, one of the Church's guidelines is to preach on that Sunday's readings unless there is a good reason to preach otherwise. Most of the time, I preach about the gospel. But I would be remiss as a priest, remiss as a teacher, if I never preached on the first or the second reading. This weekend, let's look at the second reading.

Within the celebration of the Liturgy of the Word, the second reading is always taken from the New Testament, and nine times out of ten it's written by St. Paul. So before addressing this evening's (morning's) second reading specifically, some background on St. Paul, or Saul, as he was known prior to his conversion, prior to entering into an intimate relationship with Our Blessed Lord.

First: why the name change: from Saul to Paul. It's quite common in scripture that when a person of biblical prominence entered into relationship with God, their name changed:

1. Abram became Abraham
2. Sarai became Sarah
3. Jacob became Israel
4. Simon became Peter

5. Saul became Paul.

One reason why each of us chose a Confirmation name is to emphasize the fact that at Confirmation, the one confirmed enters into a fuller covenant relationship with Almighty God.

What we know about Saul:

1. Saul lived at the same time Jesus lived.
2. Saul never once met Jesus before His ascension into heaven. Paul met Jesus in the form of a bright light and a loud voice, which knocked him to the ground. Many say, and many an artist has depicted Paul was knocked off his horse, but if you read AA 9:4, there was no horse.
3. Saul was a Pharisee; therefore he was a very strict, law abiding Jew.
4. Saul was present for the stoning of St. Stephen (who became the very first martyr)
5. and Saul was the greatest all-time enemy of the Church.
Refer to the Acts of the Apostles:

The Jews threw Stephen out of the city and began to stone him. The witnesses laid down their cloaks at the feet of a young man named Saul. As they were stoning Stephen, Stephen called out, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Now Saul was consenting to his execution. Saul was trying to destroy the Church. Entering house after house and dragging out men and women, Saul handed them over for imprisonment. (AA 7:58-8:3)

Jesus was crucified, died, rose from the dead and ascended into heaven in the year 33 a.d. Within two years after these paschal mysteries, Our Blessed Lord had more than enough of Saul. Refer once again to the Acts of the Apostles for the account of the conversion of Saul, enemy of the Church, to St. Paul, the greatest champion of the Church:

Now Saul, still breathing murderous threats against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, that, if he should find any men and women who belonged to Christianity, he might bring them back to Jerusalem in chains. On his journey, as Saul was nearing Damascus, a light from the sky suddenly flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "**Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?**" Saul said, "**Who are you sir?**" The reply came, "**I am Jesus, who you are persecuting. Now get up and go into the city and you will be told what you must do.**" (AA 9:1-6) He stayed some days with the disciples in Damascus, and he began at once to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, that he is the Son of God. All who heard him were astounded and said, "Is not this the man who in Jerusalem ravaged those who call upon this name, and came here expressly to take them back in chains to the chief priests?" But Paul grew all the stronger and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus proving that Jesus is the Messiah. (9:19-22)

Paul then, moved from a strict Jewish background to an apostle of Jesus Christ, from the greatest enemy of the Church

to her greatest champion, and his sudden, unexpected conversion took place at the height of the persecution.

A good ten years after his conversion, Paul made three extensive journeys throughout southeastern Europe. He visited the major cities to christianize their citizens. After christianizing any given city, if Paul received word of problems occurring in that city, he would write letters to the people to settle the confusion. If there was a problem, if a city did not follow the gospel values he preached, Paul wrote a letter. If word reached him that faith was waning, Paul wrote a letter. Timely as it is, I'm teaching this to our school and PREP students this year.

This evening's (morning's) second reading is the first of two letters written by St. Paul to the Church that was organized in Thessalonica, in northeastern Greece. This first letter is the oldest preserved document in Christianity, written in the year 51 A.D. Paul wrote this letter after he already had considerable success in converting the citizens of Thessalonica to Christianity, from both the Jews and Gentiles. Yet their conversion did not come without a price, as alluded to in today's reading: "And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, receiving the word in *great affliction*," (1:6) because the Jews saw the Gospel as a threat to Judaism and the Gentiles would see the Gospel as an unwelcome competition to the existing

pagan religions. Paul wrote to the Thessalonians in gratitude for their genuine conversion to the faith, to which they remained faithful, and encouraged them to stay firm in their faith until the coming of the Lord.

What a precious gift faith is. It's precious in so far as anyone can have faith, yet it is clear not everyone has faith. It's easy to have faith when all is well. As Bishop Fulton Sheen once said, "Even dead bodies can float downstream," pointing out that many people can coast when times are good. "But it takes a real man, a real woman, to swim against the current," when times are tough.

It's been a tough couple of months, not so much for us, but for Texas and the Gulf after Harvey; Florida after Irma, Puerto Rico after Maria, the earthquake in Mexico and the wild fires in California. Just what I know from my experience in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy, it's hard! So where do you go with the hurricane, the earthquake, the tsunami, the mountain, the mulberry tree in your life?

When our Blessed Lord said, "If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you could move a mountain, you could uproot a mulberry tree," he was speaking figuratively, not literally. He meant you could move the mountain in your life. You could uproot the mulberry tree in your life.

What do you do? I go to the crucifix.

What an odd place to go? What was once a cruel symbol of a cruel death to keep the Pax Romana, the peace of Rome, is something Jesus flipped into a comfort. We hang crucifixes on our walls, and wear crucifixes around our necks like the badge of honor Jesus made it.

I have this little crucifix which I have since I was in the seminary, which I hold every night until I fall asleep, and inevitably, I get stabbed in the side throughout the night as I roll over.

Each night, with my hand holding the crucifix I pray for the grace to see me the strength and the faith to see us through whatever it is we are facing, because the tsunami is bigger than you and it's bigger than me, but it's not bigger than God. And the hope and consolation I feel as I hold the crucifix do not even come close to the hope and consolation I feel as I offer the Mass and the next morning, literally, not symbolically, but literally hold God in my hands as I consecrate and receive our Blessed Lord in the Eucharist. What a precious gift faith is. Why? Because since the time of Christ, after every crucifixion, there is a resurrection.

I have thought and said it a million times that I don't know how people get through life without faith. As I was lying in bed

the other night, I thought to myself, “After watching the turmoil on the news, what would I do after I turned off the news if I didn’t have Christ, if I didn’t have faith? No crucifix to hold, and most importantly, the next morning, without, literally, God in my hand, God in my heart in the Eucharist?”

If St. Paul were to write to us as he wrote to the Church at Thessalonica, he would write many of the same things he wrote to them: “Become imitators of us and of the Lord, receiving the word in great affliction, with joy from the Holy Spirit, so that you become a model for all the believers.” He would also write many of the same things he wrote to the people of Corinth:

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus, on the night he was handed over, took bread, and, after he had given thanks, broke it and said, “This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes.

It takes a real man of faith, a real woman of faith, to swim against the current, when times are tough. So go to the crucifix, because since the time of Christ, after every crucifixion, there is resurrection.