

FIRST READING: Romans 14:7-12

A reading from the Letter of Saint Paul to the Romans:

Brothers and sisters: None of us lives for oneself, and no one dies for oneself. For if we live, we live for the Lord, and if we die, we die for the Lord; so then, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's. For this is why Christ died and came to life, that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living. Why then do you judge your brother or sister? Or you, why do you look down on your brother or sister? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of God; for it is written: *As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bend before me, and every tongue shall give praise to God.* So then each of us shall give an account of himself to God.

The word of the Lord.

RESPONSORIAL: Psalm 27:1bcde, 4, 13-14

***I believe that I shall see the good things of the Lord in the land of the living.***

The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom should I fear? The LORD is my life's refuge; of whom should I be afraid?

***I believe that I shall see the good things of the Lord in the land of the living.***

One thing I ask of the LORD; this I seek: To dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, That I may gaze on the loveliness of the LORD and contemplate his temple.

***I believe that I shall see the good things of the Lord in the land of the living.***

I believe that I shall see the bounty of the LORD in the land of the living. Wait for the LORD with courage; be stouthearted, and wait for the LORD.

***I believe that I shall see the good things of the Lord in the land of the living.***

Gospel: Luke 15:1-10

+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to Luke:

The tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to listen to Jesus, but the Pharisees and scribes began to complain, saying, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." So Jesus addressed this parable to them. "What man among you having a hundred sheep and losing one of them would not leave the ninety-nine in the desert and go after the lost one until he finds it? And when he does find it, he sets it on his shoulders with great joy and, upon his arrival home, he calls together his friends and neighbors and says to them, 'Rejoice with me because I have found my lost sheep.' I tell you, in just the same way there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need of repentance. "Or what woman having ten coins and losing one would not light a lamp and sweep the house, searching carefully until she finds it? And when she does find it, she calls together her friends and neighbors and says to them, 'Rejoice with me because I have found the coin that I lost.' In just the same way, I tell you, there will be rejoicing among the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

The Gospel of the Lord.

## Reflection for the 31<sup>st</sup> Thursday of the Year

For whom do we live? God, our family, the local community, Christ's Church? Where do we fit in? Don't each of us lead a life? Don't we have to take care of ourselves and our needs before we can take care of those around us? In part, yes. Paul may be simplifying life in order to make his point. God has made us. God has saved us. God has given us those we love; who, in turn, love us back. All our gifts, good and bad, come from God.

For whom do we die? My paternal grandmother's greatest fear was to die alone. She did and in a coma. My dad kept vigil with her until late at night. She died the next morning when he was on his way to work. Many people die alone. How many of the five million people who died of COVID 19 have died on machines when their families could not be present? We will never know what death is like until our own deaths. People can't share their experiences any more after they've died.

We live and die within a context. We live in a world that is full of wonders and horrors. We think, feel and sense things. We love and know love. Even if we live by our selves, there are always others around upon whom we depend and in part depend upon us. Paul spoke from the context of faith and community. His letter was a link between wherever Paul was in his travels and mission. He wrote to the Romans while living in another community of believers on behalf of the community of believers in Jerusalem. Aside from Paul's preaching and teaching, he was trying to raise money for a sister Church. Yes, Paul wrote the letter to the Romans as a fundraiser.

This is the spirit which Paul tried to form with his words of encouragement and persuasion. He was trying to show that all the communities were linked in Jesus and interconnected. Paul was trying to convey the meaning of Jesus' last prayer. Jesus prayed for those who would become the Church in the gospel of John chapter 17 verse 22 from the New Jerusalem Bible. "I have given them the glory you gave to me, that they may be one as we are one." For Paul living is the important thing. Jesus may have died for our sins but he lives still because of his rising from the dead.

For him, living in Christ is now and in the Kingdom of God. There is little difference between living now in Christ, dying in Christ and living forever in Christ. It is not what we do or what happens to us, but what Jesus has done through his saving actions. Living in faith now is no different than life in God's kingdom. One does not lead to the other; they are the same life; with Jesus as the source. We, by our actions build the community that will, upon Christ's return, become the Kingdom.

The response for the Psalm says the same thing (in context). What is the land of the living? From its ancient Jewish source, this Psalm 27 does not speak of a heaven or paradise being such a place. Ancient Judaism had no such concept. Immortality and eternal life came to a person through their descendants; children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren and so on. Heredity was the legacy for eternity. This was an important component to God's promise to Abraham. God promised a son and descendants more numerous than the sands of the seashore or stars in the cosmos. This is one of the reasons that Jewish people lament the Holocaust. Those six million dead Jews broke the genetic lines wiping out their eternal lives! With the broken

generations, there was no one to remember those who went before. This is why, in my prayers, I include them.

In this sense, since Paul was a good and practicing Jew who also believed in Jesus, the land of the living is also now. We are all alive and living in it. Since Jesus rose from the dead, life in Jesus is also now and in the life and kingdom to come. The promise of eternal life and all the good things of the promise are for us to experience in this life. They provide a glimpse of the Kingdom to come. Perhaps you remember the old Mystery of Faith? Christ has died; Christ is risen; Christ will come again. It didn't just happen in time. It isn't just yet to come. It is now too. The name of God, given to Moses from God in the burning bush, YHWH, is the present for the verb "to be." I Am.

Remember how your parents tried to steer you away from kids who could be a bad influence? I know mine did. That was also the attitude of the Pharisees and scribes. Inappropriate people were sinners and were ritually impure. From their point of view as Jesus associated with such people, it was likely that he would become like them. From a First Century Jewish perspective, that was a common belief. Jesus acted as a Rabbi, a teacher. As a teacher, Rabbis instructed people on the Law of Moses, God's Law. Sin and sinners Rabbis avoided. Jesus had broken religious boundaries.

Jesus' mission was to save sinners by his preaching, teaching, healing, forgiveness and especially by his dying upon the cross. His rising from the dead was witness to the success of God's mission. This, of course, was yet to happen in Luke's narrative. We read these stories from our post Easter and post Pentecost perspective as believers and members of the Church that was born in those events. These Pharisees and scribes responded out of their own deeply held and ancient faith given to them by God. How else could they respond?

This did not prevent Jesus' attempt to evangelize them. Jesus did fraternize with sinners. The scribes and Pharisees had yet to recognize they were sinners in Jesus' eyes too. Their righteousness was not of a divine kind but a self kind. In this we share a common, human heritage. We are all sinners who need salvation and forgiveness. In many ways the scribes and Pharisees already knew this. They, too, sought salvation by our God, but in a way that differed from the way of Jesus. These stories spoke to human truth. We do hunt for lost things that belong to us. To God we can be lost too. God seeks to save sinners.

These stories are parables. They are not morals. The outcomes are ambivalent. Their ambivalence comes in the rejoicing of the finder of the lost sheep and coin. How will they celebrate their finds? How will they feed their guests? The shepherd will serve sheep, or mutton, sandwiches. That's how animal husbandry works; eliminate sheep that wander through culling. The woman will use the coin to buy snacks; that's how the economy worked then as now. Even in the mission of Jesus, ambivalence happens. How did God save sinners? Jesus died on the cross. There is a cost to the rejoicing over a lost sheep, coin and sinners. The sheep, coin and Jesus were the price. Luke's mastery of the narrative was inspired by his faith in God and in Jesus who was the lamb of sacrifice and the price of our souls.

The time of God's promise is now. The unity of the Church is real. The love of God is infinite, eternal and unconditional. Jesus offered faith to the scribes and Pharisees. Sinners responded

to Jesus' message. Which of these groups were recipients of the Word of God? There's a better question for us to ask. Are we?

May God's salvation reach to all people by God's grace and in part to our witness.

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