

Chosen by God in Christ

Homily for July 10-11 2021

15th Sunday Ordinary Time

St Peter, at the end of his Second Letter to all Christians, says something about St Paul's New Testament letters. He says that some passages in those letters are "hard to understand" (2 Peter 3:16).

The section from the Letter to the Ephesians that we just listened to is one of those passages. In the Greek original, these verses, which are so long, complicated, and overflowing with deep theological terms and phrases, are all one, single sentence.

What was Paul thinking? Why would he write such a dense beginning? Did he actually want the Christians in Ephesus to have trouble understanding him?

Not exactly.

- The beginning of this letter isn't meant to be clear explanation of doctrine.
- Rather, it's more like a hymn of praise to God for his wonderful goodness.
- Paul doesn't explain God's loving plan of salvation in these lines; he proclaims it, and he proclaims it with awe, respect, and delight.
- But for that very reason, it is worth a closer look - just as it's worth looking carefully through a treasure chest even when all the gold and jewels are piled all together instead of neatly arranged.

And when we do take a closer look, we find one key idea that gives a certain unity to everything else - the idea of God's choice.

- Twice in these verses, Paul mentions that we have been chosen by God in Christ.
- This is what really amazes him, for three reasons: the fact of God's choice, the bounty of God's choice, and the purpose of God's choice.

1. The simple fact that God chooses us is the first thing that amazes Paul.

As one commentator has put it: "It would not be so wonderful that man should choose God; the wonder is that God should choose man." After all, what does God have to gain from choosing us, from giving us the gifts of his grace and his very own divine life through the sacraments? He has nothing to gain; but we have everything to gain. Because God chose to create us, and then he chose to redeem us after we had rebelled against him, we have hope. The happiness that we long for, that we were created to enjoy, is a real possibility for us, because God hasn't given up on us; he has chosen to stick with us. He knows our names.

There is a famous story about a peasant who lived in the French town of Ars back in the 1800s. This peasant was too old to work anymore, so he would come to the church every day and sit down in the front pew. He would just sit there quietly, sometimes for hours on end. One day, the parish priest, who happened to be St John Vianney, asked this peasant what he was doing. The

peasant said that he was praying. So then the priest asked him how he prayed. The peasant glanced at him and said: "I look at the Lord, and he looks at me."

That God, our Creator, our Redeemer, the eternal, all-powerful, all-knowing Lord of the universe, who knows how sinful and rebellious we are - that he loves and cares for us so much that he wants to sit with us like that... This is the amazing fact of God's choice.

2. The second thing that amazed St Paul was the bounty of God's choice.

When someone offends us, we consider ourselves big-hearted if we simply refrain from taking vengeance on them. But God went far beyond just tolerating us. St Paul describes the "inheritance... of glory" that God has chosen to offer us in Christ. God has actually begun preparing a room for us in his own heavenly mansion. He has chosen us not just to squeak into the last nose-bleed seats of the sold-out stadium, but to sit with him in the owner's box for all eternity.

The psalm for today celebrates the bounty of God's choice, especially in the second stanza.

Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet;
righteousness and peace will kiss each other.
¹¹ Faithfulness will spring up from the ground,
and righteousness will look down from the sky. ¹

Here God's bounteous choice is expressed by celebrating the coming together of steadfast love, faithfulness, righteousness and peace.

3. The third thing that amazed Paul about God's choice was its purpose.

He writes that we have been chosen to be "holy and without blemish" in God's presence. The word holy mean to be "set aside" from everyday things for a special function or mission. A church, for example is a holy place, because it has an extraordinary role to play in the world. It is the place where the human and the divine come together through the sacraments. It is the place where earthly life is linked with heaven. Every Christian, according to St Paul, is like that; someone with an extraordinary role to play in the world, someone who brings earth and heaven together. We are different; we have been set aside. We are not just passive wallflowers in God's Kingdom. No, he has come to dwell in our hearts and has invited us to be his warriors, his messengers, his ambassadors. We have been chosen to be holy; to be elite knights of Jesus Christ, angels of light and wisdom in this dark and foolish world. He didn't have to give us this mission, but he chose to, because he wanted to give our lives a meaning far beyond what we could have given it on our own.

And secondly, he chose us to be "without blemish." This is the word used to describe the animals that were used for religious sacrifice in the Old Testament. Only the best, only the most excellent animals were offered to God, because that's what God deserves. But here St Paul is saying that God is the one who makes us "without blemish." He is the one who makes us worthy of being his followers; he himself supplies what we need to become saints. It is his

¹ [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*](#). (1989). (Ps 85:10–11). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

grace that purifies our hearts of greed, lust, laziness, dishonesty, and every form of selfishness. And it is his grace that fills us with wisdom, joy, courage, peace, and all the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

This is the plan and purpose of his choice; this is why Jesus came to earth.

In this Mass, and especially through Holy Communion, Jesus will renew this beautiful choice that he has made of each one of us. He will come to each one of us individually, saying our name, pouring his royal treasure of grace into our hearts, and giving us the strength we need to be his faithful followers in the coming week. When he does, let's renew our choice of him, confident that he alone is more than enough to fill all our desires for meaning, forgiveness, happiness, and love.

As we continue with this Mass by praying the Creed,

- let's pray it from the heart,
- re-affirming our belief in this amazing Lord who loves us so much that he died for our sins,
- and re-affirming our commitment to live as he would have us live.