

“Our Amen”  
Homily for Advent 4  
December 23-24

One of my favourite parts of Handel’s Messiah is the Amen Chorus. It is the closing selection in this wonderful Sacred Oratorio. The word Amen means “I agree” and in the context of this composition, that takes two and a half hours to perform, it is used by Handel as a resounding affirmation of all that that come in the previous arias, recitatives and choruses that make up this work of musical and theological genius.

Romans is to the epistles of St. Paul what Messiah is to Handel’s musical repertoire. It is the culmination of his theological writings. The words we heard read today form what is called the Doxology of Romans. The word doxology means “right praise” and just as the Amen Chorus concludes Messiah with right praise, so too here in Romans Paul does the same. He uses these sentences as a resounding affirmation of all that he has written in the sixteen chapters that make up his magnum opus.

So let’s take some time to look at this Doxology and answer the questions:

1. What does Paul mean in these verses?
2. Why are they appointed for this fourth Sunday in Advent?

He begins the final chorus of Romans by stating:

***Now to God who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ,***

The gospel which Paul preached is offered by Jesus Christ. That is to say, the gospel takes its source in Christ and is transmitted by men and women. This is the first reason why this passage is appointed for today. As we approach Christmas we want to give thanks for the Gospel of Jesus Christ. For without Jesus Christ, there can be no gospel at all; but, without people to transmit it, others can never hear of it. The Christian duty is that, when anyone is found by Christ, that person is to go and find others for him.

Having spoken of the preaching of Jesus Christ in a more general way the Apostle goes on to say:

***according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed, and through the prophetic writings***

The coming of Jesus Christ was always at the heart of God’s plan from before the creation of the world. With the coming of Jesus, something unique happened: eternity invaded time, and God emerged on earth. His coming was the event to which all history was working up to and the event from which all subsequent history flows. This is the second reason why we hear this passage read today. For late Advent is the time when we give thanks for and anticipate that God

is the God who has a plan, who is working out his plan in the narrative of peoples' lives, people like you, and people like me.

The readings from Second Samuel and the Gospel bring this purpose and plan of God into focus. The Old Testament passage is one of the most important in the whole of the First Testament. For here we read of David's plan to build God a house but then God says through the prophet Nathan, "I have a better plan, I am going to build you a house. Actually the house that I am building isn't a building at all, rather it is a people."

***Moreover the Lord declares to you that the Lord will make you a house. When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom.***

The language says that the house will issue forth from David's body and it will be a kingdom that will be established forever. This is a theme that reaches its fulfillment in the Gospel reading where we are told that Mary is from the house of David. So here is one of David's offspring whose son will:

***be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High;  
and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David,  
and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever;  
and of his kingdom there will be no end."***

It is this same plan of God in which we share as members of the Church. For that house prophesied three thousand years ago to David is now spread across the world as we rejoice in being heirs of this kingdom that will have no end. Paul is so acutely aware of this that his very last words of Romans describe how this plan is to be worked out down through the passage of history among all people.

***is made known to all the Gentiles, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith—***

To this God all glory is due because the Gospel is the greatest gift the world has ever received. But like all gifts it cannot be forced but only offered. And so when Paul says that the Gospel is to bring about the obedience of faith what does this mean?

This is an obedience not founded on submission to an iron law, which breaks those who oppose it; it is an obedience founded on faith. Faith is the act of trusting God and entrusting oneself to God. Such trust and entrusting leads to a surrender which is the result of love. For Paul, Christians are not people who have surrendered to a power that cannot be resisted and from which there is no escape; they are men and women who have fallen in love with the God who is the lover of human souls and whose love stands forever fully displayed in Jesus Christ. This the third reason why this passage is appointed for the fourth Sunday of Advent. Like those who saw the newborn Jesus and paid him homage and love because of their faith in him, so too we are invited to do the same.

This Doxology is a hymn of right praise so appropriate for this Sunday (the day before or the morning of) Christmas Eve. Here is a chorus that affirms because of Jesus we have the Gospel; This Gospel is the fulfillment of God's plan to establish his eternal kingdom so that we can fall in love more fully with Jesus Christ. With this chorus Paul ends his great letter to the Romans and it is to such a chorus at the end of the Advent season that we can add our Amen!