

30th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME – C (October 23, 2022)

Today we hear the last of a series of readings from St. Paul's two letters to Timothy, the second of which we hear from today and written by Paul when he was in prison awaiting execution. Nero was the emperor of Rome at the time; his cruelty was extreme and bordered on insanity. After a great fire that destroyed much of Rome in 64 A.D., Nero used the Christians as a scapegoat and ordered their execution. Some historians even speculate that Nero himself set that fire.

Anyway, Paul was swept up by the arrests and persecutions. While in prison he wrote this second letter to Timothy, a young man who became Christian as a result of Paul's powerful preaching. There is an amazing sense of peace and acceptance in this letter. Again, Paul knew he would be put to death and he was in fact beheaded around 67 A.D. But there is no sense of despair or bitterness in his words. Hear again this passage from today's reading: "...the time of my departure is at hand. I have competed well; I have finished the race; I have kept the faith. From now on the crown of righteousness awaits me".

How could Paul write such stirring words so close to his own death? The answer is simple: he was certain of the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. It was the truth that Jesus died on the cross and rose from the dead to reopen the gates of heaven—gates that had been closed when sin entered the world back at the beginning of human history. Paul was fully aware of his sinfulness even after his miraculous encounter with the risen Christ on his way to Damascus...but he also knew and was grateful for the forgiveness that was Jesus' gift to him and to us.

"I have competed well; I have finished the race; I have kept the faith." A question for all of us to ponder: imagine being in Paul's situation. Not necessarily in prison or awaiting execution, but instead knowing that our life on this earth is nearing its end. We each review our life—the paths we chose, the decisions we made, what we are grateful for, what we are sorry for. Again, we know we will soon face death. If we were to write our reflections to someone like Paul did to Timothy, what would we say?

I don't mean at all for this to be a morbid exercise or that we should obsess about death—we all have our lives to live, responsibilities to see to, and joy and love to be experienced with gratitude. But we do need to be mindful of the fact that this earthly life of ours will not last forever; it will in fact come to an end. Would we be able to truthfully echo Paul's words to Timothy, or would we not? I can't help but wonder sometimes about those who at least appear to have lived their lives only for themselves. When they are forced to confront the inevitable, their own mortality because of terminal illness or any other critical situation, how do they respond? Would they think: "I'm sure glad I spent all that time away from my family so I could make even more money!" Or: "I'm really proud of myself for refusing to be reconciled with that person who hurt me or who I hurt; all that bitterness and anger that I allowed to fester within me all those years sure did me a lot of good."

I've never heard or read of any such 'deathbed gratitude for selfishness', but I sure have read and heard about those who realized at that most critical moment how foolish they had been to waste so much time and energy on things that, in the long run, mean nothing. The good news, of

course, is that genuine conversion and a true turning to Jesus and his mercy can happen even on one's deathbed—remember the so-called 'good thief' crucified with Jesus to whom Jesus promised paradise that very day. But we all know that sometimes death comes suddenly and most unexpectedly.

The much better and wiser course is to be mindful every day of where we still need to grow in faith, hope and love; how we need to allow Jesus ever more into every aspect of our life, work, relationships, and everything else. The more we are mindful of Jesus' call to draw ever closer to him, the more we respond to that call in faith and trust, the more we will in fact be able to echo Paul's words when we each come to that supreme moment in our own lives.

"I have competed well; I have finished the race; I have kept that faith." In commenting on this passage, my favorite author—Peter Kreeft from Boston College—expresses this wish: "May every reader be able honestly to engrave that on his or her gravestone." Let's all strive for that...shall we??

I want to switch gears for a bit of a medical update. I've told you that the yearly check-ups after my surgeries in 2018 have gone very well—no new growths on my kidneys—and that is still the case, thanks be to God. But after my annual physical in April, my doctor told me that my PSA (prostate) numbers had gone up a bit from last year. Further testing in August showed more of an increase, and so a biopsy was done last month—the results of which show that I do indeed have prostate cancer. I will soon be scheduling a bone scan and a CAT scan to see whether or not the cancer is contained there or if it has spread to any extent. Those results will then help determine what to do for treatment; at this point, radiation or surgery (removal of the prostate) seem to be the main options.

I want to assure you that I feel very well and, as I told the archbishop a few days ago, I have every intention of remaining here in Holy Rosary Cluster—and he is just fine with that! I'm not going to say this diagnosis is the best news I've ever had, but I am grateful to know about it so as to have the opportunity to figure out the next steps and to fight this thing head on. I promise to keep you fully informed through this whole process, and I would indeed appreciate your prayers. And never doubt my continued daily prayers for all of you and all your loved ones.