

Homily for 19th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A

By Fr Anton Webb

St Paul writes something truly shocking today [Second Reading]: *I would willingly be condemned and be cut off from Christ if it could help my brothers.* To be *cut off from Christ* is to lose the bliss of heaven and instead to endure the eternal punishment of hell. Jesus confirms this in St John's Gospel in the bit where he teaches that He is the vine and we are the branches. "Cut off from me," he says, "you can do nothing...and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire and burnt." [Jn 15:5, 6].

God forbid that we cut ourselves off from Christ, choosing hell rather than heaven! Recent Sunday Gospels have reminded us of this possibility. Remember the Parabel of the Wheat and Darnel three weeks ago where the darnel at harvest will be tied "in bundles to be burnt" [Mat 13:30], and the longer version of the Gospel two weeks ago where the fishermen sort fish they have caught in the dragnet, throwing away the bad. "This is how it will be at the end of time," Jesus continues, "the angels will appear and separate the wicked from the just to throw them into the blazing furnace where there will be weeping and grinding of teeth." [Mat. 13:41-42].

Paul does not, of course, mean that he actually wants to be cut off from Christ. On the contrary, he is full of the love of Christ. For him, "to live is Christ, and to die is gain" [Phil. 1:21] meaning that for Paul this life is only worth living if led entirely for Jesus, and that life after death will be even better because he will see and be with Jesus in all His glory forever in heaven. What Paul is doing by his shocking statement is to express the degree of his *sorrow* which *is so great* and *mental anguish* which is *so endless*. And this agitation is over the fact that the vast majority his *own flesh and blood*—the Jewish People—had not accepted Jesus as the Messiah, as the one foretold by their prophets. He laments over the fact that most of them, despite having been lavished by so many blessings from God, could not recognise the greatest blessing of all: Jesus Himself coming in their *flesh and blood*.

Those who follow Jesus have the fullness of the promise made and delivered to the people of Israel. But not only should we accept Jesus in our lives, but we should run to Him constantly as the protector and saviour of our lives. This flight to God for safety is a theme from the other two of today's readings. Elijah's life is being sought by the Queen of Israel and so he has fled into the wilderness, not aimlessly, but with the intention of reaching Horeb, the Holy Mountain of God, the mountain whose other name is Sinai onto which God descended and spoke with Moses face to face. In mortal danger, Elijah runs to God for salvation. Similarly, in mortal peril from *the force of the wind* and *the heavy sea*, Peter yearns to rush into Jesus' protecting embrace who walks out on the water towards him and his friends. Even though his faith is not too strong and he starts to sink, Peter still reaches out to Jesus in prayer, *Lord! Save me!* And Jesus does save him, and all those still in the boat.

As long as our lives last, it would be good to seek God out, often to run to His protection, not just in times of danger but actively seeking His presence in our work and even in our downtime (recall how after a long tiring day with the crowds, Jesus *went up into the hills by Himself to pray*). God will always *let us see His mercy, and give us His saving help* [Responsorial Psalm], as often as we actively seek it out and ask for it. Let us never take it for granted!