

Fourth Sunday in Advent – Epistle

THE MYSTERY HAS BEEN REVEALED – IN YOU AND ME!

Romans 16:25-27

Fourth Sunday in Advent

Analysis by James Squire

25Now to God who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages 26but is now disclosed, and through the prophetic writings is made known to all the Gentiles, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith- 27to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever! Amen.

DIAGNOSIS: Accountable to God

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – *Mysterious Behavior*

The world we live in is filled with mysterious behavior. Why do people judge each other (2:1-5)? Why do people try to make God into a liar (1:18-32)? Why do we think we are better than others are (2:17-3:20)? Paul confronts these questions in the first few chapters of his letter to the Romans, but the real mystery (v. 25) that Paul finds himself addressing centers on God's behavior, which is unfathomable to us. What happened to his

promise to the Jews (9:1-5)? Are they still his chosen people (11:1-10)? If we aren't under the law anymore, then why is sin wrong (chapter 6)? Worst of all, how can God condemn us for sinning when everything happens according to his will (9:19-29)? Paul faces or anticipates in his readers – both then and now – the questions of a frustrated people who thought they knew how to relate to God but who find themselves stuck in old patterns they can't escape.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – Obedience To Self

The obedience of faith (v. 26) is what we lack. Actually, it is what we are incapable of. Without it, our God remains a mystery. Our questioning of God is ample evidence of our inability to trust. What we really find perplexing is that God would expect such trust in the absence of clear answers to those fundamental questions. These aren't just trivia to us, these questions come from the very core of our being that really wants to know: who am I? What am I? How am I supposed to function? What is my role? Where do I fit? But as long as we consider ourselves to be the chief investigator, the mystery will remain a mystery, and we will remain unable to trust – in God, that is. We are unable to trust in God, because we are too busy trusting ourselves.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – Silenced by God

Of course, none of that pursuit gets us any closer to answers. We still can't break through to solve the mystery. We can't even make those haunting questions go away. As Paul suggests in Romans 7, there is a part of us that wants God's way; but we are cursed by flesh that refuses to fathom it or obey it. And the mind that "is a slave to the law of God" can't do anything about the flesh that "is a slave to the law of sin" (7:25). It would appear that the God "who is able to strengthen us" (v. 25) is not doing so, and where does that leave us? With little more than the clay's futile and impertinent question to the potter

(9:21): Why have you made me so? Even so, Paul has an answer anyway: “Now we know that whatever the law says, it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced, and the whole world may be held accountable to God” (3:19).

PROGNOSIS: Strengthened By God

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – A New Disclosure Breaks The Silence

But for Paul, that is not the last word on the subject, this is: “For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all” (11:32). As he states in our text, the mystery must be-and is-disclosed by God in the incarnation of Jesus the Christ, born of Mary. The mystery about salvation for the Jews leads right into the mystery of how salvation is even possible, and only one answer is given: Because God wills it so. He spoke, and the child was born. Our disobedience is the occasion of the salvation of others, theirs is the occasion for ours, and asking why is like looking a gift horse in the mouth. We were silenced because we had no answer for God’s judgments. But then God spoke his only Son, Jesus (v. 25) into the world as “a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith,” because “in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed” in order to “show his righteousness” (3:25). In Christ, on the cross, God’s judgments have been vanquished, and our silence is broken. Our accountability to God has been satisfied, once and for all.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – Obedience Of Faith

We don’t just regain our voice. We regain our identity. The proclamation of Christ is a baptismal moment in our lives. It is the “command of the eternal God to bring about the obedience of faith” in us (v. 27). The questions that plague us do so because

of our slavery to the flesh (7:25), but God in Christ has created in us the trust that we could not build in ourselves. Behind our “who am I”, we were denying the deeper question: “whose am I?” But now there is no reason to deny that question. As Paul puts it, we are “rescue[d] from this body of death” by Christ’s own death and resurrection Christ (7:24-25).

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – Prophetic Behavior
Just as Paul’s readers are referred to “the prophetic writings” through which the mystery “is made known to all the Gentiles” (v. 26), so also Paul functions this way for us, and we function this way for others. The kinds of questions that Paul addressed in his letter all stem from a very basic question: “why doesn’t God come down here and un-confuse things for us?” But in Christ, God has indeed come down here and disclosed the mystery to those with the obedience of faith. We now are called to function this way with others: to reveal the mystery of the gospel of Jesus Christ kept secret for long ages (v. 25). The mystery has been revealed and we are authorized to share it with everyone, strengthened by God in all of his glory. Questions are not to be avoided, they are to be met lovingly with the proclamation of Jesus Christ.