

Second Sunday in Lent – Epistle

INHERITANCE RIGHTS

Romans 4:13-25

Second Sunday in Lent

Analysis by Jerome Burce

13 For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. 14 If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. 15 For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation. 16 For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, 17 as it is written, 'I have made you the father of many nations') -in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. 18 Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become 'the father of many nations,' according to what was said, 'So numerous shall your descendants be.' 19 He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. 20 No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, 21 being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. 22 Therefore his faith 'was reckoned to him as righteousness.' 23 Now the words, 'it was reckoned to him,' were

written not for his sake alone, 24 but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, 25 who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.

Notes on Some Key Words and Phrases

- a. The words “righteousness” (v. 13) and “justification” (v. 25), stupefying in their ponderous solemnity, sound quite unrelated. But that’s English for you. Ancient Greek listeners had it easier. Paul’s original words (“dik-ai-o-su-nay” in v. 13; “dik-ai-oh-sin” in v. 25) obviously spring from the same root which more or less means “right,” as in the opposite of “wrong.” So think of the one (v. 13) as “right-ness,” the wonderful condition of “being all right.” Think of the other (v. 25) as “right-ing,” the marvelous process of “winding up all right.” Might preachers not only think but try to talk this way? Perhaps some hearers will finally get what we, with Paul, are driving at.
- b. “It was reckoned” (vv. 22, 23) is a fusty English stab at the Greek word “e-log-is-thay.” The root, log-, gives immediate rise to “logos,” namely “word.” I’ll play with this in Step 5 below.

DIAGNOSIS: All Wrong

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – *Vying to Inherit*
Put Bush, Chirac, Saddam, and Osama in the same room. For added fun toss in Robert Mugabe, a grand wizard of the Ku Klux Klan, and a no-name cargo cultist from Papua New Guinea’s coastal hinterland. Now name one thing that these seven persons can agree on. Answer: Paul’s underlying premise (v. 13) that at the end of the day someone-more accurately, some group of someones-

will inherit the world (Gk: "kosmos" v. 13). So who might these most special someones be? Again, the quick and common answer: the "righteous" someones, that is, whoever has "the right stuff"-said "stuff" conveying on them "the right" to call the cosmic shots for everyone else. Next questions: what is the right stuff, who has it, and how do you get it if you don't have it yet? Now, of course, is when the fighting breaks out. As it has from time immemorial, whenever and wherever these questions have come up, even among those like Bush and Osama who agree with Paul's next premise that the right stuff is a rightful claim to old Abraham's estate. That estate, after all, is cosmic in scope. So promised the God (v. 13) who made the cosmos in the first place (1:20). No wonder people and cultures shaped by the Abrahamic tradition seem especially hell-bent on contesting the question, "Who inherits?" Contest they do, with crashing jetliner and unleashed army; with sociopolitical theory and ethnic mythos; with costume, rite, moral code, and restricted sacred space (Mecca at the Hadj; Oscar night). Of course the contesting takes place not only on the grand scale of civilizational clash. You'll see it too in the petty spat that erupted in last Monday's meeting of the Altar Guild.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – *Stuck on Proving*
But why the contesting? Because "no one is righteous, no, not one" (3:10; see also the verses following). Did we need Paul spouting psalms to tell us this? Of course not. We knew it already, having learned it before we can remember learning. What we learned-more accurately, what we came to believe-is that rights to a share in the stuff of God's world cannot be taken for granted. They have to be demonstrated, defended, adjudicated, earned: in a word, proved. Nothing taught us this more clearly than the unrighteous behavior of people around us. They acted, that is, as if their own rights were up for grabs, requiring either confirmation or expansion. Rights-questing

behavior is not pretty (1:29-31). It's invariably threatening. It pushes me (or my group) to push back in defense of my (our) own piece of the pie. It also drives us to become "adherents of the law" (vv. 14, 16), i.e., to get stuck on principles and codes of behavior as instruments for proving the rights we claim. The great Mosaic torah is one such instrument of course. But so is sharia. So are SEC rules and the Boy Scout handbook and the law of the several jungles, natural and concrete. To such as these we cling like limpets. In them we trust. And this is true for every one, from law-abiding pastor to Supreme Court justice to playground bully to that aforementioned cargo cultist's third cousin's second wife.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – *The Proof of Inheritance Lost*

But "the law brings wrath" (v. 15). Always. Without fail. At day's end it necessarily leaves its every practitioner out in the cold, gnashing his teeth or hers in the deathly darkness of disinheritance. Consider: 1) I cannot prove my rights to any piece of the cosmic inheritance except at the expense of that person(s) whose contesting of those rights drove me to prove them. If I win, she loses. 2) She, losing, is not amused. But isn't her amusement, i.e., her delight in me and mine in her, also a piece of the inheritance I'm trying to claim? Her losing, then, is my loss. 3) And will she, aggrieved, not lodge her counterclaim in that ultimate court of highest appeal where the Judge Presiding is author of all that anyone seeks to claim? Woe to us both when the case lands in that court. For this is the Judge who, showing no partiality (2:11), will judge us each by the standards we dared to apply to each other (2:1). When that happens we both lose, capital "L." Still worse, the very fact of our legal jousting will have exposed our essential sin (2:20). That sin is a failure to trust the will ("promise," vv. 13, 16) of the divine Testator through whom any and all rights of cosmic

inheritance are granted in the first place. Law certainly has its place in a troubled world, but not for the purpose of securing those rights we lust for most. The notion of legally attained righteousness is oxymoronic. To use any law, even God's own, to champion one's claim to the cosmic stuff sets the Testator's will aside as "null and...void." (v. 14). We who try this prove only our failure to fear God (2:18) and our refusal to give him glory (v. 20). All we demonstrate is the presence within us of "hard and impenitent" hearts by which we are "storing up wrath for [ourselves] on the day of wrath" when God reveals who's right and who's not (2:6).

PROGNOSIS: All Right (-ed)

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – *The Counter-Proof of Inheritance Granted*

But Jesus our Lord "was handed over to death for our trespasses and raised for our justification" (v. 25). As Paul has argued in the previous chapter, this was nothing less than God's supreme display-God's supremely gracious exercise-of his own rights (3:21) as author and generator of the whole kit and caboodle of cosmic inheritance. Leave it to God: not only does he exercise his rights but he does so rightly as no one else can, in such a way as to hand us all the proof we presently need of how right he really is (3:26). How right is he? 1) The proof and exercise of his rights happen at no one's expense except his own. In Jesus' death God alone loses. 2) He "justifies the ungodly" (4:5) without fakery, i.e., without in any way underplaying or denying the deadly consequence of our sin (3:25). God's rightful right is to let Christ absorb the consequence for us. His right thereafter is rightly to raise Christ from the dead as the first act of a cosmic "new creation" (2 Cor. 5:17). Of course with new creation come new rights of inheritance. Is not God perfectly within his rights to dole these out to whomever he chooses? His amazing grace is to settle that choice on all the disinherited

children of Father Abraham (vv. 16b-17a), all of whom God wondrously seeks to justify, i.e., to invest with rights all over again (8:17).

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – Steadily Hoping

At last we arrive at the heart of the text. Question: what will we do with our brand new rights? Answer: make like Abraham. Trust them. More to the point, trust the God whose word and promise have granted them to you. Think of the advantage (by God's grace) we have over the old ancestor. Poor Abraham! He got stuck with "hoping against hope" (v. 18). We by contrast have seen in Christ—"first fruits of those who have fallen asleep" (1 Cor. 15:20)—that God is in fact the one "who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist" (v. 17). So what if the world still teems with grabby, contesting sinners who call your rights into question? So what if those rights are doubly challenged by the graying hair and receding gums that proclaim your own sin and make your claim to a cosmic future seem as dubious a notion as the fertility of Sarah's womb (v. 19)? If pre-Easter Abraham could hang on the promise without wavering, giving God the glory of the benefit of the doubt (or of no doubt at all, v. 20), then why not you? And now for the real hoot: God, basking in your faith, will clap his hands and shout "All right!" What God says, is (v. 17c). So this (strictly by virtue of God's saying and all contra-indications notwithstanding) is precisely what you are. Entirely right. Eternally all-right-ed (vv. 22-25).

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – Confessing the Inheritance

So bring on the fun-the great, brazen Christian adventure which is living day after day through thick, thin and thinner on the assumption that "all things" are in fact "yours...because you belong to Christ and Christ belongs to God" (1 Cor. 3:21b-23; read the passage in its fullness; note its present tense). Jean

Bethke Elshtain (First Things, Nov. 2002, p. 36) quotes John Paul II addressing a mostly Muslim audience in Kazakhstan: "Allow me to profess before you with humility and pride the faith of Christians...." Isn't this how an heir sounds? Like someone who, knowing both the impossible wonder and the immeasurable honor of her status in Christ, is also secure in that knowledge, "being fully convinced that God [in Christ is] able to do what he [has] promised" (v. 21)? Therefore she speaks of her hope freely yet graciously. She exercises her rights rightly, to the other's gain. She even finds the courage in Christ to claim the ugliness and suffering of the present world as part and parcel of her inheritance (5:3), and thereafter to give herself over with Christ "as a living sacrifice" (12:1). For a panoramic take on this sacrifice, see 12:2-15:13. Note how it draws us to exactly that place where we just saw John Paul, standing and serving with Christ to "confirm the promises given to the patriarchs" (15:8) through the confession of God "among the Gentiles" (15:10). Let all heirs of the promise gladly do the same!