

FEAST OF THE HOLY TRINITY Year C May 27, 2013

Theme: Hello, Romans, I'm Paul

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Some seniors in high school among us who have applied for college and their parents may be familiar with "the essay."

"The essay" is often the last item on the college or university application form in which the student is asked – in 250 words or less -- to describe him or herself creatively, in a way that distinguishes him or herself from the 10,000 other applicants to the school.

This essay of introduction often produces some amazingly creative work, but not without much sweat and worry on the part of applying seniors and their parents.

Though not applying to a college or university, our parish patron Paul wrote something like an essay of introduction when he penned his "Letter to the Romans", the source of our second reading today.

Paul spent most of his preaching ministry in Asia Minor (what we today know as the country of Turkey) and the Greek peninsula.

Now both of these were Roman provinces at the time: that is, under Roman governance and Roman influence.

Yet Paul also had come to know and work closely with Christians from Rome and news about him – both good and bad -- had filtered back to the Roman church.

Thus before Paul undertook his first visit to the Imperial Capital and before he met in person the much revered Christian community there, he decided to send ahead a sort of introductory essay, what has come down to us as "St. Paul's Letter to the Romans."

Presented as **the first of all Paul's Letters** in the New Testament, this reflects the regard in which the Letter to the Romans has been held throughout Christian history.

It is also the **longest** of Paul's Letters, the most **theologically complex** as well as the **most systematic presentation** of Paul's message.

Outstanding **Christian luminaries** such as St. Augustine, Martin Luther and Karl Barth made this Letter a centerpiece of their own theological writing and teaching.

In fact part of our text from Romans this morning was at the heart of the argument behind the **Protestant Reformation**.

What makes our peace with God, asked Paul: **Is it fulfilling laws and commandments?**

No way! He answered. **Only the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and our faith in him.**

Our works can accomplish nothing without the Paschal Mystery.

Or as he wrote to the Romans in our text today:

“Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith to this grace in which we now stand, and we boast in hope of the glory of God.”

No matter how many good works we do, no matter how well we keep the commandments, without faith in the death and resurrection of Christ -- that is without faith in God's sheer goodness and mercy -- **we cannot earn or win or merit our way into that goodness and mercy.**

Paul writes so passionately about this in Romans because it was the lesson he himself has learned when Christ appeared to him on the **Damascus Road**.

In today's text, Paul pushes his argument even further by suggesting that our boast of hope as Christians extends **even into times of affliction and suffering.**

He then builds a sort of **mounting spiral up out of despair into hope.**

It's a little tricky to follow, so hang on: afflictions, troubles, suffering produce endurance and perseverance in us.

Then endurance and perseverance lead to proven character and moral fiber.

And this proven character and moral fiber build to unshakeable hope: and such hope does not, cannot disappoint.

In other words, even in times of trouble we Christian persevere and grow in moral character and refuse to give up our hope in God, why – in St. Paul's own words to the Romans:

“Because the love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.”

Paul had come to believe that our hope in God will not be disappointed because **we have already seen the extent of God's love for us** in the death and resurrection of Jesus and in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

This love **has already forgiven our sins and made us holy** in God's eyes.

How will it not fulfill our hope and, as Paul will write a bit later to the Romans, and give us everything else that is good?

And so, brothers and sisters, I say to you as if St. Paul himself were saying it to you:

We have been justified by our faith.

We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

We have gained access by that faith to this grace in which we now stand.

We boast in hope of the glory of God... and [this] hope does not disappoint because the love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.