

2:14-17

In many sermons, I have made frequent reference to God's agenda for the world as understood in Jesus Christ. I have also made reference to the way in which our Lord shares with us his ministry in the world--that is, the kingdom-of-God agenda that Jesus began, and that we continue in his grace. Because Jesus Christ--by his death and resurrection--has become Lord over all, Paul continually emphasizes the triumphant character of the Gospel--the Good News that Jesus Christ is Lord. So, as he does here, Paul speaks of how he--and by implication, all of us, too--are part of Christ's triumphant work in the world. Here, Paul sees himself as part of a victory procession across the Roman world; hence, he says, *"Thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads in every place the fragrance that comes from knowing him [Christ],"* (vs. 14).

The apostle Paul likes to mix ideas together to drive home his points. In these words we just read, he is describing something of the effect and influence of the Gospel ministry with the images of a great street procession and that of a fragrance. In this case, these two images go together. When Paul refers to "triumphal procession," he is speaking an experience familiar to all his audience in the ancient Greek-Roman world. It's a military victory procession. When a king, a general, or some other great leader had won a notable victory, the whole city would turn out to welcome him and his troops as they came home in jubilation. They would bring with them the prisoners they had taken, the booty they had plundered, and there was a great procession through the streets would make clear to their own people that they had been victorious. It was a grand public

spectacle.

Now also with the procession was the burning of incense and spices all along the way of the victor's route through the city. The sense of smell, as well as of sight and hearing, was involved in the splendor and celebration of the occasion. And as anyone knows, smells are a powerful stimulant, and can bring back memories and stir the imagination that other senses can't get near. Indeed, smells or odors take us back to things so powerfully, the experience almost seems relived. This is true for humans. It's even more true for some animals. Makes me wonder what it's like being a dog!

The point here is that Paul uses both images that have associations with each other as he describes the life of ministry for the Gospel, meaning our lives as Christians, too, as we live them. Our lives "smell" as it were, for good or ill in terms of the Gospel. His point is: as God's triumphal procession makes its way through the world--following the victory of Christ's Resurrection over the power of death and sin--people like himself who are in the procession, are wafting the smell of victory, the smell of triumph, to people all around. And so our lives are to prove likewise. Paul then extends the meaning of this image. To those who are being grasped by the love and power of the Gospel, and who are responding to it, the smell is sweet, a fragrance. It means victory, joy, hope, and peace even in the middle of present difficult times--as we said two sermons back: "*we can comfort people in every kind of trouble, through the comfort with which God comforts us,*" (2 Cor 1:4).

But also, Paul says, to those who oppose the victory and power of Christ in the world, it is a troubling smell. It is off-putting. So he puts it: "*To one the fragrance of life to life, to the other a fragrance of death to death,*" (vs. 16). Using different images,

Jesus was in effect saying the same thing with his declarations to the disciples--and by extension to us-- "*You are the salt of the earth,*" and "*You are the light of the world,*" (Mt 5:13-16). Salt has a stinging effect, as well as a flavorful and preservative one. Light dispels darkness and those that prefer the darkness are dispelled, too. That is how Paul puts here something of the positive and negative aspects of the Gospel ministry.

Now the way Paul throws out this whole picture here, it is so grand, and the choices so final, he cannot help but throw up his hands in awe at his role in God's purposes, asking, "*Who is sufficient/competent for these things?*" (vs. 16c). We might say, "*Who can rise to this challenge? Who can possibly live up to it?*" The obvious answer is: Nobody can--unless God comes to their help. But WE have a commission from God. WE belong to Christ. WE are "in Christ" (vs. 14). And so we obey, as we best know how, and let God do the work in and through us.

Therefore, to hear what Paul is saying here is to understand our lives context, in the context of Jesus Christ as Lord. As Paul sees it, we are on display, being led--as it were--in his triumphal procession through the world--at least that part of the world we inhabit--and we have a smell--if we are Christ's--that is the Gospel truth. And because we are on display, it matters--in the details--how we live our lives as part of Christ's procession. It matters a great deal. So I close with this.

Former South African bishop Desmond Tutu, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize some years ago, once related this story when asked how he decided to become an Anglican minister: *One day, he and his mother were walking down the street when a tall, dignified white man, wearing a clerical collar came toward them. At that time, it was the custom--*[not entirely unlike what I remember growing up in my Southern small

town]--it was the custom for black people to step off the sidewalk when a white person passed. However, this time, before young Desmond and his mother could step off the sidewalk, the white man with the clerical collar stepped off the sidewalk, and as the boy and his mother passed by, he tipped his hat as a sign of respect, and continued on his way.

Tutu then asked his mother, "Why did that man do that?" Her answer changed his life. "Because he is an Anglican priest, and the goodness that he has learned from the Scripture has made him into somebody who shows kindness and graciousness, even when it's not expected." "It was then," Tutu said, "that I decided that I wanted to be an Anglican priest!" -- (in Tony Campolo, *Stories That Feed Your Soul*, p. 60). And indeed he did, becoming one of the most influential Christians in the late 20th/early 21st centuries.

Even the small things matter, because maybe--in God's agenda and ours--they are not so small after all. "Thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads in every place the fragrance that comes from knowing him [Christ]," (vs. 14). May it be so. Amen.