

TWENTIETH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME. 2026

The Gospel at every Sunday Mass is chosen to provide a more or less continuous reading from Matthew, Mark, and Luke, in years "A,B, and C" of the Sunday lectionary cycle, with interruptions to allow for readings from St. John's Gospel. The first reading at Sunday Mass, from the Old Testament most of the year, but from Acts of the Apostles and Revelation in the Easter Season, is carefully picked to go with the Gospel reading. The combination of first reading and Gospel seems to work very well.

The second reading doesn't work so well. The Church's goal is to offer excerpts from all of the New Testament Epistles over the three year cycle, but the excerpts are so short that they don't give people a good idea of what the sacred authors are talking about. For example, last Sunday, this Sunday, and next Sunday, we hear from a critically important part of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans, chapters nine through eleven, in which he discusses the role of the People of Israel in God's plan of Salvation. The excerpts are very disjointed, however. Even this Sunday's reading is really two excerpts, verses 13-15 and then verses 29-32 of Romans 11. It is very hard to follow St Paul's argument in this form.

Yet, in a time of renewed global anti-semitism, St. Paul's bold statement (oddly omitted in today's excerpt) that "All Israel will be saved" (Romans 11:26) needs to be heard and considered. The issue is confused for some by the existence of a 20th-21st Century nation state named in Israel. Clearly, in the 1st Century, there was no nation state of that name. St. Paul is talking about theology, not politics. Theologically, however, St. Paul's sacred claim that "All Israel will be saved" is bold, even shocking to some. I propose to examine it.

In chapters 9-11 of Romans, St. Paul shifts away from the word "Jews" and uses the words "Israel" and "Israelite." This is telling and dramatic. A thousand years before St. Paul's time, the Davidic Kingdom of Israel was wrecked under David's moronic grandson Rehoboam. The nine northern tribes broke away, under the title "The House of Israel." The three southern tribes, especially the biggest and strongest of all the tribes, David's own tribe of Judah, remained loyal to David's dynasty, under the title of "The House of Judah." Over the following centuries, both houses experienced political failure and military disaster, and endured conquest and exile. Despite, and maybe even because of Babylonian exile, the "House of Judah" retained a strong sense of Identity, focused on Jerusalem as at least a spiritual capital. They came to be called "the Jews", after Judah, the largest of the loyal tribes and David's own. By St. Paul's time, the descendents of the tribes of Judah, Benjamin, and Levi, living in scattered communities throughout the eastern and southern parts of the Roman Empire, all looked to Jerusalem as their spiritual center and called themselves Jews.

In this context, St. Paul was making a dramatic move when he shifted from "the Jews" to "Israel." He was saying that not only the Jews but all the descendants of the twelve sons of the Patriarch Jacob will be saved. The long lost family of Israel will be reunited, as part of God's saving plan. That included the well known Samaritans, mostly of Israelite descent. It also included people whose Israelite descent was unknown and forgotten.

For St. Paul, God's plan of salvation still includes the city of Jerusalem and David's tribe of Judah, but it expands far beyond those. St. Paul emphasizes this point by stating that he is personally a member of the tribe of Benjamin. St. Paul wants the infant Roman Church to understand that what God promised through the prophets Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Zechariah,

would be fulfilled. All Israel, including even the long lost and forgotten nine tribes of the northern House of Israel, would be saved.

St. Paul's teaching that all Israel will be saved clearly excludes every form of racist anti-semitism. God's plan for Salvation will not be complete until the promises made to the Prophets are fulfilled, and the family of the Patriarch Jacob reunited. At the same time, the Salvation of all Israel, like the Salvation of the Gentiles, is brought about by Jesus Christ, and only by Jesus Christ. The Salvation of all Israel will not be brought about by politics. It will not be brought about by faithfully following the Law of Moses, which in St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans is seen as valuable because it forces people to admit their need for Salvation. The Law of Moses points to the Savior, but cannot itself save from sin and death. Only Jesus Christ can do that; and only through Faith in Jesus Christ can anyone, Gentile or Israelite, be freed from sin and death. Missionary efforts are essential (chapter 10), as is the obedience of Faith (chapter 11). For Gentiles and Israelites alike, even though they retain distinct identities, the way to Salvation is the Grace of Jesus Christ, which comes to all through the preaching of the Gospel and faith in the Gospel.

In chapters nine through eleven of Romans, St. Paul teaches what St. Luke teaches in Acts of the Apostles. Salvation is from Israel, and so the Book starts in Jerusalem, but Salvation is ultimately for all the world, and so the book ends in Rome, the world city.

St. Paul and St. Luke both teach what Jesus taught - of course! Jesus picked twelve Apostles to correspond to the twelve tribes of Israel, He sent them first of all to the lost sheep of the House of Israel (Matthew 10:6), and He promised that they would sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel (Matthew 19:28).

The Kingdom of God, under the Messiah, the Word made Flesh, the Lord Jesus Christ, even as it extends to embrace all the peoples of the world, will have a special place for the descendants of the beloved, angel wrestling, Patriarch Jacob. In the end, all Israel will be saved.