

*"For those whom He foreknew He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, in order that He might be the first-born among many brethren. And those whom He predestined He also called; and those whom He called He also justified; and those whom He justified He also glorified." Romans 8:29-30*

Today's readings drove me to the dogmatic theology books. The first reading from *1 Kings* speaks about wisdom. The second from *Romans* speaks about predestination, the gospel from *Matthew* speaks about the Christian life.

Starting this column using the word "dogma" is about as popular as beginning with a sentence using the phrase, "parish finances". For some the word *dogma* presents an image of a cold statement of faith, important for theological discussion, but totally irrelevant for living the Christian life. This is not so. Dogma is alive and continually growing as we come to a clearer understanding of what makes a man and a woman. If we are going to lead a Christian life, we have to know who Jesus is and how Christianity can exist in the modern world.

The second reading for today speaks about predestination. Dogma helps us understand what predestination is. Without dogma, we could fall into the fallacy of thinking that we cannot choose good or evil, this has been chosen for us. How could we follow Jesus if we had no choice but to do whatever we do? Why would we even want to follow a god if we posited a god who predestined some people to sin and hell? Dogma tells us that a god who punishes good people would not be holy, because holiness is the total synthesis of all that is good and the total antithesis of all that is bad. God could not be good and at the same time predestine some people to sin and hell.

As we come to a deeper knowledge of the free will of man, incorporating advances in the science of sociology, genetics, sexuality, etc, we realize clearer and clearer, that the ability to make rational decisions distinguishes us from animals. Predestination cannot eliminate free will. If it did, we would no longer be human. What, then, is predestination? Predestination is God's choice to share his love with us. St. Paul tells the Romans, and us, that we are called to share the image of God's Son. By sharing this image we are justified, raised up to God, and glorified, shown as reflecting God's image for all people. To put all this simply: we are predestined to share God's goodness, but we have the freedom to reject this goodness. More practically, we can't go around blaming the things that happen in our life to fate. That's a pagan term and a pagan concept. Nor can we blame the devil as in "The devil made me do it". We have to take responsibility for our own actions. Even if something negative happens to us beyond our control, like sickness, we have the ability to use this situation to closer image the Lord. We also have the ability to allow a difficult situation to destroy us. If we choose what is true and good than we are allowing God's predestination to take its effect among us.

The knowledge of what God is calling us to, the understanding of what is true and good, right and wrong; all of this is wisdom, our first reading. The Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) developed the notion of wisdom to the understanding one gains of oneself, the world, and one's place in the Divine Plan for mankind. Wisdom is knowing who we are, totally. Jesus is the Wisdom of God for us, for we become whom God has called us to be by uniting ourselves to his Son. Each of us here is very different from everyone else here, as well as everyone else who ever lived. As we come to a deeper knowledge of whom we are, we come to a deeper knowledge of what God wants us to be. Wisdom is understanding God's individual predestination for us.

When we know ourselves and our God, when we understand our talents and our limitations, we recognize God's love for us as individuals. When we realize what God's niche in this world is for each of us, we have found the pearl of great price. We know how to respond to God's call with our very being, our very personhood. When we come to a deeper understanding of what God wants from us as individual people with unique personalities, then we have no choice but to sell everything we have and go and buy the field, for we have found a priceless treasure. Nothing can be more valuable than living our God's unique call to us.

Wisdom, predestination, and the Christian life. Our readings for today and our little trip through dogma, give us just a hint of the unfathomable love the Lord has for us. Or as we have heard so often: what a Savior we have in Jesus!