

May I speak in the name of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I don't know about you, but I'm one of those people who loves to make lists. I begin every day in my office by writing out a list, a to-do list for the day, putting the most pressing tasks at the top of the list. I've just had a very few fun days in Chicago and to prepare for that, I bought a book, Top 10 Things to Do in Chicago, so somebody else had already made the list for me. Some of my favorite books, they've got titles like 100 Best Films, has them all ranked in order. I love that. I like lists, but not as much as my friend Kevin, who carries in his wallet a list of the top 10 pieces of music to be played in hospital if he ever slips into a coma. I think that Kevin is a bit obsessive and that's taking it just a bit far.

Anyway, what this tendency means is that I've noticed that in our readings today, they all have an element of ranking. Various people in our readings either choose or are invited to rank things, to say, "This thing is more important than, more valuable than, or stronger than other things." Look at the Old Testament reading that we heard from Kings. Solomon has just become king of Israel in succession to his father, David, and God appears to the new king and says, "what can I give you? What is the thing that you want most?" Now, Solomon had several options, as God points out later in the reading. He could have said long life for himself or a short life for his enemies or riches or whatever. There were limitless possibilities, but what Solomon asked for, after considering all the possibilities, is what he chose as the most important thing that he needed to be a good king. Top of his list was this, "Give me an understanding mind, give me wisdom." And God was pleased to grant Solomon a wise and discerning mind.

In the gospel set for today, Jesus introduces a merchant, a pearl merchant to be more specific, and one day the merchant finds a pearl of great value, far better than all his other pearls, a pearl that he wants to put top of his list of pearls he wants to own, so he sells everything and buys that one pearl. In our Epistle, St. Paul reveals himself to

be a fellow list maker. The passage from Romans that we heard from Romans chapter eight, a wonderful passage in the Bible, it's one of Paul's purple passages. If this was put to music, the final paragraph would have fortissimo in front of it because it's a big crescendo. And what Paul does in this final paragraph is list the 10 most powerful forces known to humankind.

If there had been a program like Jeopardy at the time, these would've been the 10 things behind the screen that people might choose as the 10 most powerful forces in the universe, death, life, angels, rulers, powers, height, depth. The final two are interesting, height and depth, because they're astrological terms. The ancient world in which Paul wrote was haunted by the tyranny of the stars. You were born under a certain star and that was it, your fate was settled. Height referred to the time when the star under which you were born was at its most powerful and influential.

Depth was the opposite, when the power of the star was least before it rose to have influence once again. But what Paul is saying here is, "Don't worry about the stars. They have no hold over you. Their rising and setting can't hurt you. They're not the most powerful forces in the universe." They are not top of that list. Now, you might be thinking, "Well, we are much more sophisticated these days. We don't worry about the stars or their influence. We don't care about such powers at work. We don't rank them so highly," but how many people read their horoscopes? Or more importantly, how many times have you ever heard anybody say, "Well, of course the universe didn't let me."

I hear that all the time, and I read this this week from an author called Sherrilyn Kenyon. I'm not familiar with her work. Perhaps you are. She said this, "Every person you meet is waging his or her own war against a callous universe that is plotting against them". Kenyon thinks not only is this universe or the powers of the universe powerful, but they're actively plotting against us. St. Paul wouldn't go along with Ms. Kenyon's view of the world. He's quite clear that standing at the top of

the list of the most powerful forces in the world is God's love. He's absolutely clear about that.

In the list of powers in the universe, God's love is number one. No other power can overcome the love of God in Christ Jesus. He makes that clear in all his writings. Remember the bit at the end from Corinthians we often hear at weddings, "Faith, hope, and love abide, and the greatest of these is love." Love is top of the list. Let me draw out some implications of this. We should note that not only is God's divine love number one, the most powerful force in the universe, it's also a power that is for us. Sherrilyn Kenyon imagined that the universe is plotting against us. St. Paul is clear that God is for us. "If God is for us, who can be against us," he says. In 1660, John Bunyan, the writer who wrote *Pilgrim's Progress* was in a deep depression when this verse came to his rescue. "I remember," he wrote, "sitting in a neighbor's home and was very sad. Then this word came to me, 'What shall we say to these things, if God be for us who can be against us?' That was a great help to me."

And that realization has been a help to many believers throughout the centuries. There's no stronger power than God's love and that love is for us, and that must change our view of the world. It puts everything else into perspective, to realize that God's love is top of the list of powers in the world and it's a power that is for us. When the great preacher John Chrysostom was brought before the Roman Emperor, who was at that time head of the most powerful institution in the world, the Roman Empire, the emperor threatened to send him to exile if he remained a Christian.

And Chrysostom replied, "You can't banish me as the whole world is my father's house." "Well, I'll kill you," said the emperor. "Well, you can't," said Chrysostom, "for my life is hid with Christ in God." "Okay," said the emperor, "I'll take all your money." "No, you can't," said Chrysostom, "because my treasure is in heaven." Well, the emperor got mad and said, "I'll drive you away from everyone and you won't have any friends left." "You can't," said Chrysostom, "for I have a friend in heaven from whom you can't separate

me. There's nothing you can do to hurt me." Chrysostom knew that God's love was more powerful even than the Roman Empire. John Chrysostom's view of life, his perspective on things was fundamentally altered by the knowledge that God's love was for him.

He reciprocated God's love, which meant that he could say with St. Paul that all things work for good for those who love him. That's a very big claim open to being misunderstood and misrepresented, but it's something that I deeply believe to be true. All things work for good for those who love God, and I'll tell you why I think it's true. As many of you know, my dad was a priest and he preached a sermon on this passage taking as the text, "All things work for good for those who love God." It turned out to be the penultimate sermon he ever preached as the very next day he suffered a grievous heart attack, aged 55. Three months later, he'd recovered just enough to preach one more sermon as he bade farewell to his parish.

And he chose to take the same text as the text for his sermon that day, "All things worked for good for those who love God." He could do that despite all that had happened between the two sermons because he lived a life full of faith and he found it to be true, that all things work for good for those who love God. We can understand the truth of that amazing statement when we recognize that there's no stronger power in the universe than God's love and that love, God's love, is for us and nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Amen.