

The King and His People

8 Now I say that Jesus Christ was a minister of the circumcision for the truth of God, to confirm the promises made unto the fathers: 9 And that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy; as it is written, For this cause I will confess to thee among the Gentiles, and sing unto thy name. 10 And again he saith, Rejoice, ye Gentiles, with his people. 11 And again, Praise the Lord, all ye Gentiles; and laud him, all ye people. 12 And again, Esaias saith, There shall be a root of Jesse, and he that shall rise to reign over the Gentiles; in him shall the Gentiles trust. 13 Now the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that ye may abound in hope, through the power of the Holy Ghost.

I have never ceased to marvel at the fact that until this very day, the people most closely related to our Lord *according to the flesh*, the Jews, have retained such an incomprehensible inability to embrace the One who should be nearest and dearest to them. This is evidenced, of course, throughout the Gospel accounts, and continues in the Book of Acts, when the newly commissioned apostles preached first to the Jews. They were being granted the great privilege of receiving the Good News foremost among all the peoples of the earth. St. Peter made this very clear to the gathered Jewish leaders in Jerusalem following the Ascension of Christ: *Unto you first God, having raised up his Son Jesus, sent him to bless you, in turning away every one of you from his iniquities* (3:26). And later, in a synagogue in Asia Minor, with Jewish opposition gathering against the apostles, as it already had, and would yet on multiple occasions, we are told:

Then Paul and Barnabas waxed bold, and said, It was necessary that the word of God should first have been spoken to you: but seeing ye put it from you, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, lo, we turn to the Gentiles. (13:46)

Their opposition seems utterly unreasonable. It appears almost impossibly ingrained within the thinking of those who are called *his own* (John 1:11a). And it continues so. One modern Jewish commentator, Michael Medved, a popular talk show host and exception to that rule, views the matter very objectively. Writing in the conservative Jewish journal *Commentary*, he notes:

“For most American Jews, the core of their Jewish identity isn’t solidarity with Israel; it’s rejection of Christianity...It is far more acceptable in the Jewish community today to denounce Israel (or the United States), to deny the existence of God, or to deride the validity of Torah than it is to affirm Jesus as Lord and Savior. For many Americans, the last remaining scrap of Jewish distinctiveness involves our denial of New Testament claims, so any support for those claims becomes a threat to the very essence of our Jewish identity.” (Sept. 1, 2009)

It is simply amazing that this prejudice — for what else can it be called? — existed long before the awful crimes against the Jewish people *en masse*, often in the name of Christ and Christianity, had been committed. The behavior of those who have persecuted the Jewish people in the two millennia since our Lord’s first coming have only served to drive ever more profoundly into the Jewish heart what seemed to rest there already. I find these matters more than deeply intriguing, and of course, they are heart-breaking. The fact that things should be this way poses

an enigma that appears virtually without solution: how can His people ever come to love, know, and acknowledge the One who is their rightful King? Surely Advent is an appropriate time to consider such a topic.

St. Paul does much to clarify these concerns in his letter to the Romans, chapters 9-11. Think of today's Epistle in light of these words (Romans 11:12 ff.):

12 Now if the fall of them [Israel] be the riches of the world, and the diminishing of them the riches of the Gentiles; how much more their fulness? 13 For I speak to you Gentiles, inasmuch as I am the apostle of the Gentiles, I magnify mine office: 14 If by any means I may provoke to emulation them which are my flesh, and might save some of them. 15 For if the casting away of them be the reconciling of the world, what shall the receiving of them be, but life from the dead?

...*The riches of the world!* This is an extremely important phrase. Consider two thousand years of the Christian faith spreading relentlessly, inexorably throughout the world, bringing out of the darkness and into the light of God's love whole people-groups, nations, even continents. Consider the preservation and protection of ancient texts by the monasteries without which there would be no links to the past; the founding of universities in the early Middle Ages and in the centuries following, which have served to oppose the ever-present tendency to ignorance. But even more, how would the world have otherwise been introduced to the knowledge of the one, true God, who had alone been the province of the Jews? Through Jesus Christ, the gates have indeed been thrown wide open. None are denied entry. It is a divine generosity that somehow His own covenanted people couldn't seem to allow. Quoting our Epistle:

And that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy; as it is written, For this cause I will confess to thee among the Gentiles, and sing unto thy name. And again he saith, Rejoice, ye Gentiles, with his people. And again, Praise the Lord, all ye Gentiles; and laud him, all ye people.

There is a verse that I have clung to desperately, as I'm sure many of you have, in the face of unsolvable puzzles, of situations that defy explanation or any solution based upon the very best of human thought or will. They are the very words the angel Gabriel used when he spoke to Mary about the Holy Child she would soon bear: *For with God nothing shall be impossible* (Luke 1:37). How can the Jewish people be persuaded? How can hundreds of years of their oppression be countered by those yet identifying themselves as Christians? Rather, we must clasp to our breasts the promises of God. Looking again at Romans 11:

23 And they also, if they abide not still in unbelief, shall be grafted in: for God is able to graff them in ... 25 For I would not, brethren, that ye should be ignorant of this mystery, lest ye should be wise in your own conceits; that blindness in part is happened to Israel, until the fulness of the Gentiles be come in. 26 And so all Israel shall be saved: as it is written, There shall come out of Sion the Deliverer, and shall turn away ungodliness from Jacob: 27 For this is my covenant unto them, when I shall take away their sins.

In the sovereign will of God, His own people, except for a remnant of earnest believers, were deliberately set aside in order that the countless masses of the Gentiles could be given the opportunity to be freely ushered into the great family of God, the Father.

A host of questions arise that remain beyond our ability to answer. Was it their own stubbornness and unbelief that were the causative agent to this state of affairs? Can any human power stay the hand of Almighty God? Where does God's will, and the decisions and attitudes of men, leave off? What would have happened if our Lord had been truly welcomed and crowned by His people as their King? Would it not have meant an entirely different course to the entire subsequent history of the world? Was that the way it *could* have been and perhaps even *should* have been? Or was that the way it was *supposed* to be?

St. Paul, brilliant and learned as he was, fared no better than we with such conjectures. All he could do was cry out in praise and worship to God (Romans 11):

33 O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out! 34 For who hath known the mind of the Lord? or who hath been his counsellor? 35 Or who hath first given to him, and it shall be recompensed unto him again? 36 For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen.

All of these thoughts add to the spirit of Advent. We sorrow as we anticipate our Lord's thorough and almost complete rejection by His people. We cannot imagine a graver injustice to Him, nor something which could provoke greater sadness to His heart. Although we rejoice that the New Covenant has afforded equal membership in the community of God to all the peoples of the world, we mourn the state of affairs that prevents His own nation from immersing themselves in the kind of immeasurable joy and wonder that would be theirs if their eyes were but opened to the loveliness, majesty, and grandeur of their King.

And so we pray that the veil that covers their hearts will be lifted, that another day will come that was prophesied by Zechariah, the very same prophet who had foretold the exact manner of our Lord's triumphal entry in last week's Gospel: *Tell ye the daughter of Sion, Behold, thy King cometh unto thee, meek, and sitting upon an ass, and a colt the foal of an ass* (Matt. 21:5).

Listen once again to Zechariah:

And I will pour upon the house of David, and upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the spirit of grace and of supplications: and they shall look upon me whom they have pierced, and they shall mourn for him, as one mourneth for his only son, and shall be in bitterness for him, as one that is in bitterness for his firstborn (Zech. 12:10).

How real are the themes of Christmas! They reflect all the elements of life itself. Simplicity and paradox. Joy and sorrow. Acceptance and rejection. Moments of intense gladness and long, long seasons of patience. We are shielded from nothing. And yet the wider we open our hearts to these things, the greater we ourselves will become.

While we have the opportunity this Advent, let's make the most of it.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.