

Has God Rejected His People?

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+In the name of the Father and of the Son and of
the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

Many of you know that I generally have little time for political correctness. One of the issues which gets brought up fairly frequently in scholarly circles which I've tended not to worry terribly much about is the charge of anti-Semitism (or, more properly, *anti-Judaism*) in the Bible. With the *possible* exception of the author of *Luke* and *Acts*, every person who had a hand in writing the Bible was Jewish. Thus, even when *John's Gospel*—the most frequent object of the charges of biblical anti-Semitism—refers to the "bad guys" as "the Jews", we are seeing an internal division within Judaism between a group of Jewish leaders

and a different group of Jews who were thrown out of the synagogue for following Christ.

Despite my initial disinterest in what I've taken to be a manufactured issue, all of this morning's lessons can be taken in a way which might prove problematic. In the Old Testament lesson from *Isaiah*, we hear the word of God as given to the prophet which suggests that God has become very angry at His people. Because God looked for justice and righteousness in Israel and found the opposite, he has sworn to tear down the hedge which protects His chosen people from the ungodly who would devour the Promised Land. The psalm adds an apparently later perspective, after the judgment proclaimed in *Isaiah* had taken place. The psalmist cries out to his Lord in words which seem to charge God with abandonment. While the God of Israel had planted a vineyard, He had indeed torn down its walls. The psalmist casts an accusatory "why?" and in what

seems to be a defiant reminder to God of His own responsibility to His own people, the psalmist says:

Turn now, O God of hosts, look down from heaven;
behold and tend this vine; *
preserve what your right hand has planted.

The psalm we just heard sung so beautifully was not a song of praise but of protest, protest against none other than God Himself!

Shifting to the New Testament, Paul, in his *Epistle to the Philippians*, reflects on his Jewish *bona fides*:

[C]ircumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law a Pharisee, as to zeal a persecutor of the church, as to righteousness under the law blameless.

He immediately responds to this by claiming that he counts this rather impressive CV of Jewish piety as loss; he seems to be rejecting his own heritage and its value system. Indeed, he calls it "refuse"-rubbish.

Finally, Jesus' parable in *Matthew* appears to take things a step further. It is no longer an angry God (the landowner) who has despoiled the heritage of Israel, but the Israelites themselves, the evil tenants who killed the landowner's messengers, the prophets.

The lectionary today has done a very dangerous thing in throwing all four of these readings at us in one day because, to be frank, they've made the assumption that the preacher who is given these texts to explain is not an idiot. We might assume that the majority of the clergy are smart enough to avoid the false conclusion these four readings might suggest when taken out of context, but centuries of Christian anti-Semitism stand as evidence against the claim that such an assumption is a safe one. Medieval persecution of Jews which were believed to have poisoned water holes and defrauded debtors were more than occasionally "egged on" by stupid clergy. A case can be made that there was more

compliance than confrontation from the churches when facing the catastrophe which was the holocaust, and much of this might be attributed to the false and offensive belief that the Jews killed Jesus. Even today, there are sadly many who call themselves Christian but reject God's own people and Jesus' own religion.

So, how do we marry what I hope is our wholesale rejection of so-called Christian anti-Semitism with an appreciation of this morning's lessons as being part of the inspired Word of God? I think Jesus' own words can and should be our starting point. After he shares the parable, he asked his audience what should be done with the evil tenants, and they respond without charity and apparently (considering the fact that Jesus' audience was Jewish) with a lack of understanding of the referents of his parable:

They said to him, "He [the landowner] will put those wretches to a miserable death, and let out the vineyard to other tenants

who will give him the fruits in their seasons."

Jesus' Jewish audience gives the argument which an anti-Semite would, because they didn't understand the parable either.

Jesus immediately recognizes where this is going and he rejects the position:

Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the scriptures:

`The very stone which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner; this was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes'?"

Far from rejecting His people, God has come to give them a new and everlasting foundation. There is a great deal that could be said by manner of explicating this, for which there is not nearly time enough in this sermon. For the initial questions which arise from Jesus' words here, I would, for now, refer you to St. Paul's argument in the *Epistle to the Romans*, particularly the eleventh chapter, in which the Apostle states without reservation that God has not by any means

rejected His people, and that with regard to election, the faithful Jew (even if he does not recognize Jesus' status as Messiah) is guaranteed salvation due to God's irrevocable promise to his forefathers.

The Good News here for Christian or Jew is that God does not engage in breach of contract, as it were. Or, to us a metaphor which might be more appropriate in the current financial crisis, God doesn't default. There may be a sovereign debt crisis in Greece or Ireland or Spain or Portugal, but there will never be one in the Kingdom of God. God keeps His promises to Jew and Christian; He'll never be so short on Grace that he has to cut back benefits or apply a means test, and for this we can be truly and eternally grateful.

+In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.