

“The Believing Remnant”

Acts 3: 12a, 13-15, 17-26

Easter 2B, Boise, 2021

When the doubting Thomas finally came around, affirming what the others had told him, the number of the Apostles then rose to eleven. But it had to be twelve, to signify that they were the patriarchs of a renewed Israel. For Israel has twelve tribes, descending from the twelve sons of Jacob. We learn, from the opening chapter of The Acts of the Apostles, that St Matthias took the place of Judas to reestablish the right number.

I mentioned in my sermon last Sunday that St Peter spent the first seven or eight years following Our Lord's Resurrection preaching to his fellow Jews. It is not for nothing that St Paul referred to him as the Apostle of the circumcision [Gal 2: 8]. In our reading from The Acts on Easter Day, we found Peter on the Judean coast, making visits to the messianic congregations in Lydda and Joppa. In today's first reading, also from The Acts, the Prince of the Apostles is near the beginning of his evangelism in old Israel. He is preaching in Jerusalem, close to the places where Jesus was crucified, buried, and resurrected, and where the Spirit descended on 120 believers on the Feast of Pentecost. When that Spirit-filled group left the upper room, and Peter preached to a crowd that had witnessed the miracle of diverse tongues, 3,000 more Jews believed, and thus greatly augmented the size of the original group.

Now, in today's reading, from chapter 3, Peter is preaching on the Temple Mount to another group that has witnessed a miracle. In the Name of Jesus, he commands a lame man, begging alms at a gate of one of the courtyards, to get up and walk. And so he does. Peter then explains to the crowd why there is such power in the Name, and tells them about the Person who stands behind it.

Men of Israel, . . . the God of our fathers glorified His Child Jesus, whom you delivered over and denied in the presence of Pilate, when he had decided to

release Him. . . . You denied the Holy and Righteous One, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you. And you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses. . . . It was His Name, and the faith this man put in His Name, that has made this man strong and restored his health.

St Peter repeats the technique he used in his Pentecost sermon, which gained 3,000 converts. He accuses those in his audience of having murdered the Messiah. When Pilate wanted to release Him, they chose Barrabas. And then Peter softens the blow by telling them that both they and their rulers “acted in ignorance,” and that such was to fulfill prophecies concerning the Messiah. Their guilt is thus mitigated, but not erased. For that, they must repent and be forgiven, “that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord.”

And they did. As on the day of Pentecost, the Jews who heard Peter preach repented of having partaken of the Messiah’s murder. They accepted Jesus as their risen Lord and Saviour, and were forgiven all their sins — “about 5,000 men,” the text says, which means there were others. If you add that number to the first 3,000 converts, and then double the total to account for women and children, you can see that we now have a nucleus of the emerging Christian Church.

But those 16,000 or so newly-baptized believers did not think of themselves as that. In their minds, they were merely Jews who had finally found the Messiah — who had first denied Him, but then owned up to their error and now counted themselves among His followers. St Peter was a Jew making his appeal to other Jews in Jerusalem. They all knew what the Messiah, David’s descendant, was supposed to do. They just missed the prophecies in Isaiah and the Psalms that spoke of His suffering and death before taking His Reign. “Repent . . . that your sins may be blotted out,” the Apostle exhorts,

that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that He may send the Christ appointed for you, Jesus, whom Heaven must receive until the time for restoration of all the things about which God spoke by the mouth of the holy prophets long ago.

After Peter stuns his audience with the accusation of having killed the Messiah

and then asks for their repentance, he then steers them back onto familiar ground. When the Christ returns, he says, He will take His rightful place as the King of the Jews, and extend His rule over the nations. You see, there is no reinterpretation here of the messianic prophecies. Peter merely connects those well-known predictions to others that seemed mysterious — about a righteous Jew who was persecuted, and in His suffering bore the sins of the nation. But now that all that is over, here they all are again, waiting for the Messiah to restore Israel's glory and subdue the idolaters. According to the chronology the Acts of the Apostles lays out for us, Peter and the other Apostles continued in that vein for several or eight years, until the time the Spirit directed Peter to Cornelius.

So what do we make of it — the “Jewish Church,” as we now refer to that first group of believers, the Church before St Paul began his evangelization of the Gentiles? They carried on with their old practices prescribed by the Torah — circumcising, eating kosher, attending the synagogue on the Sabbath, perhaps now a messianic synagogue. Peter and John found the lame man at the gate called Beautiful when they were on their way to the Temple to attend the morning sacrifice. Was the burning of a slaughtered animal now a reminder of the Sacrifice that Christ had made of Himself for their sins? St Luke, the author of The Acts, does not say. How does this strange phenomenon of Jewish Christianity fit with God's plan to bring a blessing upon “all the families of the earth” through Abraham's Seed, the Messiah? Peter and the others did not seem, at this early date, to understand that the Messiah needed to be shared.

The key to answering that question is to be found, I believe, in the Biblical concept of the saving remnant. When the human race as a whole turned away from the God who made Heaven and earth, and worshipped dumb idols instead, God began His rescue by working with just a portion of it. The theme of the remnant begins early in Genesis, because it is foundational to the rest of the story. Cain murdered his brother and then journeyed to a land east of Eden,

where he built a city for his descendants. Adam and Even's third son, Seth, established the line that produced Noah, whose family alone was spared destruction by the Deluge. It was the part of mankind that had not gone bad, and hence would repopulate the earth — a saving remnant.

Things go south again with the Tower of Babel. God selects Abraham to be the father of a brand new nation, but over the centuries there is a further winnowing. The northern tribes become thoroughly corrupt and combine Baal-worship with that of Yahweh, and so He abandons them to the Assyrian invaders. The southern tribe Judah is now the remnant, and a few Israelites from the northern tribes make their way there. Judah itself is greatly reduced by its exile in Babylon. Jesus and the Apostles all come from that remnant of families that returned to the Holy Land.

But, as we know from our reading of the Gospels, most Jews in the Roman era, even though they were a remnant of a remnant of a remnant, were not in good spiritual condition. They had lost sight of their mission. Jesus, in His teaching, offers them an opportunity to regain and complete it. But, with the help of the Romans, they kill Him. Not all is lost, however. After Christ's Resurrection they are given, through the Apostles' preaching, an opportunity to repent and reorient, and more than a few, we learn from our readings of The Acts, take it. When these Jews accept the Gospel and repent of their sins, they become the new saving remnant of Israel. They are the ones who will fulfill the promise that God made to Abraham 2,000 years earlier, that from his seed a blessing would go out to "the other families of the earth." These Jews, when they believe and submit to the necessary washing, are incorporated into Christ's risen Body, animated by the Holy Spirit. Church in the NT is just another word for "assembly," and initially it is an assembly of Jews. Through the Jewish Messiah's death and Resurrection, Israel itself is brought back to life. Those of the nation who reject the Good News fall away as in the previous apostasies in its history.

For several years, the Gospel does not go out to the other nations, because, by my reading of The Acts, that remnant of believing Jews, the germ of the Catholic Church, needed time to form and solidify. When such was accomplished, then the Holy Spirit sent Peter to Cornelius, and that universal blessing promised in the Abrahamic Covenant began to go out.

Israel, as the remnant of mankind, was also selected to represent it. As God told Moses at Sinai, it was to be a nation of priests, offering the sacrifices to the true God that the other nations did not have the knowledge to make. But when the Jews sinned, that representation worked to their disadvantage: they took the punishment that all deserved. Their righteous Messiah bore it singly. Is it not appropriate, then, that when, by God's providence, it came time for Him to die, the Jews in Jerusalem acted as our representatives in putting Him to death? We killed Him with our sins through them. They acted as our agents.

And, what is even more appropriate for the remnant that bore the promises of the Covenant, they were the first to repent of having killed the Messiah with their sins. Those Jews who responded thus to St Peter's preaching were the first to understand the full extent of God's redeeming love. As those who had demanded Christ's crucifixion, they were the first to know that, as Bishop Robert Barron put it in a recent article in the Wall Street Journal, "human beings killed God, and God returned in forgiving love" [April 4, 2021]. It is not for nothing that St Paul calls us Gentile Christians, who have followed in their train, the children of Abraham by adoption [Gal 3: 29] and partakers of the Covenant by a circumcision of the heart [Col 2: 11]. Spiritually speaking, all Christians are believing Jews, accepting the forgiveness of the God whom we killed.

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