

“Coming Home”

Ephesians 2: 11-22

Proper 11B, Boise, 2021

Jesus fed the multitude with loaves and fishes. In the Epistle today, His Apostle, St Paul, feeds us with the Word of God in his presentation of the Gospel to the Ephesians — which I am preaching on today and the Sundays of next month.

Two of the most well-known sentences in this Epistle are found in the passage that immediately precedes the one we read:

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not of your own doing; it is the gift of God, not the result of works, which God prepared beforehand for us to walk in [Eph 2: 8-10].

The reason the lectionary does not include those statements in this course of readings that take us through the Epistle is that they were read earlier in the year — on the 2nd Sunday in Lent. Their message fits well with the passage from chapter 1 that we read and studied last Sunday. God chose us; we did not choose Him. Hence, as the name of our parish also declares, salvation is by grace. God offers it to us as a pure gift, wholly undeserved and wholly unearned. We accept the gift by faith, by believing in the redemptive mission of God’s Son, accomplished by His death and resurrection. Yet, as the Apostle notes, even the faith by which we receive the gift of salvation is itself God’s gift. We will not believe unless God chooses for us to believe. The result or evidence that we have received the gift of salvation and the faith by which we received it is good works — which the God who chose us in Christ “before the foundation of the world” has “prepared for us to walk in.”

Now, having preached that little sermon, which might have been given when the text was read in Lent, I’m ready to give you the one on today’s reading from Ephesians. Here St Paul continues to speak of salvation, the reconciliation with God that we have through Christ, but his emphasis is now on how in that

reconciliation Jew and Gentile are also reconciled. One cannot ignore the social aspect of Paul's presentation of the Gospel without distorting it. The Apostle always speaks as a Jew, and as a Jew who never forgets that he is Jewish. Sometimes he is speaking to other Jews, more often in his epistles to Gentile believers, but always as a Jew and a citizen of Israel. Both before and after his conversion, Paul taught that a person is saved when he or she is made a party to the Covenant that God made with Abraham and his descendants by joining the Covenanted People, Israel. If you can't bring yourself to think of salvation in those terms, you will never get Pauline theology. The thought is expressed at the beginning of the passage: "Remember that at one time you Gentiles, called" by my people "the uncircumcision, . . . were separated" from Israel and her Messiah and the hope that rested on Him. You were strangers to all that — "alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and" having no part in "the covenants of promise, without hope and without God. . . . But now in Jesus the Messiah you who were far off have been brought near by the blood" the Messiah shed.

And at this point the Apostle quotes from the passage in Isaiah that we had for our first reading. Usually in our lectionary, the OT scripture and Psalm have been selected to support the Gospel of the day; so I count myself lucky that both go today with the Epistle I'm preaching on. The prophet Isaiah conveys the words of the LORD to the exiles scattered throughout the Near East:

I struck [Israel]; I hid My face and was angry, but he went on backsliding in the way of his own heart. . . . But now I will heal him; I will lead him and restore comfort to him and his mourners . . . : Peace, peace, to the far off and the near" [Isa 57: 17b-19a].

In Ephesians Paul finds a new use for that Isaian prophecy addressed to the Jewish exiles, dispersed hither and yon. He applies it to us Gentiles, who were outside Israel altogether and strangers to her God. With the appearance of the Messiah, the prophecy to bring the exiles home to be near God in Zion has become a promise to reconcile us all to Him and also to one another. We can have peace with both God and man, because Christ Himself has become "our

peace.” He overcame the enmity between the creature and the Creator by the Sacrifice of Himself once offered. And if persons of every nation enjoy peace with God, the peace won by Christ, they can worship Him together and cease fighting one another. It is, in fact, the only way the world can have a true and lasting peace. For the kind of diplomacy practiced by governments today will, at most, lessen the hostilities and prevent them from breaking out into war.

Our Psalm today gives us another example of how OT concepts might be used to help us understand that reconciliation achieved by Christ. Psalm 22, as you know, was recited by Our Lord as He hung on the Cross: “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” But the second half of the Psalm, the half we recited today, consists of a ringing declaration of confidence in God’s mercies, and a call to praise Him for them. Isaiah told the exiles that they had taken their punishment for centuries of infidelity to the God who had adopted them. Having served their sentence, they would soon be allowed to return home. Christ on the Cross took the punishment for all mankind; so we can all go home. We can return after our long exile from Eden, the outdoor garden-temple, where God walks and converses face-to-face with man and woman. Israel’s Messiah has opened the way of return for Jew and Gentile alike, and result is that “all the ends of the world shall remember, and be turned to the Lord, and all the families of the nations shall worship before Him” [Ps 22: 27].

And in the passage from Ephesians that we study today, St Paul pulls from the OT once more to make his points, this time using Temple imagery. It kind of goes with the theme of coming home; for when the Jews did return from Babylon, they rebuilt the Temple, and indeed it was still standing when the Apostle wrote this Epistle. The Second Temple had an outer court for Gentiles, and on the wall dividing it from the two inner courts for the Jews was an inscription warning non-Jews not to pass through the gate into them if they valued their lives. But Christ, Paul says, “broke down in His flesh the dividing wall of hostility,” making

believing Jews and believing Gentiles to be “one” people who would worship God together. How did He do that? “By abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances.” The Torah had many of those which served no purpose other than to mark the separation between Israel and the other nations. The dietary ordinances, for example, separate the clean from the unclean, and in Paul’s day prevented Jews from eating with Gentiles. “We’ll have none of that in the new Christian community,” Paul informed Peter, a fellow Jew, when they were together in Antioch. The Torah no longer orders our relationships with non-Jews. It does not express the reality of the change made by the death of the Messiah on the Cross. He put to death the old humanity, in which the distinction between Jew and Gentile was necessary for God to begin His redemptive mission in an idolatrous world. In place of that old humanity, the Messiah brought forth a new man in His resurrection, a new Adam, in which believers of every nation “have access in one Spirit to the [Divine] Father.”

“So,” Paul writes to the Christian Gentiles in Ephesus, still not forgetting that ethnically he is a Jew, “you are no longer strangers and aliens. Rather, you are fellow citizens” with us “and members of the household of God.” Welcome to your new home, the Apostle is telling them. Welcome to Jerusalem.

Is there no Church, then, separate from Israel in Paul’s doctrine? That depends entirely on what we and Paul mean by “Israel.” If we can think of Israel the way he did, we will indeed consider ourselves Israelites even if we aren’t Jewish. Israel shrank from time to time, because of apostasy, persons and sometimes whole tribes’ falling away from the faith. But the nation could also expand by gaining Gentile converts. Because most Jews did not believe Jesus to be the Messiah, because they rejected this Descendent of David to be the chosen instrument of God to extend His Kingdom over the whole earth, true Israel was again reduced to a remnant, and that remnant who now carried God’s redemptive mission forward consisted of just those Jews who did acknowledge Jesus to be the risen Messiah and Saviour of the world. The expansion that followed that

reduction of God's Chosen People by unbelief occurred by the preaching of the Gospel to the Gentiles, which made those who accepted it true Israelites by adoption without circumcision. The Church today, even though it is mostly non-Jewish, is the continuation of Biblical Israel under a different name.

Israel's old leadership at the Temple and on the Sanhedrin apostasized, and besides, after the Messiah offered His Sacrifice and arose from the dead, its functions were no longer needed. Hence, Biblical Israel was rebuilt on a new "foundation of apostles and [Christian] prophets, Christ Jesus being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord." Collectively, we, the other stones in this new structure, have become the dwelling-place of God, where those who seek Him can find Him. When we open our new place of worship and fellowship, let us welcome as many as we can coming out their long exile.

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