

27th Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)
(Isaiah 5:1-7 / Matthew 21:33-43)
04.10.2020

Again and again in the story of God's dealings with His Chosen People Israel we see how it is the Lord's way to use those who have been rejected by their fellows for the good of the nation. It is as if the Lord takes delight in choosing rejected people to be His instruments of choice. Through such persons He works out His purpose to bring about the salvation of those He calls His *very own people*. By way of example, just think of the Old Testament story of Joseph recorded for us in the Book of Genesis. This story is not just a one-off. There are many others of its kind. Go through the Genealogy of Jesus Christ in the Gospel of Matthew, bearing in mind that it is God's way to use those whom others have rejected to bless the nation and, by extension, the wider world, and you will pick up on some remarkable cases which illustrate what I am saying. There are many stories in the same vein as that of the Patriarch Joseph. In Matthew's Genealogy, Jesus is shown to have had more than one reject in his ancestral lineage. Would it be an exaggeration then to say that God mainly uses such people – the least likely candidates – to accomplish His will? Whatever their number – whether the proportion of rejects is the majority or the minority – they are fairly and squarely in there. They cannot be discounted. God clearly delights in using people others are inclined to look at askance.

The Gospel passage read this morning shows us that the One used by God above all others – Jesus Christ, God's Only-Begotten Son – was Himself rejected by men.

The Prologue of John's Gospel tells us that *His very own people did not welcome Him*. The story will go on to show that they not only failed to welcome Jesus, they actually actively rejected Him.

In Matthew 21:42, Jesus says of Himself that He will be *rejected by the Chief Priests, the Scribes and the Pharisees*. Those who should have been welcoming in His regard – because He was the One sent by God, the One in whom all the promises made to Israel found fulfilment – were to reject Him and seek to eliminate Him altogether.

The Jewish religious leaders would not only reject Jesus themselves, they would do everything in their power to turn others against Him – whipping up false accusations against Him, saying that He had declared Himself opposed to the State, so that He could be tried by Pilate on a trumped up charge of insurrection: a crime for which the sentence prescribed was crucifixion. This was all part of the religious establishment's dishonest and underhand dirty work.

If the Lord uses those who are very clearly rejects, so that in and through them His promises can find fulfilment, He also uses others who, although not as manifestly rejected, are nonetheless quite unexpected instruments and channels of grace.

While not actually rejected to the degree of the Patriarch Joseph or Jesus, the Incarnate Son of God, just think of those Paul addresses when he writes to the Corinthians. The apostle reminds them that they were a truly surprising choice. The community they formed together in Corinth looked like anything but a Chosen Race. It was made up of people who were far from impressive. Those whom this world would consider contemptible were the Lord's primary agents. Paul writes: *Take a good look at yourselves, my dear friends. Look at who you were when you were first called into the life of God for the accomplishment of His will. I don't see many of the 'brightest and the best' among you, not many influential people, not many from high-society families. Isn't it obvious that God deliberately chose men and women*

that the culture overlooks and exploits and abuses, and even rejects; that He chose these 'nobodies' to expose the hollow pretensions of the 'somebodies'?

God selects as instruments of choice those whom others would be ready to dismiss as people of little consequence.

At Jesus' birth it was the shepherds who *acclaimed* the Messiah's appearance on earth. It was not the religious leaders, the known holy men, the sages, the learned in the Law and the prophets, but simple men who lived what the Law and prophets bade them live. God's chosen ones were members of the *anawim*: people of apparently little worth. The shepherds paid the Messiah King homage as He lay there before them, One of the poorest of the poor and One with the poorest of the poor. It was *nobodies* – folk others would readily dismiss and reject as credible witnesses – who proclaimed the birth of the Saviour. Likewise, at the resurrection of Jesus, it was not the Apostles whom Jesus Himself had gathered around Him and commissioned to make Him known who first did so. No. Instead, it was a little group of women – women like those we meet in the Genealogy of Matthew's Gospel (women with a story behind them, a hint of scandal about them, we might say – we are told that one of their number had been released from seven demons!). These were those who were called to be the first witnesses to the fact that Christ had risen from the dead.

We might ask: Why does God work this way? Why does God use rejects to accomplish great things? Why does the Lord's way follow a pattern which always seem to include the unexpected, the unknown, those who would be easily dismissed by others? It seems to me that the answer to that question, the reason behind the Lord using the least likely to accomplish His redemptive plan, is to manifest that *salvation comes from the Lord and not from man*, as the psalmist states. Salvation is all God's gift. It is not His response to human genius. The Book of the Apocalypse takes up the psalmist's insight and develops it when it has us hear the heavens resound with the hymn: *Salvation, glory and power belong to our God*. Our being set free comes from the Lord.

Rejection is something we are all so afraid of, and yet it holds such a place in God's plan. Jesus says clearly: *If the world hates you and rejects you, remember that it hated Me and rejected Me before you... The one who rejects you rejects Me and the One who sent Me... Blessed are you when men reject you and persecute you because of My name*. What matters is not that others reject us, but that God has chosen us. In Paul's writings we read: *You are God's chosen ones... In Christ you have been chosen and obtained an inheritance*.

While the pain of rejection is not to be minimised, it can be overcome, with the passage of time and the help of God's grace. We can come to see how it was necessary – a required element of the story to move things forward, to bring things along, to prepare a day we have not yet seen. I cannot help but think of Jesus' words to the Emmaus pilgrims who lamented that the One on whom they had pinned their hopes had been rejected. As they walked the road downcast, it appeared to Cleopas and his companion as if Jesus' mission, and their longing and expectation in His regard, had all been in vain. They were somewhat startled by their companion's words: *Was it not necessary that the Son of Man go through all this, that He be rejected and that He suffer?*

Already in the last lines of the Book of Genesis we heard Joseph's reassuring words to his brothers who feared for their safety, dreading that he might take revenge for their earlier rejection of him: *Do not be afraid! ... Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as He is doing today...* In this way, Joseph, whom his siblings had once rejected and harmed, *reassured his brothers, speaking kindly to them*

Jesus' words are even more reassuring for His hearers – for us – are they not? *It was the stone rejected by the builders that became the keystone. This was the Lord's doing and it is wonderful to see!* The One whom His people rejected so strongly identified Himself completely with His people, so ardently desiring their salvation, that even their rejection of Him became part of the story of their redemption. Let me repeat that verse I quoted just a moment ago: *Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer and so enter into His glory?* These words are to be understood as including the notion that, in a mysterious way, God brought about the salvation of those who wronged and rejected the Christ He had sent to bring about their redemption.

Just as Joseph's brothers, who had wronged and rejected him, were later to be blessed precisely as a result of their wrong action in his regard, so those who put Christ to death were saved by His crucifixion, because Jesus lived it as nothing other than a generous life-giving self-offering.

When we are rejected by others we can turn the wrong done to us to the good, by humbly accepting to live whatever ill befalls us in a loving way, making of our lives an oblation, a free-will offering. In this way we can contribute to the on-going work of this world's salvation, including that of our persecutors.