

The Rev. Ryan Fischer
St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw
Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 15)
August 16, 2020

Lectionary Year A: Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32

It was troubling for the apostle Paul to think of his own people -- the Jews -- rejecting Christ. As you likely already know, Paul was a Jew and, indeed, a persecutor of Christians prior to his conversion; there's little to suggest that he didn't wish for all Jews to eventually come to Jesus. He even went so far as to claim that their rejection of Christ was part of God's plan; were it not for that, the Gospel couldn't have reached the Gentiles, or non-Jews. So all is well and good until you get to the matter of what to do with Jews who wish to remain Jewish, right down to rejecting Jesus as Messiah and Lord.

For centuries thereafter, Christians (well-meaning and not) wished for Jews to get with the program and come to faith in Jesus Christ. While a pastor in my former church, I remember leafing through an old Service Book and Hymnal, which was the worship book for North American Lutherans from 1958 to 1978 (and happened to be heavily based on the 1928 Book of Common Prayer of The Episcopal Church); from my leafing, I discovered a prayer for the Jews, and, as I read it to you, I'll let you decide what kind of slant was taken on the matter. It reads: "O God, the God of Abraham, look upon thine everlasting covenant, and cause the captivity of Judah and Israel to return. They are thy people; O be thou their Saviour, that all who love Jerusalem and mourn for her may rejoice with her, for Jesus Christ's sake, their Saviour and ours. Amen" (Service Book and Hymnal, p. 223).

The text behind the text of this prayer is, I believe, a desire for Jews to become Christians. Of course, you could read it as a plea for God to be merciful to the Jews even when they don't proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord. But the language of "caus[ing] the captivity of Judah and Israel to return" would indicate that they

are not on the right side of God; indeed, they are seen as captive to a dated covenant that has been replaced by a new one in Jesus Christ.

So, what does one do today? Does one say, "Okay, Jews, you better come to faith in Jesus Christ or else you'll go to hell"? Or does one take more of a "live and let live" attitude? Given the fact that Israel is (and has been for decades) an eight thousand square mile powder keg, one might be well advised to take the latter approach. But, from a theological perspective, what merit would there be to call upon Jews to become Christians?

If one presupposes that religion's purpose is to bring believers into communion with their God, one could argue that all religions have roughly the same purpose. Christians achieve that through Jesus Christ, who died for them and brought them into God's fold. In the Jewish religion, this happens through obedience to the covenant that God established with the Israelites; if you'd like to learn more about that, simply read the first five books of the Old Testament.

There is no basis, scriptural or otherwise, for the belief that the Jewish God is different from the Christian God. After all, ample evidence shows that the Christian faith emerged out of the Jewish faith, and that its Savior was a Jew himself. However, claims within the Christian faith that Christianity is the only way to salvation have put a wrinkle in this warm, fuzzy garment we're about to knit. We look to Bible verses like John 14:6 as closing the gates of heaven to a sizable percentage of the world's population; remember the words of Jesus, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

Case closed, right? Well, not so fast. Would a just and merciful God condemn millions of people to hell even when they've been faithfully studying God's law and worshiping in the synagogue for centuries? The apostle Paul takes this matter to task in Romans 11, a portion of which appears as today's Second Reading. He

writes: "Just as you were once disobedient to God but have now received mercy because of their disobedience, so they have now been disobedient in order that, by the mercy shown to you, they too may now receive mercy" (11:30-31).

Now, does Paul want Jews to become Christians? Yes, I think that's quite clear. But will God be merciful to those who don't? If I may go out on a limb, I'd answer yes to that question, too. I'll leave the whole matter of whether Paul meant that to the scholars for a decade or so worth of nitpicking.

Christianity's claims to an exclusive hold on salvation have led to some ugly things, including anti-Semitism and evangelism that's more akin to brow beating than getting the word out. If I could talk to the apostle Paul today, I would tell him that the best evangelism to anyone, Jew or Gentile, is to sit down and share a meal with that person. Indeed, you give people Christ in actions as well as words. And you're not going to get everybody believing the same way. Pray for God's mercy upon those who do believe differently, because that's about all you can do; their salvation is in God's hands, not yours.

Paul's own words are rather intriguing, too. Take, for example, the final verse of today's Second Reading; I quote: "For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all" (11:32). One could read this as saying Jews who don't believe in Christ are all part of God's plan to be merciful to them. Of course, Paul has to confront the fact that the Jews are already God's chosen people, so this puts him in a rather precarious position of acknowledging God's faithfulness to the Israelites and not making God the one who does an about-face on them after Christ arrived on the planet! Much as Paul is loath to admit the fact, God's mercy will still shine on those who reject Christ. But, in his mind, they will eventually come to their senses...

An old saying about heaven goes something like this -- you'll be surprised at who

is there...and who isn't. The gist of the saying is hopefully obvious: No one can claim absolute knowledge of God's will. Besides, humans doing the judging instead of God amounts to no more than humans playing God. Hopefully, we all know that this isn't a good idea.

But, by all means, be passionate about your faith in Christ. Channel that passion into Christ-like works of love. Remember that as we are one in Christ, we want all to be one in Christ. But think of Paul's words, too. Much as we may be compelled to convert others to our religion, we cannot always know or determine how God's plan will be worked out in their lives. That's why it's important to develop a relationship with people before laying your theology out on the table.

Most of all, lest we become overly preoccupied with the state of others' souls, we look to our own. We come here...to the spiritual food and drink of Word and Sacrament. If Paul's words mean anything, may they mean that God's work takes priority over our own work; indeed, the irrevocable gifts and calling of God are real in all who partake in his promise. We are secure in the knowledge that God has chosen us -- Gentile and Jew alike -- to be in fellowship with him until the end of time...and beyond.

And yes, being people of faith will bug us, at times, with questions about salvation and about who reaps the benefits of a relationship with God. Just remember humility and humility's corresponding relationship with our incomplete and uncertain understanding of all things under God. Indeed, if we knew everything, we would be God. But we aren't. We're fragile, finite, mortal creatures who are often capable of more harm than good. Thankfully, our Lord has redeemed us and made us one with him, which has improved our prospects infinitely.

Lastly, if we wish to become one with God and with one another, we need only look to the irrevocable gifts and calling of God, to use Paul's language once again.

God has given us something that cannot be taken away -- his ever-faithful love and commitment. It is through that love and commitment that a relationship -- indeed, a oneness -- is formed, and thereby we are God's children forever. Come now to be one in the body that is of his own Son. Become what you receive -- the body of Christ for the world.

Amen.