

In Spite of Ourselves

The Third Sunday After Easter

(From the Lectionary, Morning Prayer, Second Lesson: Acts 2:22-36)

22 *"Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a Man attested by God to you by miracles, wonders, and signs which God did through Him in your midst, as you yourselves also know-- 23 Him, being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death; 24 whom God raised up, having loosed the pains of death, because it was not possible that He should be held by it. 25 For David says concerning Him: 'I foresaw the Lord always before my face, For He is at my right hand, that I may not be shaken. 26 Therefore my heart rejoiced, and my tongue was glad; Moreover my flesh also will rest in hope. 27 For You will not leave my soul in Hades, Nor will You allow Your Holy One to see corruption. 28 You have made known to me the ways of life; You will make me full of joy in Your presence.'* 29 *"Men and brethren, let me speak freely to you of the patriarch David, that he is both dead and buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. 30 Therefore, being a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that of the fruit of his body, according to the flesh, He would raise up the Christ to sit on his throne, 31 he, foreseeing this, spoke concerning the resurrection of the Christ, that His soul was not left in Hades, nor did His flesh see corruption. 32 This Jesus God has raised up, of which we are all witnesses. 33 Therefore being exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He poured out this which you now see and hear. 34 For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he says himself: 'The Lord said to my Lord, "Sit at My right hand, 35 Till I make Your enemies Your footstool." ' 36 "Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ."*

This morning I've chosen a text which might seem more like one appropriate to Pentecost, because it is an excerpt from the first sermon preached after the coming of the Holy Ghost on that day. Its appearance in the Lectionary for today's readings may be due to its emphasis on the resurrection of Christ: it quotes Psalm 16, interpreting it as a prophetic description of Christ's rising from the dead.

But I want to consider some other implications from this famous sermon by the Apostle Peter. Primarily I want to focus on the immense challenge that this material must have posed for Peter's Jewish audience. It seems to me that this same challenge can't help but repeat itself with equal intensity for Jewish people of any generation. There are lessons for us, here, as well.

None of us would ever want to be known for being of use to others, in spite of ourselves! This is a consummate insult: to suggest that our errors somehow wrought more good than our earnest efforts at success. It is a mortal blow to pride, which is founded on exactly the opposite premise: our well thought out, carefully devised plans achieved the exact beneficial results that we had anticipated. This, after all, is everyone's hope.

But the Apostle asserts to his hearers the very opposite: it is a murderous, willful act, done in ignorance, which, although implicating its perpetrators in no uncertain terms --*Him... you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death...; you crucified this Jesus* (vv. 36)-- was overseen by *the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God* (vs. 23, 36). He is say-

ing to his astonished listeners, essentially: "The worst that you could possibly have done has accomplished the greatest good."

Such a judgment is like an epitaph on all the works of men that were done to further their own glory, or of those done in error supposedly for the glory of God. The Romans built a great network of roads for the maintenance and preservation of an autocratic and often brutal empire, but they served for the propagation of the Gospel long after the power of Rome itself had collapsed. The church allied itself at many points with secular authorities out of opportunistic and very unspiritual motives, but in so doing the faith was guarded and preserved against its mortal enemies, and the Scriptures successfully transmitted from age to age. The Reformation received significant impetus from wealthy rulers looking for an easy way to strengthen their position against the Catholic Church, but the tide of change that ensued repudiated the carnality that had become rampant in the church.

Peter's sermon would have permanently altered the world of his Jewish hearers, at least, those who were open-hearted. This is proven by their reaction to his words, recorded in the very next verse to today's lectionary reading from Acts 2: *Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?"* (vs. 37). It is the very deepest possible cry for help. If my whole world were caving in, if everything I had previously believed and counted upon was put to the test, so that I felt as if I were hanging by a tiny thread over an immense abyss, it would be, to say the least, a moment of decision. What must have flashed through their minds? The very system which they were sworn to guard as a nation, the inviolate Law of Moses, which set them apart from all the people of the earth, had somehow been misused to effect the murder of the Promised One for whom all hearts longed. But the apostle offers them a way out. It is the *only* exit available to all men everywhere from the consequences of their sin, no matter what its size or scope: *Repent...*(vs. 38a). And many thousands did so.

Notice, by way of very significant comparison, how the Jewish leaders reacted to the very same message in another instance, soon to occur. When Peter preaches the resurrection to the Sanhedrin in Acts 5, the text says: *When they heard this, they were furious and plotted to kill them* (vs 33). Their world was also demolished by the Gospel message, but they were not going to go down easily. They would fight to the end. They were unwilling to repent, because to do so would have been an implicit admission that they had been wrong, not about some things, but about everything. They had lived off a lie that had served well to deceive both themselves and others: that they were beyond criticism, the pure and irreproachable stewards of the Law. Oh, how great their mistake, and how awful their end! For now, in resisting the Gospel, they were even that much more permanently hardened in impenitence.

There should indeed be a lesson for us to learn in this important text. We might all wish that the magnitude of our works for God would somehow impress Him: if we could just be great men and women for Christ, movers and shakers for the Kingdom, whose accomplishments might cause God and men to just stand back and say, "Wow!". The larger our work, the more skill and effort involved, the more eminent our qualifications, with all our human abilities grandly combined, the more likely it is, we think, that we will draw both divine and human approval.

But what is the reality of the matter? The Jews of Christ's day, to whom Peter spoke in today's reading imagined that God's imprimatur upon their choices and actions was a given. They were God's chosen people. But they were wrong. Their conclusions about Christ were wrong. They had completely misjudged Him. Their actions taken against Him were wrong. They brought to trial, accused, sentenced, shamefully abused, and murdered the One who is *both Lord*, the Ruler of all, *and Christ*, the anointed King of Israel. What we do when we realize that we are not only wrong, but really, really wrong, bespeaks what kind of hearts we possess. Do we run, do we make excuses, do we rush to justify ourselves, are we filled with rage and anger, or do we cry out, *what shall we do?*

How can I be more humiliated than to find out, after the fact, that what I had confidently deemed to be service to God was a great disservice to Him, but was being used by Him to accomplish His own ends, in spite of me? This should give me a very healthy suspicion about what importance and significance I attribute to what I fancy I do for God. I ought to be very careful about attempting to set a value on my good deeds, lest I discover that the value will be "0" unless God ignores my plans and intentions and completely reworks them, making them truly useful.

Those Jews who came to terms with their actions, and how God worked in spite of what they had done, emerged from this realization as "new creations" (2 Cor. 5:17) --completely changed and transformed. How could it be different, faced with the enormity of their mistake, and of the absolutely improbable use God made of it: to save all mankind from sins?

Such is man, and such is God.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.