

Israel and the Church

Text: Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32

I once played a piano piece by Weber in a music competition – a showy piece marked *Allegro vivace* called *Invitation to the Dance*. Towards the end, there was a double *forte* passage beginning with a run of four repeated descending first-inversion arpeggios, followed by a two-octave ascending scale ending in a thrill on the tonic, and finishing with two massive tonic cords on both hands. That, of course, was the cue for the audience to clap, and clapped they did – I didn't play too badly. The trouble was that that was not the end of the piece. There were still 11 bars to come, at a slower, *Moderato* pace, finishing on a quiet double *piano* tonic cord. There are other pieces of music like that – giving all the cues of finishing, but not actually finishing.

Paul's letter to the Romans is like that, too. At the conclusion of an extended exposition of the sufficiency of Christ's work to reconcile us to God, we read this:

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? ... I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor thing present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (8:35-39)

Arpeggio, scale, and double *forte* tonic cords; cue applause, bow, and *encore*. But that would be premature, for we're only half way through Paul's letter! What, you may wonder, is there left to say after that crescendo of Christian assurance?

The answer is that that crescendo left Paul with a problem. Paul was writing to gentiles. By this time, it was clear that the Gospel had been rejected by the Jews *en mass*. There were exceptions. Paul, for one: as we heard today, 'I myself am an Israelite, a descendent of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin.' But Paul was the exception that proved the rule. Most of his compatriots had rejected Jesus as Messiah.

Now, Paul had just assured his gentile listeners that God had adopted them as children through the Messiah, and that nothing could separate them from this love. But God had made a very similar promise to Abraham and his descendants. Up till then, the Jews had been God's adopted children. In Paul's own words in Chapter 9, to the Jews belong

the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promise; to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah ... (9:4-5)

Indeed, as our Gospel today reminded us, Jesus' earthly mission was overwhelmingly Jewish, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.' (Matt. 15:24)

So Paul was baffled that *these* very people had now rejected the Messiah; it created an acute problem for him. If his compatriots had rejected Jesus *en mass* and the Gospel had now moved on to the gentiles, then it looked like God had passed Abraham's children by. Hence the agonized question at the beginning of our reading today:

I ask, then, has God rejected his people?

If the answer is 'Yes,' then all that assurance lark at the end of Chapter 8 is not worth the parchment it's written on! If God could reject God's adopted children once – the Jews, then God could reject God's adopted children again – gentile Christians this time. Perhaps nothing *in the world* can separate us from God's love; but it sure looks like *God* can separate us from God's love!

'I ask, then, has God rejected his people?' This was an urgent question for Paul. It remains an urgent question for all gentile Christians today, especially recently, with all the disturbing news from Israel-Palestine. On the one hand, we have Jews living in constant danger from Hamas rockets; on the other, we see disproportionate military response from Israeli forces, which some in Europe have used as an excuse for perpetrating antisemitic acts. God's people suffering, and causing suffering. It appears that God has, somewhere along the line, rescinded the promise to Abraham. Then what are we doing praising and trusting in a God who seems to have committed a monumental act of unfaithfulness? Paul's problem is our problem. Romans 9-11 was Paul's complex answer. But the outline is simple, and startling.

'I ask, then, has God rejected his people?' Despite all appearances to the contrary, Paul's answer is unequivocal, 'By no means!' Even after the majority of his compatriots have rejected Jesus, Paul is certain that Israel remains God's chosen people. Indeed, Paul tells us that the church only continues to exist and thrive *because* Israel remains God's people. In the middle of Chapter 11, Paul talks about Israel as the root of a holy olive tree, into which we gentile branches have been grafted, and from which we continue to draw nourishment; verse 18:

... remember that it is not you that support the root, but the root that supports you.

The present tense there - 'supports' - is startling, but not as startling as what Paul goes on to say in v. 25

I want you to understand this mystery: a hardening has come upon part of Israel, until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. *And so all Israel will be saved.*

In other words, despite Israel's rejection of Jesus, God will, at the end of time, save *all Israel*. It seems that *nothing*, nothing at all, can separate the children of Abraham from God's love. The word that Paul repeatedly uses to explain this breathtaking conclusion is 'mercy'. It is because God is merciful that Paul is sure of all Israel's eventual salvation. And just in case any gentile is tempted to gloat - antisemitism is always lurking only around the corner - Paul warns the Romans, and us, that we rely on precisely the same mercy:

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.

These are complex verses, but the nub of the matter is clear. Don't gloat! Israel certainly does not live up to her calling as God's people, but neither do we, the church. We all, root and branches, are under mercy. We more so, because it is only by the mercy shown to the roots that the branches may continue to live!

At the heart of this, of course, as Paul acknowledges, is a deep mystery:

I want you to understand this mystery: a hardening has come upon part of Israel, until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. *And so all Israel will be saved.*

The talk of 'hardening' there implicitly acknowledges that it is somehow God's doing that has caused Israel to reject Jesus, this point is made explicitly at the end of our reading today:

For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all.

It appears that it is God's will that the root and the branches should disagree over Jesus the Messiah for a season, a long season. Paul had no idea why this is so; neither have I. But that thought surely has dramatic consequences for interfaith relations, because the moment I acknowledge God's hand in all of this, it constrains and emboldens me to look at ways in which my Jewish brothers and sisters, whether they're 'religious' or not, continue to bear witness to their status as God's people. In particular, there is good biblical warrant to see their millennia old, and continuing, suffering as part of God's own suffering, which was brought to a focus in the crucified Jesus - an innocent Jew. Like Jesus' suffering, there is a mysterious way in which the suffering of the people of God is

redemptive. On the other hand, when, sadly, we see Israel fall short of her calling as God's children, we humbly remember Paul's words

For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all.

In either case, whether we see Israel suffer, or cause suffering, we offer our prayer:

God of faithfulness, just and truthful,
you chose Abraham, your devout servant,
to be father of many nations,
hear our prayer:
our guilt has become great.
Forgive us children of Abraham our wars,
our enmities, our misdeeds towards one another.
Rescue us from all distress and give us peace.

Amen.