

THE LORD'S MYSTERIOUS WORK OF SAVING
Sermon for the 11th Sunday after Pentecost, 2020
Romans 11:1-2a, 13-15, 28-32

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is our Second Reading read before, Romans 11:1-2a, 13-15, 28-32: ¹ **Therefore, I ask, "God has not rejected His people, has He?" Certainly not! For I also am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, from the tribe of Benjamin.** ² **God has not rejected His people, whom He foreknew...**

¹³ **I am speaking to you Gentiles. Since I am the apostle to the Gentiles, I continue to glorify my ministry, ¹⁴ in the hope that I may somehow arouse my own people to envy and save some of them.** ¹⁵ **For, if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?**

²⁸ **From the viewpoint of the Good News, they are enemies on your account, but, from the viewpoint of election, they are dearly loved because of their fathers.** ²⁹ **For the gifts and the calling of God cannot be revoked.** ³⁰ **For, as you were once disobedient to God, yet you have now obtained mercy through their disobedience, ³¹ so also these people have become disobedient now, while you enjoy mercy, that they also may now receive mercy.** ³² **For God has locked all people into disobedience that He may be merciful to all people.**

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

"*Why does God work the way He does?*" is a question many people ask. The Lord does the things He wants to be done by using methods and means that do not, on the surface at least, make a lot of sense to us. We find an excellent example of this in what St. Paul is discussing today.

From the beginning, God had chosen one nation above all others, the nation of Israel, to be His special people. To them alone, He had given His Word and promises. To them were given priests and prophets to keep His Word before the people. They were given the Holy Land as a place to dwell. God's abiding presence was in the Temple, and through this chosen nation He would bring His Son into the world - exactly as He'd promised - in order to fulfil His Word to their father, Abraham, to bless all nations on earth through his Seed.¹ It's easy to see that from the time God had called Abraham to the time of Christ, there was a tremendous spiritual advantage to being born an Israelite.

The Jews, who, by the time of Christ had been reduced pretty much to just one tribe, namely the tribe of Judah, were an especially blessed and privileged people. Now Jesus has come and performed His ministry. He has died on the cross for the sins of the world. He has been raised from the dead and has ascended into heaven. The Gospel is going forth, the good news that in Jesus God has reconciled the world to Himself and that sinners are declared righteous and granted eternal life through faith in Him. It's wonderful. The Church of Christ is experiencing phenomenal growth. People everywhere from every race, tribe, and tongue are coming into the kingdom of God. Whereas before the saving grace of God fell almost exclusively on one fairly small group of people, now His grace was overflowing *to all nations*, and, while this is true, for the most part, the Jewish people themselves were being left behind. Though they had this great history of God's care and were favoured above all nations with His gracious gifts, they, more than any other group of people, were rejecting the Gospel of Jesus Christ - almost all of them anyway. You see, not all of them rejected Jesus. The earliest Christians were Jews, as were Christ's disciples. So were the 120 believers upon whom the Holy Spirit had come on the first Christian Pentecost, and also the 3000 new converts who were baptised that day² - all of them were Jews. However, the vast majority of God's chosen people had rejected Christ and His saving message. As the Word went forth, it was predominantly among the Gentiles (the non-Jews) that the Gospel found its most fertile soil. We even see this during the ministry of Jesus. Among His own people, Jesus was frequently amazed by their lack of faith.

On the other hand, there were only two people Jesus ever commended for having great faith. One we heard about in today's Gospel.³ She was a Canaanite, a Gentile. The other was a Roman centurion, also a Gentile.⁴

¹ Genesis 22:18, Galatians 3:16

² Acts 2ff

³ Matthew 15:21-28

⁴ Luke 7:1-9

Paul wrote his Letter mainly to the Gentile congregation at Rome, and one can imagine them sitting there thinking as they hear the words, *“This is strange. How is it that God’s chosen nation - the Jews who had all the advantages - don’t believe; but we who are the formerly neglected, pagan, Johnny-come-latelies do? Why is this so? More to point, how should we look at these unbelieving Jews? Should we think of them as having been rejected by God? Has the Lord finally given up on that stiff-necked and stubborn race? And does this mean that we are now somehow better than they are that we’re so faithful to the Word of truth and they’re not?”*

Regarding this last question, it needs to be said that the biggest error of the Israelites was to *think of themselves as being something extraordinary*. The prevailing thought among them was *“God chose us **because** we’re better, more noble, more obedient, more faithful, more spiritual, more **something**.”* The exact opposite was true. They were chosen by God and given all His benefits by His grace alone. As a matter of fact, that was the point in His choosing such a relatively small, insignificant, and *rebellious* group of people. The point is they were utterly *undeserving* of the honours and privileges the Lord had heaped upon them. That’s what God’s grace is all about. It’s favour and blessing granted by the Lord to those *who do not in any way merit* such treatment. The Lord had chosen Israel to *showcase* His grace - to make it shine that much more brightly - by picking such obviously *undeserving* people. It helped communicate to everyone the comforting idea that *“If the Lord could choose, forgive, bless, and love those obstinate Jews despite all their faults, then He surely will do those things for me too, no matter how weak, wretched, and sinful I am.”* The last thing Gentile believers should conclude is the reason they’re in, and most of the Jews are out is because they, the Gentiles, are somehow better than the Jews. No. *No one deserves God’s grace*. No one can lay claim to any credit before Him. *Everyone* who comes to saving faith in Christ does so **by God’s grace alone**.

But what about the first question? Should Gentile Christians conclude that the Lord has rejected the Jews and cast them aside - that He’s withdrawn His favour from them? This is the question Paul answers when he says, **“Therefore, I ask, “God has not rejected His people, has He?”**, and then answers it with what is in Greek a most emphatic negative statement: **“Certainly not!”** The whole idea that God should push aside or repudiate His people is unthinkable. Psalm 94:14 says, *“For the LORD will not abandon His people and will not forsake His own inheritance.”* Paul proves it by pointing to himself. **“For I also am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, from the tribe of Benjamin.”** Paul was a Jew - and not one who had followed Jesus during His ministry. Paul had come to saving faith in Christ much later. He went on to explain that **“the gifts and the calling of God cannot be revoked.”** The Lord didn’t slam the door shut on the Jews so that He could open it for Gentiles. Instead, the door had been widened to accommodate all, and that was true even though most of the Jews - like the prodigal son’s older brother⁵ - had refused the Father’s gracious invitation to come inside and join the celebration.

Paul further explains that God *very much* wants Jews to be united with Jesus in the Christian Church. He says, **“they are dearly loved because of their fathers.”** For the sake of their forefathers, they do have a special place in the heart of God. He loves them and aches for their return to Him. At the same time, however, Paul explains how their rejection of Christ and His Gospel has served and is continuing to serve God’s purposes. He says, **“their rejection is the reconciliation of the world.”** What Paul means is that paradoxically, through the Israelites’ rejection of the Messiah, God had brought reconciliation. Through *Jewish opposition to Jesus*, He had died on the cross. The atonement Jesus offered to His heavenly Father for our sins when He gave up His life had come about precisely because the Jews had rejected Jesus. The Lord was using their sin and unbelief for the good of everyone. Their chief priests and religious leaders, though they didn’t know it, were actually fulfilling their function by offering up the Son of God as the sacrifice for the sins of the world.

Likewise, at the time Paul wrote this, ongoing Jewish persecution of Christians was helping the Church by causing the Gospel to be spread. Remember that initially, all the Christians were in Jerusalem, and more or less would have stayed there all comfortable and happy, keeping the Gospel primarily to themselves had it not been for the persecutions launched against them by unbelieving Jews. Their attacks invariably backfired. Whenever Jews started making life miserable for Christians, some of them would flee to safer places where they’d meet the neighbours and introduce Christ to them. Next thing you knew, a new Christian congregation would spring up.

But there were other Christians who didn’t flee, instead, standing their ground boldly to confess the truth of Christ in the face of great suffering. In so doing, they gave a powerful witness to what they believed. It made people ask, *“What is it they’ve got that they’re so willing to suffer and die for? How can they be so calm, fearless, and even forgiving of their persecutors under such trials?”* Seeking the answers to such questions led more people to Christ.

This is why Paul says of the unbelieving Jews **“they are enemies on your account.”** He’s telling the Gentile Christians at

⁵ Luke 15:28

Rome that the event that saved the world, the death of Jesus on the cross, wouldn't have happened were it not for His rejection by the Jews. And even if the atonement had taken place, the people, far away in Rome would never have heard about it had it not been for their persecution of Christians, something that Paul knew about, for that's what he had done at one time. *He* had been the enemy of God. He had imprisoned, tortured, and helped condemn to death the followers of Jesus.⁶ But despite all this, the Lord had shown him His grace and favour, converted him to the true faith, forgiven all his offences, and - most astonishingly of all - even appointed him an apostle - a messenger of the very Gospel he had tried so hard to destroy.

This was why Paul was now working so hard to spread the Gospel among the Gentiles. He wanted to make his fellow Jews jealous. He wanted them to see what a mighty work the Lord was doing in building His Church, and how all their efforts to stop or destroy it was doomed to fail. He wanted to drive them to frustration and despair precisely so that at least some of them would be forced to see and admit that they too were the enemies of God and were fighting against Him. Then they too, like Paul, by seeing their sins, could be the recipients of God's grace and mercy in Christ. It's a mysterious thing, but it often happens that those who are most opposed to Christ are far closer to coming to trust and love Him than those who are merely indifferent.

Dear friends, what should we make of all this? First and foremost, we should conclude that there is no one beyond the reach of God's mercy in Christ. All are sinners, and Christ has died for *all sin*. Therefore, there is no person or group of people that the Lord does not want to welcome into His kingdom. It's a terrible thing that in times past Christian people have looked upon Jews with disdain. Western history is full of cases in which Jews were labelled "the killers of Christ" and were mistreated, persecuted, sometimes even killed all supposedly in the name of Jesus. Jesus had nothing to do with any of that; not then, nor does He today. Jesus doesn't operate that way, and neither do His true followers.

But not only Jews. The same general principle that Paul expounds here is to other individuals and groups as well - both inside and outside the Church. It is part of our sinful nature that we tend to think in terms of us, the good guys, the friends of Christ, and them, the bad guys, the enemies of Jesus. But throughout history, some who were once labelled as enemies of the Church have heard the call of the Lord through the Gospel and turned to Him, and we must be optimistic about the future of the Christian Church in places where today its members are being suppressed and persecuted as they are, for instance, in many predominantly Muslim nations.

One thing's for sure: The Lord will go on doing His mysterious work of changing those who are His enemies into His children through faith in Christ. He did it for each one of us. We were all born in sin and unbelief, and His powerful Word changed us - indeed, it's *continuing* to change us. This work will go on both for us and for others. The question is whether we shall be helping or hindering this work.

We don't want to be like the disciples in today's Gospel, who tried to block a Gentile woman's access to Christ and send her away empty-handed. Neither do we want to be like so much of the medieval church that treated Jews with hatred and contempt thus making it more difficult for them to see the grace and forgiveness of God in the face of Jesus. Instead, we want to be like St. Paul, who, knowing what all-surpassing mercy he'd freely received, worked diligently with every means at his disposal to help others receive it too.

May the Lord grant us His grace that we continue to proclaim the love of Jesus with our mouths and model it in our lives, showing love even for our enemies, in order that they too, would come to know Him as their Saviour and King and also live forever in His mercy. In Jesus' name. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

PRAYER FOR THE ELEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Heavenly Father, we come before You in prayer and praise, confident that You will hear our cries; because You are full of compassion and pity, not easily angered, and show great love and faithfulness to every generation.

Bless the work of Your Holy Spirit among us through Your Word and Sacraments. Turn us away from sin in true repentance, and help us to look to Jesus for forgiveness and for daily grace to do what pleases You. Provide faithful preachers and teachers of Your truth in Your Church, and make Your people eager to hear and learn it. Fill us with love and trust in You. Save us in all the battles we must wage, and uphold us in all our needs.

Strengthen Christians throughout the world constantly to confess that Jesus is Lord, to Your glory. Empower them to proclaim that it is Jesus who rescues them from the punishment that they deserve for their sin. Give to each one of us all

⁶ 1 Corinthians 15:9

those gifts of the Spirit that are necessary for our witness to Christ. Fill us all with wisdom and joy to use those gifts for the good of all. Enable the light of the Gospel to penetrate the darkness of this world, so that people everywhere may rejoice in Your salvation.

May this Your house always be a house of prayer. Cleanse it of all unrighteousness, that it may be a place where Your glory dwells, Your name is hallowed, and Your Word is taught faithfully.

Keep the nations of the earth in peace. Turn people's hearts everywhere away from war, terrorism, and other wickedness. We pray, in particular, for those who are our country's leaders. Grant that our liberties may be kept safe, our laws upheld, injustice suppressed, and lawlessness punished. Bless all honest and useful work in industry, agriculture, education, science, the professions, and the arts. If you give us prosperity, let us never forget You.

May the words of our Lord Jesus be treasured daily in our homes, so that both young and old may grow in grace, and follow Him who is the way, the truth, and the life.

If you cause us to pass through difficult times, grant that we may cling to Your mercy, and seek your gracious purposes in them. Look in mercy on the sick, the suffering, the poor, the bereaved, the handicapped, and the unemployed, and hear their cry. Bless them with Your powerful love, that they may turn to You, to praise Your holy name.

Continue to bless the work of all who are working to keep us safe from the ongoing effects of covid-19. May this pandemic soon come to an end.

Hear and grant these and all other prayers, O Father, for the sake of Jesus Christ, who, together with You and the Holy Spirit, lives and rules, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

11th Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 15)

Isaiah 56:1, 6-8

¹ This is what the LORD has said: "Maintain justice and do what is right! For My salvation is coming close, and My righteousness will soon be revealed..."

⁶ "As for the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD to minister to Him, to love the name of the LORD and to be His servants, and, as for everyone who keeps the Sabbath without profaning it, and, as for those who hold firmly to My Covenant, ⁷ these I shall bring to My holy mountain and make them joyful in My House of prayer. Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on My altar. For My House will be called 'a house of prayer' for all the peoples."

⁸ The Lord GOD, who gathers the dispersed people of Israel, declares, "I shall gather still others to them besides those who have already been gathered to them."

Romans 11:1-2a, 13-15, 28-32

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fathers. ²⁹ For the gifts and the calling of God cannot be revoked. ³⁰ For, as you were once disobedient to God, yet you have now obtained mercy through their disobedience, ³¹ so also these people have become disobedient now, while you enjoy mercy, that they also may now receive mercy. ³² For God has locked all people into disobedience that He may be merciful to all people.

Matthew 15:21-28

²¹ Then Jesus went out from there and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon. ²² A Canaanite woman of that territory came out and began to shout: "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David! My daughter is suffering terribly from demon-possession."

²³ However, He did not answer her a word. Then His disciples came to Him and urged Him, "Send her away! For she keeps shouting after us."

²⁴ He answered, "I have been sent only to the lost sheep of the family of Israel."

²⁵ Then she came, bowed down before Him and said, "Lord, help me!"

²⁶ He answered, "It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the pet dogs."

²⁷ She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the pet dogs eat some of the crumbs that fall from the table of their masters."

²⁸ Then Jesus answered her, "O woman, your faith is great! Let it be done for you as you wish!"

From that hour her daughter was made well.