

Monday of 31st Week, Year A
October 31, 2011

Romans 11:29-36
Luke 14:12-14

In the section of Romans we have been reading, i.e., chapters 9-11, St. Paul is dealing with the problem of Israel vis-a-vis Christianity. For him it is a problem both theologically and emotionally. Theologically because the Jews were the chosen people, the people to whom the promises had been made, going all the way back to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; the people in which the line of David is found; the line from which the Messiah should come, the people from whom came the prophets who had generated all the wonderful messianic hope. How could it be that once all this had come to pass, they should not recognize it? And it was an emotional problem, too, because he loved his people dearly and found it difficult to see them cut off from the line of grace.

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Supersessionism" is a dirty word, an accusatory word by those who employ it, implying that Judaism has been superseded by Christianity, which now takes its place. It is difficult to deny that there are supersessionist elements in the Epistle to the Hebrews. The Temple is simply a copy and a shadow of the heavenly sanctuary, a new priesthood of Melchisedek, which has nothing to do with Levi, the bloody sacrifices of the law are ineffectual, and when Jeremiah speaks of a "new" covenant, he declares the first one obsolete; conclusion: what has become obsolete and has grown old is close to disappearing.

St. Paul's approach is certainly different. He explains the conversion of the gentiles as foreseen by the prophets and as illustrating the centrality of faith. God has not rejected His people; at least a remnant of them have already entered in (gives himself as an example, as certainly would be all the earliest Christians) and in some mysterious way Israel's hardening has left the way open for the conversion of the gentiles, but when their number is complete, then Paul expects the conversion of Israel; as he says in one place: "if their diminished number is enrichment for the gentiles, how much more their full number?" and again a little later, "a hardening has come upon Israel in part until the full number of the gentiles comes in, and thus all Israel will be saved."

Some years ago the Pontifical Biblical Commission put out a document entitled "The Jewish People and their Scriptures" that is relevant here. It holds that the Jews cannot be accused of stubbornness for not reading the Old Testament as we do, that it is only the unfolding of events that allows us to see the Christological meaning, which is otherwise not obviously contained in the text. It says the promises remain and five times

quotes the passage St. Paul uses today, "God's gifts and call are irrevocable" (used also in last Saturday's first reading).

Certainly we have seen great progress in Jewish-Christian relations in our lifetime. In the earliest years of the Church the Jews in power tried to suppress it; later, with Christians in control, they paid them back with interest, and there has been much anti-Semitism through the centuries, shameful persecutions. This is certainly not a way to conversion. Let us truly build on the progress we have made, practice true love toward all, and leave it to God to carry out His mysterious designs.

Fr. Joseph Jensen