

No.14

26th November 2020

Dear Friends,

Welcome again to our RCIA Newsletter - please God it won't be too long before we can meet up again in person. Meanwhile I am very grateful to all those who were to speak and who have supplied written notes on their given topic. This week : many thanks to Fr Raglan for his thoughts on the People of God. We are made aware that as well as being individuals we are also part of humanity and have a role to play as such for the Common Good.

Keep safe and God bless

John de Waal

The People of God

If you use the term 'the Chosen People', it suggests the Jews. The 'Church' suggests the Christian people (the "Lord's", from Greek "Kyrios"). The 'People of God' was a title found particularly in the documents of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) to situate the Church in the line of a call from God to the people of Israel, which the Council Fathers then saw as devolving onto the whole Christian Church.

Exodus 19:6 says, "you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation", echoed by Isaiah 61:1, "you shall be called priests of the Lord". A priest, in the narrow sense, is one whose role is to offer sacrifice; in a broader sense they are servants

or ‘ministers’ of God’s love and mercy to the world. The call was to holiness; and a faithfulness to God and God’s ways even when peoples around the Jews followed other and false gods. This meant that they were an ‘ecclesia’, a ‘called-out’ people, summoned to stand apart from the ways of others. They were to be ‘other’ as God is ‘other’. Amongst themselves, however, their vocation was to unity, to be ‘one’ as God is ‘one’. ‘Holiness’ has connotations both of ‘set apart’ and ‘undivided’. Throughout the bible, holiness or ‘righteousness’ is given not to individuals but to a people, underlining that it is not an individualist pursuit, but comes when we make our spiritual journey alongside others.

This bond between God and God’s people was sealed in the ‘Covenant’, a word taken from peace treaties putting an end to wars between different nations, but in essence stating that the heart of their religion was a living and trusting relationship. It is not just a book, even one as holy as the Bible; and it is not just a list of rules, although it includes those. Like all relationships it had the essential quality of unconditionality: God was not there simply to fulfil their desires, an instrumental god, but a Person who wasn’t to be bribed, or taken for granted, but trusted and respected. When people forgot this aspect of relationship and made their religion a means to gaining power, in a mysterious way they actually forfeited their freedom.

The Covenant was established, although in not so many words, in the very first chapters of the book of Genesis between Adam and Eve, and God. They are to live in the world God created and gifted to them, only being careful to live according to certain of God’s ways and not transgress. In a pattern to be repeated through time, they fail; and God restores them with a new set of conditions. Covenants are made with Noah and Abraham. Moses is called to be the agent of freeing his people from slavery in Egypt, after which again they are to live in a Covenant of gratitude (Exodus chapters 19, 20 and 34). After reaching the Promised Land, David is similarly granted powers to free his people from enemies round about, and promised an enduring legacy so long as they continue faithful. Once again they fail, but the Covenant is renewed with the whole people after the disaster of the Exile (597/587-538 BC) – see Jeremiah chapter 31, and Ezekiel chapter 36.

At the Last Supper Jesus is seated with his Apostles at the time of Passover, the iconic celebration of the Jewish people’s liberation from slavery, and re-establishment as

a People, not just a group of captive individuals. Taking the wine cup of blessing he says, “this is the blood of the covenant poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Matthew 26: 28; see too Mark 14: 24; Luke 22:20 has ‘*new covenant*’ [*italics mine*]). It is upon this act of sacrifice for the world’s salvation that Christians see themselves bound together as a People under God. Like the Chosen People they see themselves called both to be distinct from the ‘world’ in its negative sense, and to be a community travelling as one, not as lone individuals. However, Christians expressed this combination of ‘apartness’ and ‘solidarity’ in an interior way rather than something to do with their outward appearance or the places where they lived. In the words of a 2nd-Century martyr, Justin (+150 AD) they were ‘like the soul in the body’, living alongside others wherever they happened to be and full members of society, praying for its wellbeing; yet interiorly standing away from actions they saw as sinful. The same Vatican Council spoke of us as a ‘Pilgrim People’ (Lumen Gentium [‘Light of the Nations’], *Constitution on the Church*, chapter VII), making our way through the sometime trials and darkness of this world, but encouraged by our fellowship with the saints who have gone ahead of us, and of those we have known who are being purified towards the life of heaven. The same *Constitution on the Church* (chapter I) spoke of her as, “in the nature of a sacrament –a sign and instrument, that is, of communion with God and of unity among all people”. Sacraments point the ultimate triumph of God upon the Cross over sin and death. So the Church is needed as an ongoing witness to that victory, in this world when that reality is still not fulfilled and we ourselves have imperfections (as scandals in the Church itself all-too-sadly reveal). Sacraments proclaim in faith, however, that the goal of God’s promised glory will come about; and not only that, but that in our lives we are part of *bringing* it about, not only ‘sign’ but ‘instrument’.

We are the sign of that hope, more so than any book or statement of principles. Personal example is the most powerful form of witness to others, which is why Jesus’ first act in his mission on earth was to choose the Apostles: People.

Bishop Barron's Sunday Sermon.

This week I have chosen the Sunday Sermon from a few weeks ago ; 29th Sunday of the Year, because it seems to link up well with the subject of Fr Raglan's talk this week on the People of God. To set the scene you may wish to read Isaiah : 45 : 1 + 4-6.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tC68zDPgZTg>

Final Prayer - taken from Compline (the Night Prayer of the Church).

Antiphon. Save us, Lord, while we are awake; protect us while we sleep; that we may keep watch with Christ and rest with him in peace.

Nunc Dimittis.

At last, all-powerful Master,
you give leave to your servant
to go in peace, according to your promise.

For my eyes have seen your salvation which you have prepared for all nations, the light to enlighten the Gentiles and give glory to Israel, your people.

Antiphon. Save us, Lord, while we are awake; protect us while we sleep; that we may keep watch with Christ and rest with him in peace.

A short time for silent prayer.

Concluding prayer.

Lord our God,
restore us again by the repose of sleep after the fatigue of our daily work; so that, continually renewed by your help, we may serve you in body and soul. Through Christ our Lord. Amen

Blessing. Lord, grant us a quiet night and a perfect end. Amen.

A final thought. "... the world, looking at the Church, does not see Christ, it sees only us."

(Frank Sheed).