

Commentary on the Gospel for Fri, Feb 26th 2016

The rejected one becomes the savior. Believe it or not, today's readings present not just two stories that mirror each other—the story of Joseph rejected by his brothers (who will emerge to become their savior) and the story of Jesus rejected by the leaders of his day (only to become the savior of his people—but really four stories that all have this same plot. Let me explain.

When Jesus begins to realize that the religious leadership, together with their Roman oppressors, are planning to have him killed, he reaches back to a parable that Isaiah told some seven centuries earlier—Isaiah 5:1-7, the parable of the vineyard that produced wild grapes and is therefore rejected by the Lord God; which parable Isaiah explains as standing for the people of Israel, led by wealthy leaders who have been self-indulgent and violent, and forgetful of God's ownership of the vineyard of Israel (Isa 5:8-12). Jesus updates that parable and applies it to what the religious and imperial power-holders are doing in his own day—thinking of themselves first and using violence (like killing him!) to implement their selfish desires to control events for their own purposes.

The Lectionary tradition that joins this reading to the Genesis story of Joseph's brothers "removing" him to implement their violent jealousy because they (i.e. the designers of the Lectionary) discern a similar pattern: the rejected one will become the savior. So far, we have three stories—the Joseph story, the parable of Isaiah and the passion and resurrection of Jesus exhibiting this divine plot.

There is yet another expression of the same phenomenon—the quotation of a verse from Psalm 118 that comes toward the end of Jesus' speech:

The stone that the builders rejected

has become the cornerstone;

by the Lord has this been done,

and it is wonderful in our eyes?

The early church found in those words of an ancient psalm the perfect summary of the Paschal mystery. While the original psalmist seems to be speaking about the eventual thriving of tyrannized Israel, those words are now wonderfully fulfilled in the life death and resurrection of Jesus. The "builders" (the religious and imperial authorities of Jesus' day) reject Jesus (like quarrymen rejecting a block of limestone as not worthy of their building plans) by killing him; but Jesus is raised from the dead and becomes the foundation stone of the New Temple that is the renewed people of God, the Church. And so, already this early in Lent, we are given a glimpse of what will happen in the death and resurrection of Jesus that we celebrate during Passion Week, Easter, and Pentecost.