

The Gospel reading this morning addresses not the acceptance of Jesus, but rather his rejection. From it we get a truly classic cliché, “A prophet is not without honor, except in his own country.” The passage, today, should raise two questions, one being why Saint Mark included it in the first place, since his purpose in writing the gospel was to bring people to belief in Jesus as the Messiah. The second question, of course, is what is the teaching point for us? What do we learn about our religion and ourselves through hearing the story and, hopefully, from my comments on the story?

Let’s look first at Saint Mark. Mark included it because the story of our Lord’s rejection points to Good Friday. Good Friday is humanity’s ultimate rejection of God and God’s love, just as Good Friday is also God’s ultimate proof of his love. But to say that the story is anticipatory of Good Friday does not reach the depth of the issues involved. A very large issue was that the people of the covenant, the descendants of Abraham, for the most part rejected Jesus out of hand. Truly, a prophet is not without honor, except in his own country, and among his own kin, and in his own house.

Put yourself in Mark’s place. You are trying to renew the world by proclaiming a totally new religion that flies in the face of each of the world’s other religions. The first question you will be asked, by those you would convert, is that if Jesus is the Messiah, why did his own people reject him? After all, did the followers of Jesus not proclaim that he came first to the house of Israel?

The answer is complex and multifaceted. On the one hand, Jesus was too familiar, and his teachings were simple and insufficiently demanding on the surface. To the Jews, Yahweh, the God of Abraham, was a complex God and the practice of religion was complex and fraught with many rules. What can you eat and not eat? How do you wash your hands before the meal? Which pans are kosher and which are not? How far can you walk on the Sabbath? The religious laws numbered, not in the tens, but the hundreds and a whole profession of religious lawyers found their livelihood in keeping the righteous straight by telling them what the Law said that they could and could not do. Jesus came along and said, God’s law is as simple as this: Love God and love your neighbor. The rest is trivia, or at best commentary on the ethic of love.

But, I said, the reason for our Lord’s rejection was complex and multifaceted. The flip side of our Lord’s law of love is that even in its simplicity, it is far more demanding and difficult than obedience to all the minutia of thousands of religious rules and laws. You can learn rules and obey them. You don’t walk any further than the rabbi allows. You use the right cooking pan and you don’t work on the Sabbath. These things are far easier than really placing God first in your life and loving - truly loving - your neighbor. That kind of thing is taxing to the core. People did not want to hear it. It was too difficult. It cost too much. You had to sacrifice yourself.

Which get us to the point of what this passage means to us, today. Because, you see, the reason that folks rejected Jesus back then are the same reasons some reject him today. Other things are easier. We can find less demanding answers to life's problems, especially through the classic philosophy of narcissism: if it feels good, do it; the self is *numero uno*; and charity begins at home. To be a Christian takes sacrifice. To be a Christian takes courage. And, more than anything else, to be a Christian truly requires the unselfish, unconditional love of God expressed in living out that love by loving your neighbor.

It is no wonder that our Lord's own people rejected him. What is a wonder, or at least a wonderful thing, is that in spite of the almost indescribable demands of true Christianity, many do turn to Jesus as Savior. Jesus said, "I am the way. I am the truth. No one comes to the Father, except through me." *Amen.*