

27. April 2022

“He who comes to me shall never hunger”

Jn 6:30-35

*At that time, the Jews said to Jesus, 'What sign will you yourself do, the sight of which will make us believe in you? What work will you do? Our fathers ate manna in the desert; as scripture says: He gave them bread from heaven to eat.' Jesus answered them: In all truth I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, it is my Father who gives you the bread from heaven, the true bread; for the bread of God is the bread which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world. 'Sir,' they said, 'give us that bread always.' Jesus answered them: I am the bread of life. No one who comes to me will ever hunger; no one who believes in me. no one who believes in me will ever thirst.*

On 25 April, on the Feast of the Evangelist St. Mark, we had heard the Gospel in which Jesus entrusts his disciples with the missionary mandate: "Go out to the whole world; proclaim the gospel to all creation" (Mk 16:15). From there, we reflected on the need to proclaim Jesus also to the Jews. In yesterday's meditation we heard two short testimonies of Jews who encountered the Lord; an experience that turned their lives around and fulfilled their deepest longing for happiness. Alphonsus Ratisbonne and Hermann Cohen even received the call to enter a religious Order and announced with great fervour the faith they themselves had found by God's grace.

Today, to conclude this reflection, we will hear briefly the story of Israel Zolli, Chief Rabbi of Rome, who met Jesus and consequently entered the Catholic Church.

When subsequently asked why he had renounced the synagogue to enter the Church, Zolli replied:

*“But I have not given it up. Christianity is the integration, completion or crown of the Synagogue. For the Synagogue was a promise, and Christianity is the fulfillment of that promise. The Synagogue pointed to Christianity: Christianity presupposes the Synagogue. So you can see, one cannot exist without the other. What I converted to was the living Christianity.”*

These statements show us the way of salvation that God has intended for His People. This is what He intends, so that His "Firstborn Israel", His "first love" will recognise His Son and thus all that He had promised them can be fulfilled.

Rabbi Zolli's first contact with Christianity was in his childhood, when he used to visit a schoolmate, Stanislaus, who was a Christian and in whose house there was a crucifix, which moved him deeply and raised serious questions: *"Why was this man crucified? Was he evil? Why do so many people follow him if he was so evil? Why are those who follow this crucified man so good? How is it that Stanislaus and his mother, who worship this crucified man, are so good?"*

After completing his studies, Israel Zolli was appointed chief rabbi, first of Trieste and then of Rome. The love of Jesus always remained in him, but initially this did not seem to him to imply a change of religion. His decisive experience took place while presiding over the Yom Kippur ceremony: *"I saw Jesus Christ clad in a white mantle (...). I then experienced the greatest inner peace. (...) Within my heart I found the words 'You are here (in the synagogue) for the last time'. The replay of my heart was: 'So it is, so it shall be, so it must be.'"*

Only a few days later he resigned his position in the Israelite Community, and a few weeks later he received the sacrament of Baptism, being incorporated into the Catholic Church.

In his autobiography "Before the Dawn", Zolli shares some thoughts on conversion:

*"Conversion consists in responding to a call from God. A man is not converted at the time he chooses. But in the hour when he receives God's call. When the call is heard he who receives it has only one thing to do: obey!"*

*Christianity represented for me the object of longing for a love which should temper my soul's winter, in incomparable beauty which should quench my desire for beauty...in the word of the Canticle of Canticles:*

*For see, winter is past, the rains are over and gone. 'Flowers are appearing on the earth. The season of glad songs has come, the cooing of the turtledove is heard in our land. (Song 2:11-12)"*

People who encounter Jesus return home. This counts for all those who experience a true encounter with God and respond to him. So it was with the three Jews whose

testimonies we have heard. They can attest to the truth of these words of the Lord: *“He who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst.”*

It was the same experience as the first disciples of Jesus, who also belonged to His people, and it will be the same for all Jews who encounter the love of God manifested in His Son.

It is with a heavy heart that I have written these last three meditations, because there is simply no truth in the claims that the Jewish people have their own way of salvation, and that the coming of the Messiah into the world is of no importance to them. A Christian who makes such claims denies God's history of salvation with His people. And if these absurd statements were the "official" line of the Catholic Church, then she would have abandoned God's ways at this point and would be unfaithful to the mission entrusted to her.

I hope that those who are aware of the grace of Redemption will ignore these confusing statements which imply that Christians should stop proclaiming Jesus to the Jews. I also hope that Church leaders will turn away from the ways of error, and instead call upon the faithful to pray fervently for the enlightenment of Israel and do all in their power to bring the People of the Old Covenant to recognise their Messiah. No doubt this can and should be done with great sensitivity and respect. But it is precisely love that must impel us to proclaim Christ to all people, beginning in Jerusalem and reaching to the ends of the earth (cf. Lk 24:48). This is the mission that is ours to accomplish until the Lord's return!

For my part, I would like to invite you to pray especially for the Jews, that they may experience as a living reality these words of the Lord: *“He who comes to me shall never hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst”*.