

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

The tribes that Moses—and probably others—led into the Promised Land were, in the words of Exodus (12:38), a “mixed multitude.” That means that although once in the desert they were all called Hebrews or Israel, not all were physical descendants of the patriarch Jacob. Moreover, they did not have a particular Hebrew culture and tradition. When they encountered God at Mount Horeb, or Sinai, it was there that they began to receive and accept the Law, and live the customs that by the time of Jesus really gave Israel-Judah- an identity.

But in the time of Jeremiah, things were a kind of muddle. Remember that the Promised Land is in the Levant, which is a land bridge between Asia and Africa, between Syria and Turkey on the east and Egypt on the west. So, there were traders and armies going through there in both directions, the traders year by year and the armies when some king felt like taking land or stuff from the other leaders. Finally, when Moses and his people originally arrived in the Promised Land, there were already peoples and cultures and cities there, and most of them survived the Conquest, keeping their gods and traditions and seducing the newcomers into observing what they could call the “ancient ways.” And remember that except for Hezekiah and Josiah, the kings of Judah were all jerks at the time of Jeremiah. They married foreign princesses and worshiped the foreign gods with them. “After all, my great grandfather Solomon did exactly that, so Jeremiah, what are you complaining about? It’s “traditional” to steal, murder opponents, lust after my neighbor’s wife, and burn incense to Baal. It’s the way it’s always been done here. Get over it.” Finally, they papered over their horrible sins by going into Solomon’s temple and offering a bullock to Yahweh, the god of David and Solomon. And

they said in that half-empty echo chamber: “The temple of the Lord, of the Lord, of the Lord” [fade the repetitions]

Not good enough, is it? The Lord is not one god among many; not even the chief god of some pagan pantheon. It was an insult to treat the one God, the non-contingent source of all life and being, like a false god. He is entirely, totally different from other so-called gods. He is the Reality that defines reality, that holds all that is, material or spiritual, in being. He is the One the psalmist fell in love with and sang, “My soul longs, yea, faints for the courts of the LORD; my heart and flesh sing for joy to the living God.” He is the One to whom the swallows sing who build their nests on the walls and ceilings of the open-air Temple. He is the One who, in His compassion and love and pity, took flesh in the womb of the virgin Mary, becoming True Man who was already True God.

So just as Israel was always something of a mixed multitude of races and cultures and histories, so also is the Church. We have always been a field sprouting with wheat and tares, plants that look very similar but yield different fruits. Except for very egregious situations, where one very notable member of the Church commits a grave public sin, our leaders trust their people to live virtuous lives and take communion in faith. After all, repentance and conversion is what Jesus, and we, are all about. Tares can become wheat, in the best case, and must not be thrown out before the final whistle or trumpet is blown. May God give us all hearts of flesh that can be massaged by the Holy Spirit so that we all can enter the heavenly temple in love and confidence.