

## How do you handle rejection?

No matter how mature or professional you may be, the pain of rejection is not ignorable. It gets to you. Your buddy said something not nice about your weight. Your co-worker discounted your idea at the team meeting. The girl you asked for the prom date said no. The bank rejected your loan application. The school you applied to wished you a good luck. You were laid off or fired.

A short newspaper article reported on the subject of rejection, and explained why we feel the pain, when we are rejected: the same circuits in the brain that process the physical pain also handle what we feel, when we are socially rejected. And, according to the article, some people who have a rare variation of the "OPRM-1" gene, that programs cells in those circuits are acutely sensitive to both physical pain and social rejection.

If regular people have such a difficulty with rejection, how did Jesus handle rejection? How did it hit him? Did it ever influence his attitude and thoughts? The Gospels record plenty of occasions of such rejections. He was rejected by his townspeople. He was not only rejected by the religious leaders, but also was always challenged by them. How did Jesus handle rejection from people? This is what he told his disciples what to do, just in case they were rejected:

<sup>10</sup> And he said to them, "Where you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. <sup>11</sup> And if any place will not receive you and they refuse to hear you, when you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet for a testimony against them (Mk. 6)."

Jesus does sound like he had some serious hang-up with rejection, doesn't he? All synoptic gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke, they are named synoptic, because they can be laid down and looked at side by side—report consistently the same attitude of Jesus in regards

to rejection of his message and ministries. Jesus did not want to have anything to do with those who rejected him. Not even the dirt from their place was tolerated, as far as rejection was concerned—maybe, he had that variation of the OPRM-1 gene.

I am not saying that we should follow the example of Jesus' attitude in our daily lives. But I am trying to show that Jesus felt the hurt, when he was rejected. It is "human" to feel the pain, when rejected. That is what I am trying to say. And as far as the good news is concerned, once people reject the good news of the kingdom of God, there is not much left for the chance of salvation. Even the dust of the sandals was shaken off. That is not what I am trying to say; that is what Jesus was trying to say.

**T**hen, apart from the synoptic gospels, the Gospel of John shares with us an occasion of rejection that must have played a significant role in formation of the way Jesus perceived people. In John's Gospel, Jesus is

verbose, and speaks in metaphor a lot. He compared his body to bread, the food that sustains people's lives. He told them that they had to eat his body and drink his blood. Apparently, people could not take this message: it sounded much like cannibalism. They reacted:

<sup>60</sup> Many of his disciples, when they heard it, said, "This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?"

Then Jesus responded to their saying, and even gave them a further push:

<sup>65</sup> And he said, "This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father."

**T**his is rather too abrupt an image of Jesus to which an average, modern reader is acquainted. People are used to that gentle, loving, and accepting image of Jesus: Jesus basically told them that God did not want them. A political advisor would wince at a statement like this, for it would alienate the constituents—one's power base.

You will never hear these words from the mouth of a televangelist or a politician. It would be a financial and political suicide. Every one knows that, if you are seeking people's approval or votes, you never tell your constituents that God does not welcome them: you tell them, instead, that God blesses them, and that they are all going to heaven. You just know in your gut that Jesus would never have been elected to any political office. And his constituents reacted to this almost gruff stance:

<sup>66</sup> After this many of his disciples drew back and no longer went about with him.

Viewed from a secular perspective, this occasion would have marked a decisive end to the career of Jesus. John comments that many of Jesus' disciples no longer followed him after this incident. Jesus lost many core members who had been committed to follow him. Now the teaching created a rift between Jesus and his disciples.

These core members were different from those whom we identify as "the crowd." The crowd is the people who followed Jesus not out of the commitment to the principles, but out of curiosity or any selfish motivation. Nevertheless, this crowd was a force to reckon with, according to Jesus' enemies.

There were at least two reasons why the crowd was feared by the religious establishment, or even by the Roman prefect. Jesus so far attracted a vast crowd that followed him. The religious leaders of the time so feared the crowd that they relented from arresting Jesus in the daylight.

<sup>5</sup> And they discussed it with one another, saying, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say, 'Why did you not believe him?' <sup>6</sup> But if we say, 'From men,' all the people will stone us; for they are convinced that John was a prophet... <sup>19</sup> The scribes and the chief priests tried to lay hands on him at that very hour, but they feared the people; for they perceived that he had told this parable against them (Lk. 20)."

But it all changed, once Jesus was arrested at night, and was accused of treason and blasphemy. We know that the same crowd chanted later against Jesus, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" No, "the crowd" is distinct from the disciples who were committed to follow Jesus. And the Roman prefect decided to release the insurrectionist, Barabbas, instead, because he feared that there would be a riot (Mt. 27:24).

As we read the Gospels, we must put the distinction between the crowd and the disciples. The disciples were the committed people, while the crowd was those who show up to watch, when a house catches fire.

After the many disciples abandoned Jesus, John identifies that the only people who stuck to Jesus were the 12 disciples whom he personally selected. Although not mentioned by John, we should not forget those women who followed Jesus to the end. And Jesus asked his 12 disciples:

<sup>67</sup> Jesus said to the twelve, "Do you also wish to go away?"

Although the Gospel writer did not mention, this occasion must have dealt a serious blow to Jesus, although Jesus did not show it. Rejection and betrayal were two most painful things that Jesus endured during his earthly ministries. Jesus meant only the good things for the people, but they either misunderstood him, or wanted to take advantage of him. It must have been a lonely life for Jesus.

What would have happened to Jesus, if the 12 disciples also left him? He had those women who followed him. Given the socio-cultural setting of the time, he would not have made it with a bunch of women following him around. He would not have been taken seriously by the male-oriented culture. His movement would have been in the serious danger of failing.

Peter's remark, I have no doubt, had provided a tremendous

encouragement to Jesus at that critical time of his ministry:

<sup>68</sup> Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life; <sup>69</sup> and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God."

Have you ever wondered why Jesus took Peter, a bumbling fool, as his trusted disciple? This is the reason why Jesus regarded Peter as his rock upon which he would build his church, even though Peter was full of imperfection. What Jesus needed at the moment was not a smart disciple, but a disciple who would stand with him, who believed in him. Jesus needed a disciple with the rock-solid faith in him. Peter not only confessed his faith in Jesus, but also spoke for the rest of the disciples. Peter not only spoke for the rest of the disciples, but also validated what Jesus was doing, and affirmed who Jesus was: you have the words of eternal life; you are the Holy One of God.

**I**n the course of our lives, we sometimes come to taste the pain of rejection and betrayal. And the rejection and betrayal seem to find the precise moment when we are most vulnerable. That is the moment when we need the rock-solid faith and commitment from our friends and family. Unfortunately, even friends and family at times fail us, when we need them the most. And that pain cannot be described with words. Only those who had gone through such rejection and betrayal may know what that tasted like.

When that happens to us, we need some one who would stand up and validate what we are doing and affirm who we are. And we have that very person in our midst who timelessly declares: You are my friend, and you are a child of Abba Father, my God. And I loved you with my life.

That friend, my friends, is Jesus.