LESSON 22: THE MISSION OF JESUS (REJECTION BY HIS OWN PEOPLE)

Instruction for Faith Educators		
For Basic Level / Age 8	:	Cover points 1 to 8, 11
For Intermediate Level / Age 11	:	Cover points 1 to 9, 11
For Advanced Level / Age 14	:	Cover points 1 to 11

Revision from previous lesson:
In the previous lesson, we learned that Jesus started His public ministry by preaching about the coming of God's kingdom beginning from age 30. This was His main message all throughout His ministry. In this lesson, we learn of how Jesus' message was misinterpreted by the Jews, and why He eventually got rejected by His own people as the Saviour sent by God.

Current lesson:

1. Jesus came for a very specific mission, that is, to establish the kingdom of God or the kingdom of Heaven. In order to do that, He had to "save His people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21). But instead of accepting the coming of this Saviour with great happiness, they were eventually unable to accept Him as the Messiah whom God had promised. There are reasons why they could not accept Jesus as the Messiah that they had been waiting for.

2. The Messiah they were expecting was to be a politically influential and powerful person, because only a wealthy, influential, and powerful man would be able to become king. Based on their expectations, this Messiah should therefore either be a Pharisee or a Sadducee, the two influential classes of people in the Jewish society of His day. (Both these classes of people, the Pharisees and the Sadducees, were against each other, although they would sometimes join forces to trap Jesus.)

   The *Sadducees* were upper class, wealthy people. They were mainly priests and aristocrats. The high priests at the temple of Jerusalem came from this sect. The Sadducees controlled the temple in Jerusalem. They accepted the fact that Israel was now under Roman rule, and in order to keep the peace, they rubbed shoulders with the Roman authorities in order to gain favours.

   The *Pharisees* were a large movement, common people, who were upset because Israel was abandoning the purity of the covenant they had made with God and were being lax in their morality and in their obedience to the commandments of God. Being mostly common people, the Pharisees separated themselves from the masses and set a moral example that they imposed on others. They were very conservative people who took control of the synagogues all around Israel. They considered the Sadducees the worst sinners because of how the Sadducees compromised with the Roman authorities. The Pharisees also prided themselves as people who kept the laws of God perfectly, but this self-righteousness was fake.

The Pharisees placed such great emphasis on the Law that they even expanded the Ten Commandments into 613 commandments (Hebrew, *mitzvot*). The *mitzvot* were statements and principles of law and ethics covering a multitude of things that the Jewish people should and should not do. The Ten Commandments were seen only as main categories under which all those *mitzvot* fell. (But in reality, one would find it difficult to place many of those *mitzvot* under any of the categories of the Ten Commandments.) As if the 613 *mitzvot* were not burdensome enough, many more rules were added to them as time went on. That was why Jesus was so critical of the Pharisees and other religious leaders of his day. The actions and teachings of Jesus showed Him to be defiant of their established laws, beliefs, and practices at every turn. In fact, He constantly rebuked them.

Jesus was defiant of them because they imposed these laws on people and judged people who were unable to follow the stringent demands of these laws as unworthy of heaven. As far as Jesus was concerned, He came to fulfil the Ten Commandments given by God, but certainly not the commandments made by men (Matthew 5:17-18).

3. Jesus did not come to abolish the law but to fulfil it (Matthew 5:17). He came to fulfil the true meaning and purpose of what the Law was about. Jesus' fulfilment of the law had been foreshadowed by the Old Testament prophets. They had spoken of the New Covenant that the Messiah would establish. He would put His Spirit within them, change hearts of stone for hearts of flesh. Then they would truly be His people, sincerely following His laws and commandments.

4. One of the "offences" Jesus frequently committed, which terribly offended the Pharisees, was healing people on the Sabbath. The Pharisees had stringent stipulations for things that were forbidden on the Sabbath. They included writing, erasing, and tearing; conducting business transactions; shopping; cooking, baking, or kindling a fire; gardening; doing laundry; carrying anything for more than six feet in a public area; moving anything with your hand, even indirectly (with a broom): a broken bowl, flowers in a vase, candles on a table, raw food, a rock, a button that had fallen off (you could move things with your elbow or your breath, but not with your hand). And this is just a partial list! They therefore defined Jesus performing healing on the Sabbath day as doing "work". Precisely because of this, Jesus deliberately just kept on healing people on the Sabbath!

   Casting an unclean spirit out of a man (Mark 1:21-28; Luke 4:31-37)
   Healing Peter's mother-in-law (Matthew 8:14-15; Mark 1:29-31; Luke 4:38-39)
   Healing the man with the withered hand (Mt 12:9-13; Mk 3:1-6; Lk 6:6-11)
   Healing the lame man by the Bethesda pool (John 5:1-18)
   Healing the crippled woman (Luke 13:10-17)
   Healing the man with abnormal swelling of the body (Luke 14:1-6)
   Healing of the man born blind (John 9:1-7, 14)

5. In addition to this, Jesus was also "guilty" of having undermined other *mitzvot*. The following are just a couple of examples:

Healing of the blind man (John 9:1-7, 14). Jesus spitting on the ground to make clay violated several Sabbath laws. Making the clay went against the law that prohibited "kneading" on the Sabbath, and placing the paste on the man's eyes broke the law against anointing on the Sabbath, all of which qualified as "work".

Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). In the Parable of the Good Samaritan, the priest and the Levite lived in Jericho, where around 12,000 priests and Levites lived during Jesus' day. The way from Jerusalem to Jericho was a very rough and rocky road. It was nicknamed the "Way of Blood" because of the brutal harm often caused by robbers there. The priest and the Levite could not bring themselves to come close to the man left for dead on the road because if the man was dead, and they touched a dead body, it would have made them ritually unclean. In fact, they should not even touch the shadow of a dead body. Therefore, it would have been better to avoid the risk all together by crossing over to the other side of the road. In the end, it was a Samaritan who rescued the badly injured man. But during Jesus' day, the priests and Levites were supposed to be the good people, not Samaritans! (Samaritans were a result of intermarriages between the Jews and the Assyrians during the exile, and were much hated by the Jews because of their foreign religious practices and their Assyrian pedigree. Since the immense hatred was mutual, it was very unlikely that a Samaritan would even want to rescue an injured Jew.) Jesus is deemed wrong for alluding to the goodness of a Samaritan and the badness of a Jewish priest and a Levite in this parable.

6. In addition to the Pharisees' hatred for Jesus because of His disdain towards the *mitzvot*, the Messiah that Israel was expecting was also to be partial towards Israel and not the Gentiles. And yet, Jesus was showing more attention and granting more favours towards the Gentiles than the Jews were comfortable with Him doing. Read the following examples:

   The Canaanite woman (Matthew 15:22-28). Jesus entered into Gentile regions such as Tyre and Sidon. When a Canaanite (Syrophoenician) woman approached Him to heal her demon-possessed daughter, Jesus explained to her twice that His mission was first to the "lost sheep of the house of Israel". The disciples, too, seemed to think that Jesus should stay focused on the needs of Israel. They kept telling Him to send her away because they were tired of hearing her cries for help. Jesus even likened her position to that of a dog, as Jews frequently called Gentiles dogs, since being in their presence could make a Jew ritually unclean. In testing her faith, Jesus implied that she had no legitimate expectation of His help. She expressed that she just wanted a crumb, recognising that even a crumb from Jesus was sufficiently powerful to defeat the demon that had possessed her daughter. Notice that in the passage that immediately precedes this story, Jesus responded to challenges from the scribes and Pharisees by reframing the boundaries of clean and unclean.

   Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:4-26). Jesus willingly walked into Samaria, talked with the Samaritan woman (who was an adulteress), and even asked to drink their water which was deemed not kosher. Samaritans were despised by the Jews because they were known as half-breeds, half Jewish and half Gentile. When the Northern Kingdoms were taken captive by the Assyrians, they intermarried with them to settle in the place that is called Samaria, just north of Judea. These foreigners intermarried with the Israelite

population that was still in and around Samaria. These "Samaritans" at first worshipped the idols of their own nations, but being troubled with lions, they supposed it was because they had not honoured the God of that territory. A Jewish priest was therefore sent to them from Assyria to instruct them in the Jewish religion. They were instructed from the books of Moses, but still retained many of their idolatrous customs. They received only the five books of Moses and rejected the writings of the prophets and all the Jewish traditions. Their religion was thus a mixture of Judaism and idolatry (2 Kings 17:26-28). The Samaritans built a temple for themselves on "Mount Gerizim", which the Samaritans insisted was designated by Moses as the place where the nation should worship. Sanballat, the leader of the Samaritans, established his son-in-law, Manasses, as high priest. The idolatrous religion of the Samaritans thus became perpetuated. When the Jews returned to Jerusalem and tried to rebuild the second temple during the Persian exile under Nehemiah, the Samaritans would pour pigs' blood in the temple area which was to make the temple unclean and the building project of the temple had to be stopped so that the temple area could be cleaned up again (Nehemiah 6:1-14). This was detestable to the Jews and polluted what they considered to be a holy place; therefore the Samaritans were hated even more than the Roman conquerors. The Jews would not even walk in Samaria but would go far out of their way (through Perea), even if it was a longer trip, to avoid entering Samaria because they believed the Samaritans were unclean people.

The cleansing of the temple court of the Gentiles (Matthew 21:12-13, Mark 11:15-17). Among the other failures of the Lord's old covenant people was that as a whole, they never fulfilled their call to reach the Gentiles and invite them to worship the one, true God. In the first century, the Jerusalem temple did have a court of the Gentiles that measured some 35 acres where non-Jews could come and pray to Yahweh, the God of Israel. However, the Gentiles were not really welcome there. The popular Jewish mind-set hoped that the Messiah would cleanse the temple of all Gentiles. Moreover, when the Gentiles came to the court of the Gentiles in first-century Jerusalem, there was no welcome awaiting them. Instead, the court was filled with merchants who sold animals for worshippers to bring as sacrifices and money changers who exchanged Roman coins for shekels that had no image of the emperor on them and thus were fit for payment of the temple tax. Josephus, the famous first-century Jewish historian, reports that 255,600 lambs were sacrificed during the Passover, which gives us a good idea of the scale of the merchants' operation in the temple. There really was no place there for Gentiles to worship the Lord. Seeing this, Jesus drove the merchants and money changers out of the temple. They had no business conducting their business in that place and violating God's design for the Gentiles to pray there. Jesus used judgment language, calling the place a "den of robbers".

Some other examples:

The Roman centurion's servant (Matthew 8:5-13)
The Gadarene demoniacs (Matthew 8:28-33)
The ten lepers, one of whom was a Samaritan (Luke 17:12-19)

7. In the minds of the Jews, the Messiah they were expecting was supposed to build David's earthly kingdom by expelling the Roman authorities. When Jesus was heralding the "kingdom of God", they thought that He was speaking of the coming of a new government

that would restore the independence and the pride of Israel. Even His own disciples thought so!

When Jesus first summoned His first disciples to follow Him, they immediately left their original jobs and followed Him (Matthew 4:20), thinking that this "Messiah" was going to be a great king, a political deliverer of Israel. Following Him would be a wonderful stepping stone to a glamorous political career.

For this reason, the disciples were often quarrelling among themselves (Mark 9:33-37; Matthew 20:20-28; Luke 22:24). The argument among them was frequently about who would occupy higher ministerial positions on the governmental cabinet when Jesus became king one day. It would seem like even their parents might have been involved in this ambition! The mother of James and John came to Jesus, attempting to persuade Jesus to assure her that her two sons would be given the two highest positions in His government one day, one to be seated on His left and another on His right (Matthew 20:20-28).

When Jesus rode on a donkey (along what is now known as Palm Sunday Road) into Jerusalem, the disciples were the ones who got excited (Luke 19:28-40). They began inciting the crowd to make a political statement by shouting "Hosanna to the Son of David", because Old Testament prophecy said it was a son of David that would save the kingdom of Israel. They also waved palm branches, a symbol of victory. About 200 years prior to Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, Judas Maccabeus (son of a Jewish priest during the Hasmonean dynasty) had won a war of independence against the Syrians and became king. He adopted the palm branch as a symbol of his victory and Israeli independence.

In the upper room, on the night of the Passover meal, the disciples were quarrelling again about who should take the humble posture of washing everyone else's feet (John 13:1-17). When Jesus began washing the feet of the disciples, Peter reacted strongly against Jesus' humble action because he expected Jesus to behave like a king rather than a servant. If Jesus was uncertain about His own place as king of Israel, this would have jeopardised Peter's own position which Jesus seemed to have already promised Him (Matthew 16:18).

Imagine the disappointment and frustration Peter felt when Jesus was arrested and seemed powerless to release himself from the captivity of the Roman authorities. His own political ambition had now become hopeless. This frustration was perhaps what led to Peter angrily denying that he knew Jesus (Matthew 26:33-35; Mark 14:29-31; Luke 22:33-34; John 13:36-38).

The hope that Israel had of Jesus becoming king by defeating the Roman authorities was utterly frustrated when the people saw that He did not have the power to defeat their political enemies. Hope turned into disappointment, which subsequently turned into anger. This same crowd that celebrated Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem the previous Sunday now demanded for Jesus to be crucified (Matthew 27:22; Mark 15:13-14; Luke 23:21; John 19:6).

Evidently, the people of Israel had totally misunderstood Jesus' intentions.

8. Because of these experiences with His own people, together with His knowledge of God's appointed timing, Jesus was aware that the time was drawing very near for Him to be sacrificed for the sins of Israel as well as all mankind. He had already made important plans in preparation for what was to happen.

9. Read Matthew 16:13-20 about Jesus' conversation with His disciples in Caesarea Philippi, about 48 kilometres north of the Sea of Galilee, at the foot of Mount Hermon. Jesus bringing His disciples to this place must have been quite a shocking experience for them, as it was a place that the Jews commonly avoided. But it was precisely because of this that Jesus took them there: to get away from the Jewish crowds in order to reveal His identity openly to His disciples.

   Caesarea Philippi was a newly built city on a huge mountain of rock. From the days of the Greeks, it was known to be a place of pagan worship. Since they worshipped the Greek god, Pan, the Greeks used to call the city Panias until Herod Philip began rebuilding the city and renamed it Caesarea Philippi after himself. However, the worship of Pan continued even until the time of Jesus. Here, Jesus had an interesting conversation with Peter.

   A) Jesus told Peter, "You are Peter and on this rock I will build my church" (Matthew 16:18). While Herod Philip was building his city on this rock, Jesus told Peter that He would build His Church upon Peter's ministry. Furthermore, from under Caesarea Philippi was one of the largest springs that fed water to the Jordan River, on which the people of Israel were dependent for water. The Church built upon the Petrine Ministry would be a source of spiritual life for all people of Israel and beyond. This was the beginning of the Petrine Office, which is why Peter is recognised as the Chief of Apostles. All Apostles who were called into their office as shepherds of God's People were to be in communion with Peter. In the same way, today, all bishops of the Church (successors of the Apostles) have to be in communion with the Pope (the successor of Peter) and function under his headship over the Holy Catholic Church (CCC 882).

      CCC 880: "When Christ instituted the Twelve, he constituted them in the form of a college or permanent assembly, at the head of which he placed Peter, chosen from among them."

   B) Jesus also promised Peter that "the gates of hell would not prevail" over this Church that He would build upon the ministry of Peter (Matthew 16:18). The worshippers of Pan believed that the cave there created a gate to the underworld, and that fertility gods lived there during the winter (and they supposedly returned to the earth during spring). This cave was literally known as the "gates of Hades". As a result, they committed immoral sexual acts there regularly such as prostitution and sexual interaction between them and their fertility gods. Men were also killed and sacrificed to these demon gods by being thrown into the cave. But Christ promised Peter that the gates of the underworld would never prevail against His Church.

      This promise was a divine guarantee that the Church would never fall into error, since Jesus had already guaranteed that "Christ endowed the Church's shepherds with the charism of infallibility in matters of faith and morals" (CCC 890). This infallibility is

God's gift to the Church. Although the Pope is a sinner and can make mistakes like anyone else, the Holy Spirit prevents him from being in error when he teaches on faith and morals from his position as Pope (*ex cathedra*). He exercises this divine gift on behalf of the Church. The same is true when the Pope and bishops worldwide gather in a special meeting (called an Ecumenical Council) to solemnly declare something about the faith. However, bishops who individually teach the faith do not have the privilege of infallibility which only the Pope has.

C) Next, Jesus tells Peter, "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of Heaven: whatever you bind of earth will be bound in heaven; whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (Matthew 16:19). The keys are a very important part of the papal symbol precisely because Jesus promised Peter and His successors the keys to the kingdom of Heaven. Peter's keys are always visible in the papal insignia. The gold and silver keys symbolise Peter's power to bind and to loose. They are also seen on the Vatican flag as well as in each Pope's individual coat of arms. These keys symbolise spiritual authority as well as authority of jurisdiction over the Church on earth which is also honoured by the authority of Heaven. By these words, Jesus meant that He was investing His authority in the Petrine Office, and that because of this, there was going to be an intimate connection between the Church and the kingdom of Heaven. This is why we know that Jesus had given to Peter and his successors the responsibility as supreme ruler and shepherd over the People of God.

It was from this point forward that Jesus began speaking actively to His disciples about His impending death (Matthew 16:21).

10. Read Matthew 17:1-13 (also accounted for in Mark 9:3-13 and Luke 9:28-36). Six days later, Jesus took Peter, James, and John with him to Mount Tabor. On this mountain, Jesus was transfigured before them. Since this account is found in all three Gospels, it must have been very crucial to the Gospel writers.

    Jesus took His three closest disciples up a high mountain, which indicated something very important was going to happen, since a mountain (in the Bible) was always a place of revelation. The Apostles did not really understand the significance of Moses and Elijah's conversation with Jesus. Moses represented the Law, whereas Elijah represented the prophets (since he was seen by Israel as the greatest of all prophets). Jesus' conversation with them showed that Jesus Himself was the fulfilment of both the Law and the prophets. The voice of God, saying "This is my Son, the beloved" affirmed the divinity of Jesus. These were the exact words spoken by God when Jesus was baptised in the Jordan River (Matthew 3:17).

    The Gospel of Matthew is attempting to highlight something very important: the Jesus who was going to be tortured and crucified in Jerusalem was also the Lord of glory who came down from heaven.

The Transfiguration (Matthew 17:1-8)	**The Crucifixion** (Matthew 27:27-56)
Similarities	
"After six days" (17:1)	"From the sixth hour" (27:45)
Three named witnesses (17:1)	Three named witnesses (27:55-56)
Jesus is God's Son (17:5)	Jesus is God's "Son" (27:43)
They were "overcome with fear" (17:6)	They were "terrified" (27:54)
Contrasts	
Jesus takes others (17:1)	Jesus is taken by others (27:27)
Jesus is elevated on a mountain (17:1)	Jesus is elevated on the cross (27:35)
Private epiphany/revelation (17:1)	Public spectacle (27:39)
Light (17:2)	Darkness (27:45)
Garments illuminated (17:2)	Garments stripped off (27:28, 35)
Jesus is glorified (17:2-6)	Jesus is disgraced (27:27-31)
Elijah appears (17:3)	Elijah does not appear (27:47-49)
Moses and Elijah beside Jesus (17:3)	Two thieves beside Jesus (27:38)
God acknowledges Jesus (17:5)	God abandons Jesus (27:46)
The disciples prostrate reverently (17:6)	The soldiers prostrate mockingly (27:29)

Peter (and perhaps the other two disciples as well) wanted to stay on the mountain and remain in this moment of consolation and glory, as it was a refreshing change and respite from the challenges they had faced throughout their ministry. But Jesus was intent on making His way to Jerusalem to suffer and die for the sins of mankind. His earthly mission was not yet completed!

11. Jesus came for four principal purposes (CCC 457 to 460):
    A) to save us by offering Himself as sacrifice for our sins;
    B) to reveal the Father's love for us, through His words and deeds;
    C) to be our model of holiness and to show us how to live as God's children;
    D) to make us partake of God's life, as God had intended it from the beginning.

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