

I was standing at a gas station one day when I noticed a middle-aged woman staring at me, puzzled by the black suit I was wearing. She finally worked up the courage and asked, “Excuse me, sir. Are you an umpire?”

Most people do figure out I’m a priest, and many of them act differently when I’m around. They try not to cuss. They’re polite. They may cut me a deal. Or they may hope I’ll go away. When I join a group in mid-conversation, someone may joke, “OK, guys, watch what you say. Father’s here.”

People act differently around ministers, and they shouldn’t. They shouldn’t put on their best behavior for the likes of me. They should behave their best for the likes of you. Every human being deserves our best behavior.

In today’s reading from Exodus, God tells Moses that the Israelites will be a kingdom of priests, a holy nation. Each one of them will be God’s special possession, dearer to him than anyone from some other nation. The Israelites will be so special in God’s sight, that it won’t be like they have only a few priests. Everyone will be a priest. They will be a kingdom of priests, a holy nation.

We believe that God chose the Israelites to be his own in the old covenant, and God has chosen Christians to be his special possession in the new covenant. We are a kingdom of priests, a holy nation. Whenever I baptize an infant, I anoint the child on the crown of the head with chrism and say this prayer: “The God of power and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ has freed you from sin and brought you to new life through water and the Holy Spirit. He now anoints you with the chrism of salvation, so that, united with his people, you may remain for ever a member of Christ who is Priest, Prophet, and king.” At baptism we all become members of Christ the priest. The First Letter of Peter says to its Christian readers, “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy people.” Every Christian is special in the eyes of God; every Christian deserves respect.

God tells Moses the people should act holy because they saw for themselves what happened to the Egyptians – namely, the Egyptians lost the battle. The Israelites also saw how God bore them up on eagle wings and brought them through the desert. God led them out of their slavery in Egypt, across the Red Sea, and into freedom. He bore them up, the Book of Exodus says poetically, on eagle wings.

It is hard to treat everyone with the respect we’d give to a priest, a bishop, a president, an actor, a ballplayer or a potential partner. When we meet someone important to us, we put on a good face. When we meet someone else, we don’t always respect them. Sin pulls us down, making us think the worst of some people. But God can bear us up on eagle’s wings, rescue us from our slavery to sin, and help us believe in someone else the way God does – as a member of a kingdom of priests, a holy nation.