

Palm Sunday, Year B

These Teaching Tips offer brief pointers for avoiding anti-Jewish bias and for highlighting positive observations about Judaism which might otherwise go unnoticed in Catholic preaching and teaching.

A Note on the Passion Reading

The reading of Christ's Passion this Sunday is powerful indeed, reaching to the heart of the Paschal mystery and the central tenets of Christian faith.

It also raises a matter of great sensitivity relating to the history of Christianity: distortions of some Christian teachings led to the Jewish people being collectively blamed for the death of Jesus and branded "Christ-killers" (the "deicide" charge). Over the centuries, such hostile ideas and words led to violent activity against Jews and were even manipulated by Nazi propaganda in the lead-up to the genocidal events of the Holocaust.

At the Second Vatican Council the Catholic Church firmly repudiated such distortions of Christian teaching (known as 'the teaching of contempt') and embraced a commitment to a reconciled Christian-Jewish relationship. In the document *Nostra Aetate* (1965) the Council Fathers explicitly rejected the centuries-old deicide charge, although at the time there was a certain misreporting. Some media headlines suggested that the Church had 'pardoned' the Jews for killing Christ. In fact, what the Church said was that the Jewish people should never have borne this charge of collective guilt in the first place.

This commitment to correct centuries-old errors in preaching and catechesis, was a morally courageous step taken by the Church, albeit long over-due and its delay at a terrible cost to the Jewish people. Further, deep-seated changes take time. Still today, the history of Christian antisemitism is not widely known among Catholics and the effects of this long history continues to have a subtle conditioning effect on congregations. Without any ill intent, 'good Catholics' can sometimes be unaware that their Church does *not* teach that "the Jews killed Jesus" (see Ecclesial Texts below) and is actively engaged in efforts to prevent this kind of misinterpretation of the Gospels.

The key point here for homilists is to ensure that the theological focus for preaching about the crucifixion is *God's love*; the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection offers forgiveness, healing and redemption for all humanity. To blame one whole group of people for Jesus' death is historically inaccurate and misses the point of the Gospel. After all, Christians have never been preoccupied with blaming "the Romans" for Christ's death, and neither should they blame "the Jews". Rather, for Christians, the Cross is the great symbol of God's love and forgiveness freely given for humanity, so that all may be reconciled with God and one another.

It may be helpful to remind a congregation that it is impossible for historians to reconstruct exactly what took place in the actual events surrounding the crucifixion of Jesus. The Gospel accounts of the Passion are not a moment-by-moment historical/biographical record, but rather the religious memories handed on by communities decades after the death of Jesus, writing with theological intent, within a particular set of historical/pastoral circumstances. While the Gospel of Jesus' passion invites us into a

lively narrative that engages our emotions and imaginations, it also requires us to use our 'heads'. The Gospel is to be interpreted within the context of the whole Bible and the wider tradition. Catholic teaching today calls us to respect Judaism and to be mindful of the way Scripture has too often been mis-used against the Jewish people in the history of Christianity (see Ecclesial Texts below).

As sorrowful as we are for this past, we can also be grateful to be part of a Church that has the moral courage and commitment to repent and to repair its relationship with the Jewish people. We can be encouraged to be living in a post-*Nostra Aetate* era with the opportunity to play our part in this unfolding story of Christian-Jewish reconciliation.

Relevant links:

- [Guidelines for Catholic-Jewish Relations](#) (Australian Catholic Bishops, 1992).
- [Criteria for Evaluating Passion Plays](#) (U.S. Catholic Bishops).
- [Guidelines](#) for Rightly Interpreting the New Testament (CCJ Victoria, 1994).
- [Preaching Without Unintended Prejudice](#) (Catholic Diocese of Broken Bay, 2015).
- [Ecclesia & Synagoga](#). A one-page teaching aid (Catholic Schools Broken Bay, 2018).

Notable Ecclesial Texts

Second Vatican Council

"[W]hat happened in His passion cannot be charged against all the Jews, without distinction, then alive, nor against the Jews of today. ... [T]he Jews should not be presented as rejected or accursed by God, as if this followed from the Holy Scriptures. All should see to it, then, that in catechetical work or in the preaching of the word of God they do not teach anything that does not conform to the truth of the Gospel and the spirit of Christ.

"Furthermore, in her rejection of every persecution against any man, the Church, mindful of the patrimony she shares with the Jews and moved not by political reasons but by the Gospel's spiritual love, decries hatred, persecutions, displays of anti-Semitism, directed against Jews at any time and by anyone.

"Besides, as the Church has always held and holds now, Christ underwent His passion and death freely, because of the sins of men and out of infinite love, in order that all may reach salvation. It is, therefore, the burden of the Church's preaching to proclaim the cross of Christ as the sign of God's all-embracing love and as the fountain from which every grace flows."

Declaration on Relations with Non-Christian Religions, *Nostra Aetate*, 4.

French Catholic Bishops' Committee for Relations with Jews

"It is a theological, historical, and juridical error to hold the Jewish people without distinction guilty of the Passion and Death of Jesus Christ. The Catechism of the Council of Trent already rejected this error (para 1, cap 5,11). . . . Contrary to what an ancient but contested catechesis has sustained, we must not deduce from the New Testament that the Jewish people were deprived of its election. Scripture as a whole asks us to recognise, on the contrary, that the fidelity of the Jewish people to the Law and Covenant is a sign of the fidelity of God toward His people."

1973 Statement, IV. b.

Pope John Paul II

"Forgive us, Lord, we who have crucified the Jewish people so many times in the past."

Stations of the Cross, Rome, 1999.