

Fifth Sunday of Lent, 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.

Notes on the Gospel: John 12:20-30

Christianity's deep links with Judaism are affirmed by highlighting the profoundly Jewish ideas and images that permeate this Gospel (John 12:20-30). For example:

"Now the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified..."

A possible inference to Isaiah 52:13 – the Servant of the Lord “will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted”.

"Unless a wheat grain falls to the ground and dies..."

The kernel of wheat appears in rabbinic literature as an eschatological image, symbolising resurrection of the dead. For example: “Rabbi Meir said . . . If wheat, which is buried naked, meaning that the kernel is sown without the chaff, emerges with several garments of chaff, all the more so will the righteous, who are buried with their garments, arise with their garments” (BT Sanhedrin 90b. Accessed at Sefaria.org).

"Anyone who loves his life will lose it..."

The ‘love/hate’ contrast in Scripture can sometimes jar our western, 21st century sensibilities. It may help to mention that it is a Semitic way of describing ‘preference’ (rather than ‘hatred’ as we understand it).

"A voice came from heaven..."

In Judaism there is a tradition that refers to the *bat kol* (Hebrew: ‘daughter of a voice’), a heavenly voice that speaks and is heard at pivotal moments in Jewish history, bringing divinely-inspired clarity. It is possible that the *bat kol* is invoked here by the author as the ‘voice from heaven’ (and elsewhere in the Synoptic Gospels where the Father’s voice is heard, e.g., at the Baptism of Jesus).

"When I am lifted up..."

The phrase “lifted up” is part of a process of illumination occurring in John’s Gospel, beginning with Jesus’ words to Nicodemus in John 3:14-15 (“And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”)

The Book of Numbers (21:4-9) contains a curious story set in the wilderness, where Moses lifts up (‘sets on a pole’) a bronze image of a serpent. By gazing upon the image, those who have been bitten by poisonous serpents are healed. The passage depicts a movement of healing and life, following affliction and death, and supports the double meaning of the Johannine expression “to lift up”: Jesus will be ‘lifted up’ on a cross and eventually ‘lifted up’ (exalted) by the Father in resurrection and ascension into glory.

Notes on the other readings

Jeremiah 31:31-34

The prophet speaks to the Israelites of a new covenant, and, true to the nature of a prophet, sharply criticises the failure of the people in their covenantal obligations.

Homilists can be cognizant that Old Testament passages like this have in the past been misused to champion 'good/faithful' Christianity over 'bad/unfaithful' Jews, rejected by God for their disobedience. Not only does this harm the Jewish people and contradict Catholic teaching (see below), but it contradicts the testimony of Scripture itself: the Lord God is eternally faithful to Israel (Jer 31:34), and so should we (Christians) be attentive to and respectful of the continuing vitality of God's covenant with the Jewish people, for "the Jews remain very dear to God, for the sake of the patriarchs, since God does not take back the gifts he bestowed or the choice he made" (Vatican II: *Nostra Aetate* 4; cf. Romans 11:28-29).

Hebrews 5:7-9

"During his life on earth, Christ offered up prayer and entreaty..." (v.7). Obvious as it may be, it is worth noting that Christ's life of prayer is exercised and offered in a thoroughly Jewish way; and it is this life of Jewish prayer that formed him as the One obedient to the Father unto death, as the One who became "the source of eternal salvation" (v.9).

Notable ecclesial texts

St Pope John Paul II

In 1980 Pope John Paul II gave an address at Mainz, Germany, where he acknowledged that the Jewish people are the people "of the Old Covenant, *never revoked* by God."

Then again, in the Year of the Great Jubilee 2000, standing on Mount Sinai, the Pope said: "But now on the heights of Sinai, this same God seals His love by making *the covenant that He will never renounce.*"

And in 1986, in an address to Jewish community leaders in Sydney, the Pope reiterated:

"For the Jewish people themselves, Catholics should have not only respect but also great fraternal love; for it is the teaching of both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures that the Jews are beloved of God who has called them with *an irrevocable calling.*"

Pope Francis

"We hold the Jewish people in special regard because their covenant with God has never been revoked, for 'the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable' (Rom 11:29)."

2013 Apostolic Exhortation: *Evangelii Gaudium*, 247.

Bibliography: : [Dialogika](#) online library maintained by the Council of Centres on Jewish-Christian Relations and the Institute for Jewish-Catholic Relations of Saint Joseph's University in Philadelphia; GK Beale and DA Carson, eds., *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 474-75; Anthony Kelly and Francis Moloney, *Experiencing God in the Gospel of John* (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2003), 255; Babylonian Talmud, English translation accessed online at www.sefaria.org; Murray Watson, homily notes, n.p.d.