

Second Sunday of Lent, Yr 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.

The Gospel of the Transfiguration

In Mark's account of the Transfiguration (9:2-10), on the high mountain where Jesus is transfigured in the presence of three of his disciples, we are told:

"Elijah appeared to them with Moses; and they were talking with Jesus" (Mk 9:4).

Christian commentators readily note that these two figures of the Old Testament, Moses and Elijah, represent the Law and the Prophets respectively. They are not two 'random' characters that appear out of nowhere. They have an honoured place in the biblical story. They are two 'greats' from the ancient, treasured story of God's covenantal love for Israel, and their presence evokes the memory of other biblical episodes – like the radiant Moses descending Mount Sinai with the decalogue (Ex 34:24); like Elijah's whirlwind ascent into heaven (2 Kgs 2:11). Together they provide a symbolic 'summing up' of the foundational pillars of Judaism. Their presence in this Gospel scene is powerful, yet also gentle and poignant, implying a little circle of intimacy as "they were talking with Jesus" (and that phrase alone is enough to draw us listeners into a midrashic wondering of what was being said – of which Luke's Gospel offers a hint).

It is worth dwelling on these connections between the 'Jesus story' of the Gospel and the framing story of Israel, as a dialogue between the two Testaments. There is an opportunity here to highlight how God's revelation in Jesus, and the glory manifested in this particular scene, takes place wholly in accordance with the Hebrew Scriptures, and in no way severs Jesus from his Scriptures or his people. The Gospel narrative couldn't make it more obvious. Yet, at times this point can be lost on Christian audiences in the homilist's understandable desire to emphasise the *uniqueness* of Jesus. After all, this Gospel draws us to glimpse his divinity, his divine Sonship; Peter's suggestion of building three tents (perhaps suggestive of Sukkot, the Festival of Booths) is upstaged by the divine voice that commands, "Listen to him". Jesus is revealed as the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets, his authority unsurpassed.

These are all important interpretative insights in our Christian tradition. And none of them need take away from the integrity of Jesus' Jewish identity and that of his disciples and of the narrative as a whole. Indeed, the Gospel presupposes and depends upon the truth of God's revelation in the Hebrew Scriptures, without which the New Testament would be unintelligible. Thus, the Catholic liturgy has us listen to the first reading from Genesis of the Sacrifice of Isaac (in Judaism: *Akedah*, the 'binding' of Isaac), before pondering the Transfiguration with its sombre conclusion pointing to the cross (v.9).

Food for thought, as we walk our Lenten journey, with respect for our Jewish spiritual heritage and love for our Jewish brothers and sisters.

Some notable ecclesial texts follow.

Directory for Catechesis

“The Old Testament is an integral part of the one Christian Bible, and the Church bears witness to her faith in the one God who is author of both Testaments, thus rejecting any presumed opposition between the two.”

2020 Directory for Catechesis, 348c

Pope Benedict XVI

“[W]e must not forget that the Old Testament retains its own inherent value as revelation, as our Lord himself reaffirmed (cf. Mk 12:29-31). Consequently, ‘the New Testament has to be read in the light of the Old. Early Christian catechesis made constant use of the Old Testament (cf. 1 Cor 5:6-8; 1 Cor 10:1-11)’. For this reason the Synod Fathers stated that ‘the Jewish understanding of the Bible can prove helpful to Christians for their own understanding and study of the Scriptures’.”

2010 Apostolic Exhortation: *Verbum Domini*, 41.

Second Vatican Council

“The plan of salvation foretold by the sacred authors, recounted and explained by them, is found as the true word of God in the books of the Old Testament: these books, therefore, written under divine inspiration, remain permanently valuable.”

Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, 14