

Fourth 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 First Reading: 2 Chronicles 36:14-16, 19-23

This reading presents an opportunity for the homilist to draw attention to the Babylonian exile, a critical turning point in the OT biblical narrative and a key event in salvation history.

Background: in 586 BCE the southern kingdom, Judah, was conquered by the Babylonians¹ (the northern kingdom having already been conquered by Assyria). The Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed and the prominent inhabitants of Judah were taken as captives to Babylon. Recall the lament of Psalm 136(137): “*By the Rivers of Babylon . . . there we wept when we remembered Zion*”. This devastating period of destruction, suffering and exile, might well have meant the end of ‘the Jews’ (as they came to be known) at the hands of the super-power Babylon. Yet, as the First Reading from 2 Chronicles tells us, several decades later, with the rise of the Persian kingdom, Cyrus the king of Persia allowed the exiles in Babylon to return to Judah to resettle in the land and rebuild the Temple.²

In the Hebrew Scriptures, the title *mashiach* (‘anointed one’, ‘messiah’) is applied to Cyrus. He is the catalyst for a chain of saving events for the Jewish people as they rebuild their lives, their society, their religion (we might ponder the thought that there would be no Jesus of Nazareth, no Christianity, if the Jewish people had disappeared in the mists of history).

Note: The final verses of this reading (vv. 19-23) are the final verses of the Jewish Bible, ending on a note of hope-filled expectation: hope in the end of the exile and the restoration of the people to their God-given land, and the opportunity to rebuild the Temple and their system of religious worship. Cyrus invokes “the Lord, the God of heaven” when he commands, “Whoever there is among you of all his people, may his God be with him! Let him *go up*.” To ‘go up’ to Jerusalem denotes both a geographical and spiritual ascent; the expression is found in Scripture, in Rabbinic tradition, and still in use today. When a Jew (in the diaspora) moves to Israel to live, he/she makes *Aliya* (meaning, ‘to go up’).

Why is it important for Christians to learn about these things? Briefly, it is important to our understanding of:

- Scripture, and the unity of the two Testaments.
- Jesus, and the Incarnation.
- The Jewish people, then and now.

Some points to highlight:

The biblical account of these events is not only relevant to Jewish history, it is part of the Christian Bible and an important chapter in our Christian ancestral faith-story. As Pope John Paul II reminded us, Jesus did not appear out of the blue “like a meteor that falls by chance to the earth. . . From her origins, the Church has well understood that the Incarnation is rooted in

¹ See 2 Kings 24-25.

² Cf. the Book of Ezra.

history and consequently, she has fully accepted Christ's insertion into the history of the People of Israel."

The great prophets we are accustomed to hearing in our lectionary—Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Isaiah—are prophets of the Babylonian exile.

Not only do we come to deeper knowledge of our own Scriptures, we are helped to better understand Judaism and the relevance of these Scriptures to the Jewish people today. E.g., every year on Tisha B'Av, Jewish communities hold a day of fasting and communal mourning in memory of the destruction of the Temple by the Babylonians in 586 BCE and by the Romans in 70 CE. On Tisha B'Av the Book of Lamentations is read.

By learning about the Babylonian exile, Christians are in a more informed position to grasp the story of Jesus and ponder the paschal mystery. To his followers, Jesus is recognised as the *Mashiach* (*Christos* in Greek). He is the liberating Messiah, the Christ, the One who inaugurates the Endtimes, the time of salvation (still unfolding in human history). Jesus' followers interpreted his death and resurrection against the weighty backdrop of Israel's Scriptures, with its already-existing thematic patterns of suffering and salvation, slavery and liberation, exile and return. The Babylonian exile is a key landmark in this 'bigger picture' (and appears as such in Matthew's genealogy (Mt 1:11-12) which opens the New Testament.

Notes on the Gospel: John 3:14-21

"The Son of Man must be lifted up as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him" (John 3:14).

The phrase "lifted up" will recur in John's Gospel as part of a gradual process of illumination; here it appears in Jesus' words to Nicodemus.

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 on 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 is 'lifted up' on a cross and later he is 'lifted up' by the Father in resurrection and ascension into glory.

The notes above offer examples by which Christian audiences can grow in awareness of the Jewish roots of their faith, and can understand more deeply why the Church discerns a permanent link with the Jewish people through a common Scripture.

Notable ecclesial texts

St Pope John Paul II

"Jesus' human identity is determined on the basis of his bond with the people of Israel, with the dynasty of David and his descent from Abraham. . . . To deprive Christ of his relationship with the Old Testament is therefore to detach him from his roots and to empty his mystery of all meaning. Indeed, to be meaningful, the Incarnation had to be rooted in centuries of preparation. Christ would otherwise have been like a meteor that falls by chance to the earth and is devoid of any connection with human history.

"From her origins, the Church has well understood that the Incarnation is rooted in history and consequently, she has fully accepted Christ's insertion into the history of the People of Israel."

Pope John Paul II, Address to Pontifical Biblical Commission, 11 April 1997.

LIGHT OF TORAH

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 . . .”

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.