

Sixth Sunday of Easter, 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. The readings follow the lectionary for Mass used in the Roman Catholic rite, in Australia.

Suggestions in view of the Jewish-Christian Dialogue

I. Acts 10:25-26, 34-35, 44-48

“God does not have favourites” (Acts 10:34).

Mindful of the intra-Jewish dimension of the debate, in this scene we hear Peter reminding his fellow Jews of God’s attributes as impartial judge (Deut 10:17-18). Note that Deut 10 does not deny the particular covenantal relationship between God and Israel but impresses that this relationship must support—not impede—care and justice for the marginalised (cf. Rom 2:10-11).

In Acts 10, Peter seems to be saying something similar. He is not denying God’s particular relationship with the Jewish people, but he insists that, given the new situation of Gentile faith in Jesus and the influx of Gentiles to the communities of Jesus’ disciples, the covenantal status quo has to be reimagined so that Gentile members do not find themselves facing unreasonable expectations that could impede their living of a new life reconciled with God.

Note that this view is very different to an (erroneous) interpretation that holds the Jewish covenant to be abolished in favour of a Gentile Church, or that sets up a simplistic opposition between ‘insular’ Judaism versus ‘universal/outreaching’ Christianity. Historically, Christianity is not yet clearly separated from Judaism as a religious entity in the first century CE. Theologically, the mystery of Israel remains to this day both distinct and profoundly linked (“intrinsic”) to the mystery of the Church (Rom 9:3-5; LG, 16; NA, 4; John Paul II, 1986 – see Ecclesial Texts below).

To sum up: to preach on this text, a homilist can affirm God’s covenantal embrace of the Gentiles while *also* affirming God’s continuing love for and irrevocable election of the Jewish people.

II. John 15:9-17

“Abide in my love” (Jn 15:9).

The language of ‘abiding’ in Jesus’ love, speaks of ‘remaining’, ‘dwelling’ in Jesus as the source of lifegiving, self-giving love. It implies an enduring, permanent relationship, withstanding all adversity, for its source is the mutual love between the Father and the Son.

How beautifully this Gospel builds upon, develops and extends the underlying theme of the entire Old Testament: the Lord God’s relentless love for and fidelity to the people of Israel, which is to be a blessing for all peoples. A tumultuous love story filled with human infidelities, the recurring message of the OT is that the Lord’s love is everlasting (Ps 136). In the NT Jesus is this divine love Incarnate; in and through him, salvation history is brought to a climactic point.

“If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love” (Jn 15:10).

The Gospel presumes the inseparability of *loving* God and being *obedient* to God’s ways. Obedience is not opposed to the ‘freedom’ of loving but enables it.

This principle is firmly embedded in Torah (e.g., Deut 30:16; Ps 119:54-55) and in Jewish tradition where ethical living is deemed integral to love of God. The latter point has at times been

LIGHT OF TORAH

misunderstood by Christians who have sweepingly regarded Judaism as a 'legalistic' religion in contrast to Jesus' call to love; hence the corrective offered by the CRRJ (see Ecclesial Texts below).

"... that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete" (Jn 15:11).

According to rabbinic thought, perfect joy would be possible only in the age to come, thus this verse can be interpreted as a reference to the messianic age and to Jesus' identity as Messiah.

"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." (Jn 15:12).

"Commandment" here is singular, suggesting the unity of loving Jesus and loving "one another".

"I have called you friends" (Jn 15:15).

Only Abraham and Moses are given the title 'friends of God' in the OT. In other Jewish literature the title is applied to Isaac, Jacob, Levi, Israelites and students of Torah. "Here Jesus extends the same privilege of friendship to all believers, predicated on their obedience to his commands." (Beale and Carson, p.493)

"You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit..." (Jn 15:16).

Friendship entails a responsibility. Jesus' "friends" are chosen for service. The term "appointed" (*tithēmi*) is possibly a Semitic expression; it or similar is found in God's election of Abraham (Gen 17:5), the ordination of Levites (Num 8:10) and the commissioning of Joshua (Num 27:18).

III. The 'love language' of John 15 and the vision of *Nostra Aetate*, 4

This Sunday's Gospel finds particular resonance within the frame of the Church's post-conciliar commitment to Jewish-Christian reconciliation.

Being Jewish, Jesus' life and message reflected his 'dwelling' or 'being at home' in the ancestral traditions of the children of Abraham. To be a Jew is to be a member of the Jewish people; this was true no less for Jesus of Nazareth. When Jesus speaks of "my love", while universal in reach, we know it arises from the heart of a Jew, in a familial relationship with other Jews.

In keeping with the biblical testimony, the Second Vatican Council recognised God's *irrevocable* calling of God's beloved people, Israel (Rom 11:28-19; LG, 16; NA, 4). To this day, the Jewish people continue to abide in God's love, knowing that God is unceasingly faithful to God's covenant with them. From a salvation history perspective, we might say they are 'God's first love' (cf. Rom 2:10; Jn 4:22), the people of "a jealous God" (Deut 4:24), from whom God refuses to be separated.

If God refuses to be separated from his people, Israel, then Jesus must be that divine-love-for-Israel Incarnate, through whom God loves the whole world (cf. 1 Jn 4:16). And if Jesus is this, then his particular love for Israel must be imitated by the Church, in genuine affection and not simply theological abstraction. If God regards the descendants of Abraham as 'beloved' and loves them with an 'irrevocable' love, then how can Christians not also be in love with the Jewish people?

When our Christian ears hear the "abide in me" love language of John's Gospel, we are usually sensitive to our call to love and be loved by God (Father, Son, Spirit). We are usually attentive of the challenge to love our families and our faith community, to stay connected to our Church, and to extend our love to our neighbour and all people, indeed, all creation. The challenge posed in a post-*Nostra Aetate* church is: Do we also hear how deeply Jesus loves his own Jewish kin, of whom he was (is) a son? And are we prepared to imitate the divine love for the Jewish people?

"Whoever wishes to be united to God, must also love them [the Jewish people]." – Pontifical Biblical Commission (2001).

Notable Ecclesial Texts

Second Vatican Council

“There is, first, that people to whom the covenants and promises were made, and from whom Christ was born according to the flesh (cf. Rom. 9:4-5): in view of the divine choice, they are a people most dear for the sake of the fathers, for the gifts of God are without repentance (cf. Rom 11:28-29).”

Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, 16.

“As the sacred synod searches into the mystery of the Church, it remembers the bond that spiritually ties the people of the New Covenant to Abraham’s stock.

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

St Pope John Paul II

“The Church of Christ discovers its ‘links’ with Judaism ‘by pondering its own mystery’ (see *Nostra Aetate*, 4). The Jewish religion is not ‘extrinsic’ to us, but in a certain manner, it is ‘intrinsic’ to our religion. We have therefore a relationship with it which we do not have with any other religion.”

Address, Great Synagogue of Rome, 1986.

“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.”

Address, Sydney, Australia, 1986.

Pope Francis

“The inseparable bond that unites Christians and Jews is theologically clear. Christians, in order to understand themselves, cannot fail to refer to their Jewish roots, and the Church, while professing salvation through faith in Christ, recognises the irrevocability of the Old Covenant and God’s unfailing, steadfast love for Israel.”

Address, Great Synagogue of Rome, 2016

Pontifical Biblical Commission (PBC)

“Whoever wishes to be united to God, must also love them [the Jewish people].

“[A]n attitude of respect, esteem and love for the Jewish people is the only truly Christian attitude.”

The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible, 86-87.

Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews (CRRJ)

“The Old Testament and the Jewish tradition must not be set against the New Testament in such a way that the former seems to constitute a religion of only justice, fear and legalism, with no appeal to the love of God and neighbor (cf. Dt. 6:5; Lv. 19:18; Mt. 22:34-40).”

“*Guidelines*” (1974), II, III

Bibliography: Beale and Carson, eds., *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007); Levine and Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, rev. ed. (Oxford University Press, 2017); [Dialogika](http://www.dialogika.org) online library of documentation of the Jewish-Christian dialogue.