

## Christian Anti-Semitism – Trinity 11 2023

Isaiah 56 vv 1-8 p742, Romans 11 vv 1-32 p1137, Matthew 15 vv 21-28 p982

Christian anti-Semitism is both terrible and extraordinary. It is terrible that Christians should persecute anybody, people of any race or religion, and yet we have; we have persecuted even our fellow Christians. The pages of history are stained with the blood of the victims of Christian prejudice and intolerance. The Nazi Holocaust was simply the worst example of millennia of anti-Semitic atrocities. Shameful attacks on Jews, their religion, their culture and their heritage continue in the modern world.

It is deeply shocking that Christians should be prominent among the persecutors, but it is also extraordinary that prominent among the victims of Christian intolerance should be the Jews. Read the Bible. Nearly all of the characters in the New Testament are Jews. The Old Testament is not only the ancient story of the Israelites but also the foundation for the New Testament. Jesus was a Jew. All the apostles were Jews. Paul, the great apostle to the Gentiles, was himself a Jew and he is on record writing, “For I could wish that myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh: Who are Israelites.” It grieves Paul deeply that so many of the Jews have not yet recognised the truth of the Gospel. He would rather be lost himself than that the Israelites, his fellow Jews, should not be included in the New Covenant. Without the Old Covenant, there would be no New Covenant. Paul goes on, referring to his brothers, “Who are Israelites; to whom pertaineth the adoption, and the glory, and the covenants, and the giving of the law, and the service of God, and the promises; Whose are the fathers, and of whom as concerning the flesh Christ came, who is over all, God blessed for ever, Amen. No Jews, no Christians; no Israel no Church.

So how did it come about that the Christian Church so hated the Jewish people? Actually, anti-Semitism is not confined to Christians. Many people, of various religions and no religion at all, have an irrational dislike and distrust of the Jews. Why should this be? In the Book of Esther, hundreds of years before Jesus was born, the evil Haman a prominent member of the Persian court, incited King Ahasuerus to exterminate all the Jews living within his dominions – two and a half thousand years before Hitler came up with the same idea. Why this hatred of the Jews?

I suggest two possible explanations. One is that the Jews were different. They had their own customs, their own laws. They didn't mix with other people. They were the chosen people and they had received God's Law on Mt Sinai. The Jews lived by higher standards than the people among whom they dwelt. The Israelites were not idolaters. They were not licentious. They were modest and moderate in their habits. They were honest. They were just. Of course, any reader of the Bible is aware that they did not always live up to these high standards – any more than we do – but, nevertheless, they knew the rules and, deep down inside, they knew how the rules should and could be obeyed. So Moses tells the Israelites on the eve of their entry into the Promised Land: “For what nation is there so great, who hath God so nigh unto them, as the Lord our God is in all things that we call upon him for? And what nation is there so great, that hath statutes and judgments so righteous as all this law, which I set before you this day?” In order to keep the Law, the Israelites had to maintain a separation from the idolatrous Gentiles – a distance which got under the skin of their neighbours.

Could it be that we Christians have become too complacent in failing to distinguish ourselves from the 21<sup>st</sup> century western world in which we live. St Paul warned the Corinthians: “Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of God.” One of the reasons the Romans persecuted the early Church was because we, like the Jews, stood out as different from them.

Another reason why the Jews were disliked by many was that some of them rose to positions of power and prosperity. They were honest and diligent in business and they earned the trust of powerful people. Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego prospered under the Babylonian and Persian kings and were promoted to high office and, as a result, became victims of the jealousy of lesser men. Down through the ages, Jewish businesses have often done well both because they have been run wisely and because of an ethos of taking care of one another in the family and in the community at large. It is far from true, however, to suggest that all Jews are wealthy. There are and always have been many poor Jewish people. Both Moses and Jesus teach that the poor will always be with us – and that we should do good to them! Jewish involvement with money lending has often been resented as money lenders very often are despised. But there are two sides to that story. Even in Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice*, the debtor Antonio has borrowed recklessly. Should the money lender always be expected to take the loss when a debtor can’t or won’t pay?

There are, however, also specific reasons for Christians persecuting the Jews. One is that, in the early days, the Jews persecuted us. But that’s no reason for us to persecute the Jews in subsequent generations. Jesus told us to pray for those who persecute us. And we’ve already heard what Paul thought. He was himself often the victim of Jewish opposition to his preaching, but he said, “I could wish that myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh.” The fact that we Christians know what it means to be persecuted ought to mean that we would never persecute anybody. Would that that were so!

According to the Gospel accounts of the Crucifixion, the Jews, specifically the Pharisees, bear a heavy responsibility for the death of Jesus. Some Christians today try to tone down or even omit these passages from the Passion Gospel. But this is dishonest. The Bible is the Word of God and it says what it says. What we need to remember is that we are all responsible for the Crucifixion of Jesus. He died for all human beings. He died for you and He died for me. We are all sinners. The Jews who handed Him over to Pontius Pilate and cried, “Crucify Him! Crucify Him” are no more culpable for the Crucifixion than we are. He died for them just as much as He died for us. His Death is *a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction, for the sins of the whole world.*

When we read the Old Testament, time and time again, we read about the faithlessness of the Israelites. They fail to trust God’s promises. They disobey the Law. They disregard the prophets. They even abuse and kill God’s messengers to them. So Jesus says (to all the

Jews perhaps and certainly to their leaders), “Therefore I say unto you, The kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof.” So, we might complacently and arrogantly conclude that the Jews had had their chance and blown it and that now it is the turn of us Gentiles. But read the Bible. Everything that happened from the Creation of the Universe up to the Birth, Death and Resurrection of Jesus was all part of God’s plan for the redemption of the whole of humanity. It was all meant to happen – everything that happened in the Old Testament and in the New, Christ’s Birth, Crucifixion and Resurrection. By these means, the way was prepared for the coming of the Holy Spirit and the fulfilment of all God’s purposes in time and eternity. Israel’s failures in both Old and New Testament times are warnings to us. We are not here to judge, still less to condemn, the Jews. Reading about what went wrong in biblical times, we ought to be asking ourselves whether we are faithful to God, whether we are keeping His Commandments, how we are responding to His Word. As we heard in today’s reading from Romans, if disobedient Jews can lose their place in God’s Kingdom, so can disobedient Gentile Christians. God’s ultimate plan is that we should all be one in His Kingdom – *neither Jew nor Greek, neither bond nor free, neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.*

**L**ORD, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace : according to thy word.

For mine eyes have seen : thy salvation,

Which thou hast prepared : before the face of all people;

To be a light to lighten the Gentiles : and to be the glory of thy people Israel.

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost; As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

