

WEEK 5

'The Crucified Jew'

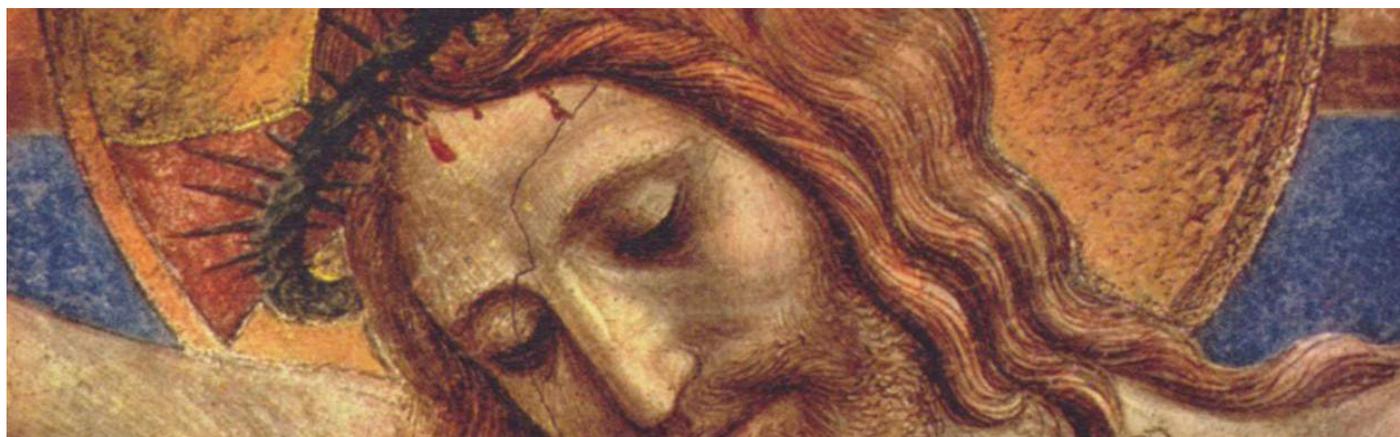


Image: Fra Angelico (Yorck Project)

Our journey thus far has taken us to some remarkable places: we have explored fasting, detachment and the remembrance of God's name. We have reflected upon Christian faith through the experiences of those with a deep engagement with Buddhism, Islam and Sikhism. Although there are many other faiths we could have chosen there is one that has a particularity to our journey: Judaism. In this penultimate week of Lent we are bringing our journey home, not only to the central drama of the Christian faith to which we will turn in Holy Week, but home to the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Soon after the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, legal authorities were petitioned by a number of Christians living in Israel asking whether the new Jewish State might correct a miscarriage of justice and offer a pardon to the man crucified almost 2,000 years ago. The accusation that the Jews were responsible for the trial and execution of Jesus has been staple of anti-Semitic language throughout the centuries. St. John Chrysostom stated that the Jews were banished from Palestine for eternity because they had crucified Jesus, and St. Augustine wrote that their banishment reinforced Jewish falsehood and Christian truth.

A curious myth grew up amongst Christians of Europe, that of the Wandering Jew. This myth told of a Jew who taunted Jesus on his way to Calvary and, as punishment, was banished from Jerusalem and the Holy Land, to wander eternally throughout history. In some respects this was a reworking of ancient Germanic and Norse pre-Christian religion where Wotan, estranged from Valhalla, wanders eternally the earth in search of redemption. Such was the power of the Wandering Jew, many believed it

to be literally true and sightings were claimed all over Europe! The 'Wandering Jew' encapsulates the enmity between Jews and Christians and the blame of the entire Jewish people for the crucifixion of Jesus.

Consider this passage from Matthew's Gospel:

'Now at the festival the governor was accustomed to release a prisoner for the crowd, anyone whom they wanted. At that time they had a notorious prisoner, called Jesus Barabbas. So after they had gathered, Pilate said to them, 'Whom do you want me to release for you, Jesus Barabbas or Jesus who is called the Messiah?' For he realized that it was out of jealousy that they had handed him over. While he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent word to him, 'Have nothing to do with that innocent man, for today I have suffered a great deal because of a dream about him.' Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus killed. The governor again said to them, 'Which of the two do you want me to release for you?' And they said, 'Barabbas.' Pilate said to them, 'Then what should I do with Jesus who is called the Messiah?' All of them said, 'Let him be crucified!' Then he asked, 'Why, what evil has he done?' But they shouted all the more, 'Let him be crucified!'. So when Pilate saw that he could do nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took some water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, 'I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves.' Then the people as a whole answered, 'His blood be on us and on our children!' So he released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified.' (Matthew 27.15-26)

It is clear from everything that we know about Roman forms of execution and Roman rule that Jesus was executed by Roman edict. Yet the old accusation can still be found in our liturgies and hymns. No less than Sydney Carter's much loved 'Lord of the Dance' states:

'I danced on the Sabbath and I cured the lame:
The holy people said it was a shame.
They whipped and they stripped
and they hung me on high,
And they left me there on a cross to die'

In Jewish-Christian relations there is plenty of common ground to explore – reading together the Hebrew Scriptures/Old Testament or discussions about festivals and how the Christian festivals relate to Jewish ones. But then there are the difficult and painful issues: some of the language of the New Testament is painful for Jews because it is so closely associated with centuries of anti-Semitism. The Holocaust survivor and writer Elie Wiesel (1928-2016) painfully observed 'they love the Jew on the cross: if he is not there, well they can oblige'.

Good Friday is the holiest day in the Christian year. Throughout the world Christians attempt to enter more deeply into the events surrounding the betrayal, arrest, trial and execution of Jesus of Nazareth. Yet one of the stumbling blocks for me and for many others is the language in the New Testament that refers negatively to 'the Jews'. In a bygone age when the 'blood libel' was openly preached from European pulpits, these words would have seemed unremarkable, and proof of the charges leveled against Jewish people, with terrible consequences. Has this 'blood libel' been finally laid to rest after more than half a century of Jewish-Christian dialogue?

Do the words of the New Testament such as 'let his blood be on us and on our children' make everyone in our churches wince?

'If I am honest I am troubled that we might be in danger of rolling backwards down the hill. Some people tell me that we have already started to roll back down the hill. They point to what the churches are saying on Israel-Palestine that appear to blame Jews rather than Israelis for the suffering or to the references made by Palestinian Christians that self-identify their own suffering with that of Christ.'

But is this a rolling back down, or a moving up the hill in a new and different way?

There are dangers here – we can easily fall back into

blaming 'the Jews' for the plight of Christians in the Middle East. Yet it is an ancient part of Christian spirituality to self-identify with Christ amidst our own sufferings. The Christians of Gaza and the West Bank are no different in this respect to those enslaved by the transatlantic slave trade who frequently identified with the Israelites enslaved in Egypt or Babylon. However, as we witness events in the Middle East, what will save us from rolling back into the darkest of times? Perhaps a continual reaffirmation of some of the theological principles established since the end of the Holocaust. 'Nostra Aetate', the declaration that emerged from the Second Vatican Council, affirmed the unique relationship of the Jewish people to the Church. The Reformed Swiss theologian Karl Barth stated unequivocally that God's election is extended equally to the Jewish people and to the Church, and as such declared anti-Semitism as a denial of God's grace. And more recently Pope John Paul II stated that God's covenant with Israel has never been revoked. Recognising this unique relationship between Judaism and Christianity may make the contemporary context in the Middle East more painful for us, but it should also mean that walking away from it is simply an act of faithlessness to the God of Abraham.

Questions for discussion

1. Discuss your own reactions when you read the passion stories in the Gospels?
2. How would you respond to the charge that the New Testament has sometimes encouraged anti-Semitism?
3. Do you think that Christians have a special relationship to the Jewish people?

Prayer

God of the eternal Covenant,
We praise you for Jesus Christ, our Jewish brother,
Whose suffering, death and resurrection save us
from the darkness of this world.
As we approach this most holiest of weeks,
May we be humble in our meditation and prayers,
And penitent for our participation in all that is
sinful in the world.
Heal us by your grace, and set us free to be
your people.
We offer this prayer in the name of the one who
died because God so loved the world.
Amen.