

Dear Friends,

I was once given an unusual and intriguing gift, a book called the *Jewish New Testament*. That sounds like a contradiction in terms, as for us the New Testament is the Christian Scriptures, it is the Old Testament which is the Jewish Scriptures. This version was made by someone who is a member of the group known as Messianic Jews, those who remain with the Jewish fold and practise the religion, but agree that Jesus is the Jewish Messiah – something which orthodox Jews would not be able to accept. The author wanted to bring out what he calls the essential Jewishness of the New Testament writings, and does so mostly in two ways: using only Hebrew forms of names and translating any specifically Christian terms into the Jewish equivalents. So, for example, Jesus Christ is always Yeshua the Messiah, Mary is Miryam, the Holy Spirit is the Ruach-ha-Kodesh, John the Baptist is Yochanaan the Immerser, and so on. I do not use this book often, but when I do I find it a fascinating experience and one which gives a great sense of the history and traditions from which Jesus came.

One can only be born in this world at a specific time and in a specific place, and it is no accident that Jesus was born in 1st century Palestine into the Jewish religion. God had been preparing his birth through the long centuries of the history of his chosen people, to which Jesus belonged. He and his first followers were all Jews, they practised the Jewish religion, they were steeped in its traditions, its rituals and festivals. The book of Acts records the apostles going to the Temple in Jerusalem for the regular times of prayer, while at home they celebrated an early form of what became the distinctive Christian act of worship, the Eucharist or Mass.

I sometimes think that if the Christian religion had stuck closer to its Jewish roots we might have been spared influences which came in from elsewhere, but which do not really accord with our beliefs. It was, for instance, the Greek philosopher Plato who believed that our task in life is to dissociate the immortal soul from the physical body so that it can be free to soar up to a higher spiritual realm, which alone according to him is truly real. This idea has undoubtedly had a large appeal in Christianity, but it contradicts our belief in creation and incarnation: God creates the world and everything in it to be good and is born into it as a human person to restore it to union with himself. It is only as embodied persons living in the physical world that we can know God here and now, and our belief is not in an immortal soul which survives the dissolution of the body, but in the resurrection of the whole person – body, soul, spirit in one.

Our Christian faith is certainly in its origins an offshoot of Judaism, so that the Old Testament Scriptures and history continue to be important for us as they were for

Jesus himself. He would have been well familiar with the message in the first reading of this Sunday's Mass, from the second book of Chronicles – that the constant rejection by God's people of those he sent to them as his prophets (those who speak the word of God) led to the greatest imaginable disaster – expulsion from their God-given homeland and exile to pagan Babylon, together with the destruction of the Temple and the holy city. Not that God engineers bad things to happen in our lives, but rather that our actions carry their own consequences within them. It was Jeremiah the sorrowful prophet who said, 'Until this land has enjoyed its sabbath rest, until seventy years have gone by, it will keep sabbath throughout the days of its desolation.'

And so it proved. Against all odds the people were able to return to their home and rebuild the city and temple when Babylon gave way to the dominance of the Persians, whose emperor Cyrus acted as God's agent in this restoration. God, as we know, moves in mysterious ways – never more mysterious than here. This reading has perhaps a particular message for us today in our situation. We *can* live through and outface even the worst of disasters: they will not last for ever, and we can continue to have faith that God is always at work and bringing us through all our hardships and difficulties to ever greater knowledge of his unfailing love. For the present it is for us to keep the sabbath through the days of our desolation.

Jesus would have known well the history of his people and the example of Jeremiah, the prophet who was rejected and shamefully treated for bringing to them a word they did not want to hear. That example was very much with him through his own rejection and the dark days of his passion.

Last Sunday we saw Jesus clearing the traders and their animals out of the temple, another of the actions that made him unpopular with the religious leaders of his day. As we have seen many times, the teachers of the law whom we call Pharisees came in for his severest criticism for substituting the letter of the law for its spirit, but it was a sympathetic Pharisee, Nicodemus, who came to Jesus after this episode to learn from him because, as he said, 'Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.' Nicodemus came by night, we are told, perhaps because it was dangerous for him to consort openly with the trouble-maker. He reappears at the end of St. John's Gospel to assist Joseph of Arimathea in burying Jesus, providing the expensive spices and ointments needed to anoint his body.

The conversation with Nicodemus carries on in St. John's Gospel from last week's excerpt. It moves in depths that Nicodemus cannot always fathom, but it also

contains one of the clearest and, I think, most important sayings in the whole of Scripture that we hear this Sunday:

*God so loved the world that he gave his only Son,
so that everyone who believes in him may not perish,
but may have eternal life.
Indeed God did not send the Son into the world
to condemn the world,
but in order that the world might be saved through him.*

God does not need to condemn, for people condemn themselves by the way they behave, showing that they prefer darkness to light. His concern is only to save, to bring them back to himself, and this is the whole purpose of Jesus becoming human, being born to suffer, die and to be raised again – so that all human beings may know the love of God and move beyond everything that keeps us away from God to return to him.

As we continue our journey through the season of Lent (the spring-time), by our prayer, fasting and almsgiving we hope to draw ever closer to God so that we can rejoice in his gift of new life in the glory of the risen Lord at Easter.

Wishing you every blessing,

Fr. Robin

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P.S. St. John's Gospel features prominently in the liturgy of Lent and Eastertide. A book about this Gospel which I have found rewarding and return to regularly is *Water into Wine*, by Stephen Verney. If you would like to some reading to accompany you at this time I can much recommend this book, available from Amazon.