

Dear Friends,

I was once given a book with an intriguing title, the *Jewish New Testament*. That sounds like a contradiction in terms. For us the New Testament is the Christian Scriptures, while the Jewish Scriptures are the Hebrew Bible, what we call the Old Testament, the only Scriptures Christ himself knew. This version was made a member of the group known as Messianic Jews, those who acknowledge Jesus as the Jewish Messiah (which orthodox Jews would not do), but stay within the ambit of the Jewish faith and do not subscribe to the Christian religion.

The translator wanted to bring out what he says is the essential Jewishness of the New Testament, which he does in two main ways - using only Hebrew forms of names (Paul is always Sha'ul, Mary is Miryam, Jesus himself is Yeshua and so on), and translating any specifically Christian terms back into their Jewish equivalents: e.g. baptism is immersion, which was a Jewish rite, and John the Baptist is Yokanaan the Immerser!

I do not use this book often, but I find when I do that it gives a great sense of what is after all the Jewish context in which our Christian faith arose, which we can easily forget. Jesus and his first disciples were all Jews. They observed the Jewish law and kept the festivals, Passover and the rest. They went to the temple for the set prayers and met in their homes 'to break bread,' that is to celebrate what became the characteristic Christian form of worship, the Eucharist.

One can only be born in this world at a specific time and in a specific place, a time and place which have their particular background and history in culture and religion; and it is of course no accident that Jesus was born into the Jewish religious world of the 1st century B.C. This was the setting in which God chose to make himself known in special ways. He had always been at work in the cosmos, but now he made himself known in the history of one chosen race of people, and he had been at work in the history of this people over many centuries, preparing them and us for the definitive revelation of his nature in the person of Jesus.

The Old Testament has many stories of how God related to his people and how they responded to his choice of them to be his people, not always edifying stories, but always personal and deeply human. The new dimension that the Christian revelation introduced was that God was present in one man from this people, so fully interfused with his human being that he can be called *the* Son of God, whose life and actions not only teach us about God, but enact God's desire for all his people - that everyone is called to know God in himself and be united with God as fully, as completely as Christ is. There is I think little in what Jesus says about God that is not already contained in the teaching of the great Hebrew prophets, but what Jesus *does* for us as the Son of God - this is new and unprecedented in Jewish belief. This is why they found it so difficult to accept him as the Messiah, that what he does goes far beyond their accepted religious ways of thinking: the Messiah could never possibly be made to suffer such an ignominious death; no human person could ever return from the dead.

This is what the Christian way of faith invites us to believe, that God who is the all-powerful, all-loving creator of all that is cares about his creation so much that he is willing to give

himself completely in his human self, the man Jesus, in order to restore our right relationship with him. Incarnation, God becoming human, is at the heart of Christian faith, and it also gives a new perspective to what was already accepted in Jewish belief, that God is present in and can work through the things of this created world in order to communicate his love and his will for us. There were Jewish rituals of immersion in water to cleanse and purify, but Christian baptism goes further in saying that this cleansing immerses us into the very life of Christ himself, enabling us to die and be reborn as he was.

Nevertheless, it is good to be reminded of the roots from which we come, which can often help us to understand better the meaning of our own rituals and practices. I also think that if Christianity had remained closer to its Jewish origins it might have been saved some of the misguided ways of thinking that developed later from contact with the pagan Greek world of antiquity - but that is another story!

In this Sunday's Gospel reading here is a tiny detail which reminds us of the sacramental aspect of our faith, that God's grace, an inward spiritual essence, is shown in outward physical terms. The story in St. Mark of the restoration to life of Jairus's daughter is given in two parts, framing another account of healing. A woman who had long been suffering a painful complaint worked her way through the crowd gathered around Jesus in order to touch his cloak. "If I can touch even his clothes," she had told herself, "I shall be well again." The account in St. Matthew's Gospel of this episode gives more illuminating detail. What the woman touches is the fringe of Jesus' robe, in Hebrew *tzitzit*, which has a special religious significance.

In the book of Numbers God tells Moses, 'Speak to the Israelites, and tell them to make fringes on the corners of their garments throughout their generations and to put a blue cord on the fringe at each corner. You have the fringe so that, when you see it, you will remember all the commandments of the Lord and do them, and you shall be holy to your God.' For Jewish people God's gift to them of the Law is the sign of their being his chosen people, and their keeping of the Law is what enables them to be holy, as God is holy. So the woman touches the holiest part of Jesus' garments, the outward sign of God's presence in him, because she knows that the holiness of God is what can heal her. 'Your faith has restored you to health,' he says to her; 'go in peace and be free from your complaint.'

As human beings we are flesh and blood, material creatures living in a material world, but that world is given life by the inward Spirit of God at the heart of creation, and through material things we can know God's Spirit in specific ways and given to us for specific purposes: the water of baptism to immerse us in the life-giving death and resurrection of Christ, the bread and wine of the Eucharist to become the very life of God in Christ that sustains us with his life, blessed oil to heal our sicknesses, the laying on of hands to confirm the gift of the Spirit and transmit to us God's forgiveness.

The book of Wisdom, in this Sunday's first reading at Mass, reminds us that we are made in the image of God's own nature. In our human selves we are the visible sign of God's creating love, and through our lives in the world God will continue to bless us and draw us ever closer to him, using the things of this world to do so, so that in time we may come to be united with him totally, perfectly.

A prayer in the Mass, not usually heard, as it is directed to be said quietly by the priest at the altar, says: 'By the mystery of this water and wine may we come to share the divinity of Christ, who humbled himself to share in our humanity.' This expresses exactly the twofold nature of our faith, belief in Incarnation and in the Sacraments: God entering fully into our human material world and using the things of that world to draw us to himself. As the early Church put it, starkly and dramatically:

*GOD BECAME HUMAN, SO THAT HUMAN BEINGS MAY BECOME GOD.*

Wishing you every blessing, Fr. Robin.