

Year B: 4th Sunday Ordinary Time

These Teaching Tips offer brief pointers for avoiding unintended anti-Jewish bias and for highlighting positive observations about Judaism which might otherwise go unnoticed.

Gospel: Mark 1:21-28

“when the Sabbath came, Jesus entered the synagogue and taught” (Mk 1:21)

Three key words here: Sabbath. Synagogue. Taught.

This verse provides an opportunity to draw a congregation’s attention to an important element of Catholic teaching with respect to Jesus’ Jewish identity:

Whilst Jesus’ teachings created controversy at times in certain circles, he remained a faithful, observant Jew, who frequented the synagogue on the Sabbath and participated in the liturgical practice of reading from the Torah and the prophets. (‘The imperfect tense of the verb probably indicates repeated or habitual action in the past, suggesting that Jesus regularly went to the synagogue on the Sabbath’ - Murray Watson).

Further, the verse above indicates that he was respected within his Jewish community as a teacher of biblical texts as part of the Sabbath service. It does not tell us *what* he taught that day, but that he was accepted as an authority in the context of Jewish liturgical life.

By helping a congregation to be attuned to Jesus’ Jewish identity, they will be less likely to misunderstand those passages where Jesus is depicted in conflict with other Jews. These are intra-Jewish debates. Jesus does not stand ‘outside’ or ‘against’ his own Jewish tradition, but remains an ‘insider’ to the end.

The above observation from Scripture could be reinforced with reference to Pope John Paul II’s words:

Jesus’ human identity is determined on the basis of his bond with the people of Israel, with the dynasty of David and his descent from Abraham. And this does not mean only a physical belonging. By taking part in the synagogue celebrations where the Old Testament texts were read and commented upon, Jesus also came humanly to know these texts; he nourished his mind and heart with them, using them in prayer and as an inspiration for his actions. Thus he became an authentic son of Israel, deeply rooted in his own people’s long history. (John Paul II, Address to Pontifical Biblical Commission, 11 April 1997).

Vatican documents of the Jewish-Catholic dialogue make a similar point. For example:

Jesus was and always remained a Jew . . . It should be noted also that Jesus often taught in the Synagogues (cf. Mt 4:23; 9:35; Lk 4:15-18; Jn 18:20 etc.) and in the Temple (cf. Jn 18:20 etc.), which he frequented as did the disciples even after the Resurrection (cf. e.g., Acts 2:46; 3:1: 21:26 etc.). He wished to put in the context of synagogue worship the proclamation of his Messiahship (cf. Lk 4:16-21). (Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, ‘Notes on the correct way to present the Jews and Judaism in preaching and catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church’, 1985, III. 1-3)

“Fully and completely human, a Jew of his time, descendant of Abraham, son of David, shaped by the whole tradition of Israel, heir of the prophets, Jesus stands in continuity with his people and its history.” (Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, “Gifts and Calling”, 2015, n.14)

Bibliography: *Bridges: Documents of the Christian-Jewish Dialogue*, vol. 2, edited by Franklin Sherman, New York: Paulist Press, 2014; Murray Watson (Canadian Catholic biblical scholar), homily notes, private circulation.