

Third Sunday of Lent, Yr B

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

In this Sunday's Gospel (John 2:13-25), Jesus overturns tables in righteous anger and speaks of the destruction of the Temple. John's Gospel, if dated in the 90s, would be emerging two decades after the events of the Temple's actual destruction by the Romans in 70 CE.

The interpretative complexities associated with this Gospel abound. For example, commentators speculate: what might have provoked Jesus' anger? Was it a protest against business transactions occurring within a sacred space? Was he objecting to fraudulent money-changing practices infiltrating an otherwise legitimate enterprise supporting the Temple and its pilgrims? Was it that the Temple system, legitimate in itself as a house of worship, had become compromised by other interests of a political nature, becoming a symbol of prestige, power, wealth (and associated corruption)? Or is it best to stay focused on Jesus' action as prophetic and symbolic in a messianic sense, pointing to his own person as the focus of divine presence in place of the (now destroyed) Temple? Historical background, memories of Jesus, biblical allusions, theological interpretation, pastoral concerns of the Johannine community . . . all come into play in this text.

Whatever the homiletic direction taken, here are a few things to avoid, and to include, in order to ensure that Judaism is not denigrated, but is respected, in accord with contemporary Church teaching on Jewish-Christian relations.

Avoid any suggestion that Jesus and the disciples are "Christians" in opposition to "the Jews" described in the Gospel. Remember that Jesus and the disciples are also Jews! John's use of the phrase "the Jews" in this Gospel is much discussed by scholars; it should be handled carefully so as not to invoke historical inaccuracies which then feed into anti-Jewish stereotyping.

Include positive mention that Jesus' ministry is at home within the religious setting of Judaism, in this case the season of the Passover festival. Point out that Jesus has come to Jerusalem to partake in the Temple prayers and rituals as an observant Jewish pilgrim, as was his custom according to John's Gospel. That he "went up" (a geographical and spiritual ascent) to Jerusalem is an expression found in Scripture, in Rabbinic tradition, and still in use today (Hebrew: *Aliya*).

Avoid depicting Jesus as the sole critic of Temple-related issues. Remind listeners that Judaism has a tradition of Temple critique (e.g., Jer 7:1-15; 35:2-10; Ezek 10:18-19; the Essene community), and that the Temple at the time of Jesus was situated in a politically tense society due to Roman occupation. Many Jews viewed the Temple leadership as compromised in its dealings with the Roman authorities. Jesus would not have been alone among Jews in a critique of the Temple system *as it was at the time*. However, this does not mean Jesus was against the Temple *per se*. [By way of analogy: many Catholics today are critics of *clericalist* tendencies in the church, but this does not mean they are against the Catholic *priesthood*.]

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Include positive mention that where the disciples are said to have “believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken” (v.22), the Scripture referred to here is the Torah, and Jesus’ authoritative “word” is anchored in Israel’s Scriptures (e.g., Commentators cite verses from Jeremiah 7:11, Psalm 69:9 and Zechariah 14:21 as they explore this Gospel.)

Avoid any subtle undermining of the Temple or suggesting that Jesus willed its destruction. Although there is a long Christian history of interpreting this passage as the demise of Judaism and the substitution of Christianity, today we recognise that this view is an oversimplification of the interpretative complexities. It is not supported by Catholic teachings that have flowed from the Second Vatican Council which repeatedly affirm the spiritual resilience and vitality of Jewish life post-70 CE and the “never revoked” status of God’s covenant with Israel. It is unnecessary and unhelpful to ‘downgrade’ the Jewish Temple or to treat it in a dismissive manner in order to proclaim the radical significance of Jesus according to Christian faith. To do so undermines Jewish tradition and dismisses a central element of Jesus’ own life of prayer and worship as a Jew by which he expressed his relationship with his heavenly Father.

Include mention that John’s Gospel depicts Jesus’ life as a faithful Jew who engaged in Temple worship. (According to Acts 2:46 Jesus’ followers continued to frequent the Temple after his death and resurrection.) Prominent scholars (e.g., E.P. Sanders) have noted that Jesus’ words about the Temple’s destruction and rebuilding lie comfortably within the framework of Jewish eschatological expectations of his day (e.g., 1 Enoch 90:28-29). Whilst John’s Gospel can be read as presenting Jesus as having authority over the Temple, and whilst Jesus may be critiquing practices relating to the Temple, this should not lead to a negative perception of the Temple *per se*, much less a deprecation of Jews and Judaism in the Christian mindset.

It may be helpful here to remind listeners of a significant statement from the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews which reads:

“Christians must strive to acquire a better knowledge of the basic components of the religious tradition of Judaism; they must strive to learn by what essential traits the Jews define themselves in the light of their own religious experience.”¹

When it comes to appreciating the Temple in Christian discourse, it is important to give sufficient attention to Jewish self-understanding with respect to its own symbols. It could be pointed out that for ancient Israel the Temple is not merely an earthly structure awaiting the “spiritualised” interpretations of a later Christian view. Rather, the Temple *already* contains intrinsic spiritual meaning; it is already understood by Jews as a place-symbol that mediates divine presence, and this is precisely what makes it fertile material in Christian interpretative methods which seek to intensify and augment its meaning. Retaining the Temple’s already-given spiritual meaning properly involves retaining respect for its visible, material dimension (without which the already-given spiritual meaning has no basis).²

¹ 1974 *Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration “Nostra Aetate, 4”*, Preamble.

² This point draws on Gregory Vall, “‘Man Is the Land’: The Sacramentality of the Land of Israel”, in *John Paul II and the Jewish People. A Jewish-Christian Dialogue* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008), 131–67.

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As a way of respectfully acknowledging present-day Judaism, it could be noted that Jews today commemorate *Tisha B'Av* on their liturgical calendar: a day of mourning for the First and Second Temples - destroyed in 586 BCE by the Babylonians and in 70 CE by the Romans. This is not to suggest that mainstream Judaism promotes a future rebuilding of the Temple in practice. Like Christianity, ancient Judaism evolved and developed after 70 CE, and responded to the absence of the Temple with a renewed framework of prayer and worship based on the primacy of Torah study, domestic table rituals, and deeds of loving kindness.

A brief note on the first reading and Psalm:

In Exodus 20:1-17, the Israelites (through) Moses receive the Ten Commandments. The commandments are understood as God's loving guidance for a way of life properly oriented to a divine vision that respects human dignity, freedom and protects the vulnerable. These commandments retain their vitality through the ages and are just as relevant today.

Psalm 18 (19):8-11 describes God's law in joyful, lifegiving terms – refreshing to the soul, enlightening to the eyes, desirable and gladdening, and “sweeter than honey”. We might point out to listeners that this is a good example of how Judaism understands the ‘Law’ (the Hebrew word is ‘Torah’ which means ‘teaching’, ‘instruction’, ‘guidance’). Unfortunate tendencies in Christian interpretation have at times depicted the Jewish Law as oppressive, burdensome, in contrast to Christ's teaching on ‘love’. It is true that all religious communities (including Christian communities) are prone to turning God's laws into human burdens. However, it would be grossly misleading to present this as the essence of Judaism. Psalm 18 (19) offers the perfect platform to draw a congregation into a deeper appreciation of Judaism's grasp of Torah's lifegiving vitality, and to encourage awareness of post-conciliar Catholic teaching (see below).

Notable ecclesial texts

Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews

“The existing links between the Christian liturgy and the Jewish liturgy will be borne in mind. The idea of a living community in the service of God, and in the service of men for the love of God, such as it is realized in the liturgy, is just as characteristic of the Jewish liturgy as it is of the Christian one. To improve Jewish-Christian relations, it is important to take cognizance of those common elements of the liturgical life (formulas, feasts, rites, etc.) in which the Bible holds an essential place.”

Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration “Nostra Aetate, 4” (1974), 25.

“We must remind ourselves how the permanence of Israel is accompanied by a continuous spiritual fecundity, in the rabbinical period, in the Middle Ages and in modern times, taking its start from a patrimony which we long shared, so much so that ‘the faith and religious life of the Jewish people as they are professed and practiced still today, can greatly help us to understand better certain aspects of the life of the Church’ (John Paul II, 6.3.82).”

Notes on the Correct Way to Present Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis of the Catholic Church (1985), VI. 25.

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Bibliography: [Dialogika](#) online library maintained by the Council of Centres on Jewish-Christian Relations and the Institute for Jewish-Catholic Relations of Saint Joseph's University in Philadelphia; Kevin J. Madigan and Jon D. Levenson, *Resurrection: the Power of God for Christians and Jews* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008); AJ Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, rev. ed. (Oxford University Press, 2017); Gregory Vall, "'Man Is the Land': The Sacramentality of the Land of Israel", in *John Paul II and the Jewish People. A Jewish-Christian Dialogue* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008), 131-67; Murray Watson, homily notes, n.p.d.