

11th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year 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. The readings follow the lectionary for Mass used in the Roman Catholic rite, in Australia.

Insights from the Jewish-Christian Dialogue

The sacramentality of the land

In the readings this week (**Ezekiel 17:22-24; Psalm 91:2-3,13-16; Mark 4:26-34**) we find vivid imagery from the natural environment and an agricultural society – seeds sown, harvest reaped, palm trees, green shoots, cedars of Lebanon, mustard seeds and shrubs, birds of the air nesting in large branches.

Whilst a universal message is communicated through these readings, note the particularity of the images themselves. These are not ‘generic’ environmental images, they depict scenes from a concrete time and place – the landscape of the villages and hills and deserts of the first century where Jesus walked, what we call today ‘the holy land’, and its surrounds.

In one sense, these readings draw us to consider the ‘*sacramentality*’ of the land. (Here we mean the ‘principle of sacramentality’, not the seven sacraments *per se*.) As with all sacramental realities, infinite mystery is expressed and experienced in and through the concrete and the particular.

As we ponder these readings, we might be led to reflect on how we respond to divine presence in our own experience of trees, vegetation, birds, country, environment, natural surroundings.

We also might be led to reflect upon the witness of those who live life with a profound sense of connection and felt belonging to their ancestral land, such as First Nations in Australia, and Indigenous peoples of other lands, and what they can teach us.

And in this vein, returning to the Scripture readings of the 11th Sunday in Ordinary Time, we might reflect, too, on the profound connection and belonging felt by the Jewish people, in their very being as a people, to the land of Israel; a connection that has been consistently expressed over millennia in their prayer and liturgy, in their Scriptures and Oral Tradition, and in the personal aspirations of so many Jews.

Catholic teaching today acknowledges the land as integral to Jewish religious experience, while taking care not to interpret modern day political events in biblical/messianic terms, as indicated by the following ecclesial texts.

Notable Ecclesial Texts

Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews

“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.”

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

Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews

“Christians are invited to understand this religious attachment [of Jews to the land of their ancestors] which finds its roots in Biblical tradition, without however making their own any particular religious interpretation of this relationship. . . . The existence of the State of Israel and its political options should be envisaged not in a perspective which is in itself religious, but in their reference to the common principles of international law. The permanence of Israel (while so many ancient peoples have disappeared without trace) is a historic fact and a sign to be interpreted within God's design.”

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

Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews

“With regard to the ‘land of the forefathers’ the document [1985 *Notes*] emphasizes: ‘Christians are invited to understand this religious attachment which finds its roots in Biblical tradition, without however making their own any particular religious interpretation of this relationship. ... The existence of the State of Israel and its political options should be envisaged not in a perspective which is in itself religious, but in their reference to the common principles of international law.’ The permanence of Israel is however to be perceived as an ‘historic fact and a sign to be interpreted within God’s design’ (VI, 1).

2015 “*The Gifts and Calling of God are Irrevocable*” (Rom 11:29).
A Reflection on Theological Questions Pertaining to Catholic-Jewish Relations on the Occasion of the 50th Anniversary of Nostra Aetate (No. 4), 5.

Bibliography: Philip Cunningham, “Toward A Catholic Theology of the Centrality of the Land’ in *Enabling Dialogue About the Land*, edited by Cunningham, Langer and Svartvik (Paulist Press, 2020); [Dialogika](#) online library of documentation of the Jewish-Christian dialogue.