

Fifth Sunday of Easter, 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.

Suggestions in view of the Jewish-Christian Dialogue

I. Highlight the OT image of the vine in John 15:1-8.

"I am the true vine" (Jn 15:1).

The image of the vine and the vineyard recurs in the Old Testament as a symbol for Israel, God's chosen and beloved people. E.g.:

"You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it" (Ps 80:8).

"Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard" (Isa 5:1).

Invariably it is accompanied by a warning or a lament about separation or degeneration. E.g.:

"Yet I planted you as a choice vine, from the purest stock. How then did you turn degenerate and become a wild vine?" (Jer 2:21).

The latter metaphor should not be interpreted as a contrast between Christian faithfulness with Jewish infidelity; rather the prophetic challenge applies to both communities equally.

Other references to the vine in Jewish and Christian traditions:

Rabbinic sources; e.g.:

"Why is Israel compared to a vine? Consider what owners of a vine do, seeking to improve it. They pluck it from its place and replant it elsewhere, and there it flourishes. So, too, when the Holy One sought to make Israel known throughout the world, . . . the Holy One plucked them out of Egypt and brought them into the wilderness, and there . . . they received the Torah and their name went forth throughout the world." (Exod. Rabbah 44:1)

"The vine's keeper stands above it and watches over it. So, too, Israel: their Keeper stands above them and watches over them." (Midrash Sam. 16)

The Didache (the earliest account of the Eucharist outside the New Testament) contains a blessing over the cup:

'We thank you, our Father, for the holy vine of David your servant, that you have revealed through Jesus Christ your servant'.

Jewish table blessings refer to the Lord God "who creates the fruit of the vine".

Similarly, the Offertory prayer in the Roman Catholic eucharistic liturgy refers to "fruit of the vine and work of human hands".

II. Ensure that Jewish interpretation is not ‘torn down’ in order to ‘build up’ a Christian interpretation.

Our NT texts are firmly grounded in the Hebrew Scriptures. This is a point of affirmation of and continuity with Jewish tradition.

In whatever way Christian commentators may highlight a new, extended, transcending meaning for the vine in the teaching of Jesus (the ‘true’ vine), we can remind our audience that an authentic Christian interpretation does not denigrate the existing meaning found in Jewish tradition or suggest that it is somehow less ‘spiritual’ than the NT meaning. Rather, the vine is already grasped in Jewish tradition as a symbol that mediates divine presence and as a call to covenantal fidelity, and this is precisely what makes it fertile material in Christian interpretative methods.¹

III. Point out how the term to ‘remain’ or ‘abide’ affirms God’s covenant fidelity, not only to the Church, but to the Jewish people.

Jesus says: “remain/ abide in me” (Jn 15:4). This teaching speaks of personal closeness, intimacy, enduring fidelity. We can remind listeners that the scriptural “vine/branches” image which captures this intimacy so powerfully, does not arise out of the blue. In Jewish tradition the vine was (is) already a powerful image of the enduring intimacy between God and the Jewish people. God “remains”, “abides”, “dwells” with the people of Israel:

- in their wilderness journey (encamped around the tabernacle),
- in the Holy of Holies in the Jerusalem Temple.
- In the *Shekinah* (the presence of God in the Temple): from *shakhan*, “to dwell; to abide”.

This enduring relationship between God and the Jewish people *continues to this day* (see Romans 11:28-29), an insight recovered at Vatican II (*Lumen Gentium*, 16; *Nostra Aetate*, 4) and developed further in the teaching of subsequent popes and theologians. St John Paul II repeatedly pointed to God’s covenant with the Jewish people as “never revoked” (1980, 1986, 2000).

This is not the usual ‘go to’ point for homilists on the Fifth Sunday of Easter, however the image of the vine and branches certainly invites comment on God’s relentless fidelity, not only to the Church, but to the Jewish people. By abiding in Jesus, Christians cannot help but be drawn closer to Jesus’ Jewish story and to the Jewish people, held secure in God’s embrace of love and election. “*Whoever meets Jesus Christ, meets Judaism*” (John Paul II, Mainz, 1980).

The Catholic Church (and other mainstream Churches) teaches that *the mystery of the Church is permanently linked to the mystery of Israel* (see *Nostra Aetate*, 4). This link is by way of:

- a shared *Scripture*;
- the *Incarnation*, where God takes on Jewish ‘flesh’ (‘born of a woman’ - Gal 4:4);
- other expressions of the Church’s *Jewish roots*: the history, traditions, beliefs, prayers, blessings and ritual practices of Israel which profoundly shape the nascent church.

¹ This point is well made by 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.

In a post-*Nostra Aetate* Church, the faithful are called to love and reconcile with the Jewish people. This involves an ongoing “pruning” of Christian hearts and lives, cutting away the subtle anti-Jewish sentiments which are part of Christian history and have conditioned our present. Having set itself firmly on a path of Jewish-Christian reconciliation, the Church has borne much fruit already (*Nostra Aetate* itself is a major fruit) and looks forward to a greater harvest to come.

Notable Ecclesial Texts

Pope Pius XI

“Through Christ and in Christ we are the spiritual descendants of Abraham. . . . Spiritually, we are Semites.” Reflection given to Belgian pilgrims, 6 Sept 1938.

Second Vatican Council

“There is, first, that people to whom the covenants and promises were made, and from whom Christ was born according to the flesh (cf. Rom. 9:4-5): in view of the divine choice, they are a people most dear for the sake of the fathers, for the gifts of God are without repentance (cf. Rom 11:28-29).” Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, 16.

“As the sacred synod searches into the mystery of the Church, it remembers the bond that spiritually ties the people of the New Covenant to Abraham’s stock. Declaration on Relations with Non-Christian Religions, *Nostra Aetate*, 4

St Pope John Paul II

In 1980 Pope John Paul II gave an address at Mainz, Germany, where he acknowledged that the Jewish people are the people “of the Old Covenant, *never revoked* by God.”

Then again, in the Year of the Great Jubilee 2000, standing at Mount Sinai, the Pope said: “But now on the heights of Sinai, this same God seals his love by making *the covenant that he will never renounce*.”

And in 1986, in an address to Jewish community leaders in Sydney, the Pope reiterated:

“For the Jewish people themselves, Catholics should have not only respect but also great fraternal love; for it is the teaching of both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures that the Jews are beloved of God who has called them with *an irrevocable calling*.”

This teaching of the irrevocable covenant has been reiterated many times since: in the addresses and homilies of Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis, in the Catechism of the Catholic Church (no.121), in the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, in curial documents of the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, and in the writings of theologians immersed in the work of Jewish-Christian dialogue.

Bibliography: Beale and Carson, eds., *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007); Bialik and Ravnitzky, eds., *Sefer Ha-Aggadah. Legends from the Talmud and Midrash*, trans. W.G. Braude (New York: Schocken Books, 1992); Jasper and Cuming, eds., trans., *Prayers of the Eucharist: Early and Reformed*. 3rd rev. ed. (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1990); 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; [Dialogika](#) online library of documentation of the Jewish-Christian dialogue.