

Ash Wednesday

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

Preaching without Unintended Prejudice

Lent is a time for Christians to be particularly vigilant in their handling of the lectionary readings in order to avoid subtle, unintended anti-Jewish messages.

A couple of brief pointers follows.

A thought on the Gospel

“But when you give alms, your left hand must not know what your right hand is doing; your almsgiving must be secret, and your Father who sees all that is done in secret will reward you” (Mt 6:3-4).

Prayer, fasting and almsgiving are traditionally part of the Church’s season of Lent. As we listen to the Gospel of Matthew on Ash Wednesday (6:1-6,16-18), all three are mentioned.

Presented there is a picture of the Jewish community to which Jesus belongs, a community which takes for granted the importance of prayer, almsgiving and fasting. Jesus calls for these actions to be undertaken in a spirit of humility. This teaching was, and continues to be, integral to Jewish understanding. For instance, in the Talmud we read:

‘One who gives charity in secret is greater than Moses’ (Baba Bathra 9b).

‘Humility is the greatest virtue of all’ (Abodah Zara 20b).

Recall, too, a theme resounding in the Hebrew scriptures:

‘True sacrifice to God is a contrite spirit’ (Psalm 51:17).

Ashes

Regarding references to the use of ashes in the Old Testament, [this video](#) by Catholic Productions, features a 30min presentation by Brandt Pitre on “The Biblical Roots of Ash Wednesday”.

Another comment on the Gospel

“And when you pray, do not imitate the hypocrites...” (see Mt 6:1-6,16-18)

One scripture scholar puts it plainly when he says, “It would be a serious misuse of this text to speak about the ‘hypocrisy of the Jews’ in Jesus’ era, especially if it is an attempt to ‘raise up’ Christianity by ‘putting down’ ancient Judaism” (Murray Watson).

Misinterpretations of this Gospel have suggested that Jesus was launching a sweeping condemnation of Jewish society and the Jewish religion, judging Jewish piety and synagogue worship to be superficial and morally corrupt. This kind of interpretation depicts Jesus as standing *against* his own tradition; it fits with the ‘teaching of contempt’ of centuries past, now firmly repudiated by the Catholic Church.

LIGHT OF TORAH

The Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews reminds homilists:

“With respect to liturgical readings, care will be taken to see that homilies based on them will not distort their meaning, especially when it is a question of passages which seem to show the Jewish people as such in an unfavorable light. Efforts will be made so to instruct the Christian people that they will understand the true interpretation of all the texts and their meaning for the contemporary believer...” (*Guidelines and Suggestions for the Implementation of the Conciliar Declaration Nostra Aetate No.4*, II.)

Teachers and homilists can take care to explain to their listeners that Jesus was a Jew, standing firmly within his own tradition, critiquing elements from within, but not rejecting his own people or the Jewish religion. All religions are prone to the ‘hypocrisy’ described by this text. The Gospel calls Christians, and the Church itself, to an examination of conscience in this regard.

Further reading:

“Preaching Without Unintended Prejudice” – downloadable leaflet available at [this website](#) of Broken Bay Catholic Schools.

Further links can be found here at the [Etz-Hayim website](#) – see especially links to the U.S. Bishops’ Conference where a number of relevant issues are addressed for Lent and Holy Week.