Guidelines for Preachers

Difficult passages for Christian-Jewish Relations in the Common Worship Lectionary

There are many problematic passages in scripture, as any preacher well knows. While it is possible, and sometimes very profitable, to explore such texts in the context of a study group, the confines of a sermon, in which the congregation plays a largely passive role and wherein the preacher is unable to gauge quite what has been taken in by whom, can make the procedure quite a risky one. This is especially true in this particular age where the congregant may have little background knowledge.

The responsibility, therefore, which falls on those who offer instant, 20 minute expositions on such passages is onerous. All scripture is interpreted, and such interpretation is an acquired skill.

It is impossible for a Christian to read the New Testament without forming some sort of impression of the people described in its pages. The vast majority of these people are Jewish. The preacher is, quite probably these days, the first person to suggest to his or her hearers a 'correct' attitude to adopt. *The Common Worship Lectionary* does not include some of the most difficult passages in this respect, such as the latter parts of John 8 or I Thessalonians 2. However, in view of the disastrous history of Jewish-Christian relations, it is vital that each passage is carefully and prayerfully presented.

Although there are, inevitably, theological issues raised, the focus here is solely on the identification of passages which should be approached with caution. The question preachers must ask is: In what ways can this text be read? To know that New Testament passages were used by preachers during the Third Reich to justify Nazi policies against the Jews must put us on our guard immediately. Neither is this an historical issue; there are many Jewish people in Britain today who first heard the name of Jesus when, as children, they were accused of having killed him.

The background

Despite some problems created by Biblical criticism in the past, Anglicans of all traditions would now agree that some sort of understanding of the historical, social and theological background to the text serves to enhance it. Good preachers always offer just enough of this.

The New Testament was written against a politically volatile background in Judaea and in a period of intense discussion on aspects of the Torah and the function of the Temple cult. To ignore these undercurrents is not instructive. These observations lead us to the following guidelines which encourage good practice:

- Distinctions between 'the Jews' on the one hand and Jesus and disciples on the other are literary constructs; it should always be remembered that the whole gospel takes place within a Jewish context.
- The Torah should not be randomly disparaged; as God's own provision, it has been revered for centuries and Jesus himself asserted its timeless authority.
- Pharisaic questioning should be placed within the context of rabbinical discussion common at the time. Jesus often uses the conventions of the day in terms of exaggeration and analogy.

- The admission of Gentiles was the main concern of the early church. Passages which deal with this should be used to stress inclusivism rather than wielded as a weapon against the Jewish people.
- We must acknowledge that Christians are guilty of all the traits criticised by Jesus and that there are lessons to be learnt.
- Deliberate contrasting of Jews or Jewish practices with Christianity is usually inaccurate and always indefensible. Considering the number of passages in which Christians are exhorted not to judge or compare oneself favourably to others, it is astonishing that this is still deemed acceptable in the case of Jews, where we would not countenance it in other contexts.

Let us pray for God's ancient people, the Jews, the first to hear his word -
for greater understanding between Christian and Jew
for the removal of our blindness and bitterness of heart
that God will grant us grace to be faithful to his covenant and to grow in the love of his name.

(From: Intercessions for Good Friday, Lent, Holy Week and Easter Services and Prayers, as commended by the House of Bishops of the General Synod of the Church of England)

Suggestions for further reading:

Gareth Lloyd Jones: Hard Sayings: Difficult New Testament Texts for Jewish & Christian Dialogue *(available from the Council of Christians & Jews, price £3.50)*

Luke 13: 31 - 35 *Jerusalem, Jerusalem* Year C
Lent 2

The emphasis in this text, especially if read in the context of other selected readings for these services, appears to be on the evil displayed in previous times in contrast to the hope embodied in Jesus himself. Such texts invite the unwary preacher to dwell on the ignorance and, in traditional terminology, 'hardness of heart' of the Jewish people. This is then contrasted with the enlightened righteousness of those who trust in Christ. It is not difficult to envisage a final step resulting in the crude formula - Jews equal anachronism/ignorance/wrong-doing, while Christians equal illumination/ understanding/goodness. At the very least, a preacher may compound the anti-Jewish stereotype with a sense of smug complacency on the part of the church-goer in a modern equivalent of 'Pharisee and publican'.

It is perhaps worth noting in passing that Jesus is warned about danger by Pharisees. A preacher who suggests to a congregation that this might be part of the Pharisees' own warped agenda should ask him or herself what is to be achieved by such an aside.

Note about Pharisees:

One of the problems which preachers often have when dealing with the Pharisees lies mainly in the manner of Jesus' address to them (eg. Lk 11) - 'You fools!' or 'woe to you Pharisees!'. It is easy to read into this a total condemnation of the entire Jewish approach to the worship of and obedience to God. However, modern scholarship has drawn attention to the way in which religious discussions and disputes were routinely carried out in Jesus' day. Also in the first century in the course of extensive debating of the time, Rabbi Dosa ben Harkinas criticises his brother Jonathan who has taken a different position on a legal issue, calling him "the first born of Satan"[1]. Clearly this is rhetoric and not intended to be taken seriously - certainly not literally (as many have interpreted Jesus' utterings in John 8).

The Talmud portrays Pharisees as belonging to seven basic 'types'. These include the 'shoulder Pharisee' who ostentatiously carries his 'good deeds' on his shoulder for all to see, and the 'wait-a-while Pharisee' who keeps someone in need waiting while he performs an ostentatious 'good deed'. The 'bruised Pharisee' bashes his head against the wall in an attempt to avoid looking at a woman. Such sketches are offered in contrast to the ideal Pharisee, described as one who follows the 'law' of Love, of which Abraham is cited as the supreme example. This of course represents an approach of which Jesus would have approved. He always reserves his greatest pronouncements against religious hypocrisy and ostentatious piety among the religious leadership.

The practice of question and answer is well attested as the means of obtaining teaching from a rabbi on any given subject, especially if there were disagreements between the rabbis on the matter, which often happened. The case for Jesus having at least experienced the more prominent rabbinical debates, especially between the great schools of Rabbis Shammai and Hillel (some of whose responses are often remarkably similar to Jesus' own approach) has been well made. The Pharisaic movement, with its desire to make biblical faith accessible to the people, contained a range of views and opinions, as we can see if we read the gospel texts carefully and in their entirety. However, in Jesus' teaching the need to put spirituality and ethical considerations before legal minutiae is always stressed.

[1] Talmud: *Yebamot*16a. Interestingly, Jonathan is a disciple of Rabbi Shammai.

Matthew 27: 11 - 54	Year A	*Jesus is condemned*	Palm Sunday
Mark 15: 1 - 39	Year B		
Luke 23: 1 - 49	Year C		
John 18: 1 - 19: 42	Years A,B & C		Good Friday

This is the central narrative in Christian soteriology. It is revered and recounted in all its great and terribly imagery - the focus of meditation and a source of profound spiritual experience. It is also, paradoxically, the passage which evokes the greatest sense of dread among many Jewish people even today, and which has been the catalyst for anti-Jewish violence on notable occasions in European history. If Christians wish to explore the theme of the cross as the symbol of both good and evil, they could do worse than examine its place in Jewish - Christian relations.

The most difficult verse of all is verse 25 in the Matthean passage. As Pilate washes his hands, the crowd shout "His blood be on us and our children"[2]. It is not unheard of, even today and in Britain, to hear preachers informing their listeners that, on account of these words, the Jewish people are communally cursed. As members of the body of Christ, we would wish to refute this in the strongest terms. Christians cannot wish for Jews to hear about Jesus and his death solely in terms of their judgement and condemnation and consequently, understandably, decide to have nothing more to do with those and their institutions who thus condemn them. Only a few years ago, an Easter sermon broadcast on BBC radio left listeners with the impression that modern Jews were still tainted with the blood of Jesus. Not surprisingly, several Jewish listeners who had raised their heads above the parapet are known to have lowered them again smartly.

While the text is the text, preachers can do much to prevent the persistence of this pain by, for example, ensuring that they do not label all Jesus' opponents together as "the Jews". In this context, it must be borne in mind throughout the Jewishness of all those in the narrative, including Jesus himself, with the exception of Pilate and the execution squad. Exploration of more universal traits such as the nature of the crowd, the desertion by the disciples and the uncertainty of some of the religious and social leaders are fruitful themes. Indeed, there are so many strongly drawn characters in this vibrant narrative (particularly in the Johannine text) that there can no longer be any excuse for using this passage, even unwittingly, to encourage negative feelings towards the Jewish people as a whole.

[2] In fact, this saying represents a formula common in connection with capital offences, suggesting the fact that the execution was carried out on behalf of society (Talmud: Sanhedrin 37a)

Matthew 21: 33 -46 *The labourers in the vineyard* Palm Sunday
Proper 22 Year A

The parable of the labourers in the vineyard presents a favourite Lucan theme also found in Acts. The obvious interpretation is that the wicked tenants (the Jews) had "treated shamefully" all the prophets - messengers whom God had sent to them - and finally murdered the "beloved son". The selection of this passage at the beginning of the Holy Week makes this traditional interpretation immediately clear to the hearers.

In the arsenal of weapons which promotes Christian anti-Judaism, this is one of the most effective. Preachers must ask themselves how this passage may be used to enrich the Christian lives of their hearers rather then encourage derision and even violence towards the Jewish people. It should be noted that many Christian clergy in Nazi Germany used this text to tell their congregations that Jews did indeed deserve punishment but that God and not Hitler should mete it out. Such a view did nothing to alleviate the suffering of Jewish victims but, in fact, compounded it. Pastor Martin Niemoller, for example, when he later came to realise this, suffered a great deal of remorse.

The question which this parable is answering in this passage is of course one which the Christian church ceased to ask not long after: do the Gentiles have a place in the kingdom of God, a share in the covenant? The Matthean passage is presented as an indictment against the religious leadership. It follows on directly from verse 32 which, alas, is not included.

The perpetuation of the charges of deicide against all those born to a Jewish mother is medieval. It is also totally inconsistent with traditional Christian teaching which makes it clear that while we each have an individual responsibility for our own spiritual welfare, if anyone can be said to have 'caused' Jesus' death it was sinful humanity in its entirety.

If the use of this text is depressing, the one small glimmer of light is the inclusion verse 45. This shifts the burden of possible judgement onto those in authority and with responsibility for religious leadership (a common theme in Jesus' preaching) and right away from the people (Jews) as a whole.

Matthew 22: 1 - 14 *The marriage feast* Proper 23

Traditionally interpreted, this suggests that the Jewish people had their opportunity but have chosen to ignore God's invitation. Viewed this starkly, that cannot, of course, be true since Jews have for centuries continued faithfully to respond to God's invitation to the covenant, made at Sinai, and many still centre their lives around the Torah, given to Moses by God as Israel's obligation.

Again, it must be remembered that the burning issue of the day was the admission of Gentile converts. This parable is a necessarily exaggerated illustration of how the least likely are admitted into the covenant relationship. The full import of this revolutionary idea is to be stressed - rather than any suggestion that Jews as a whole are now rejected. Together with the 'labourers in the vineyard', this parable was used as ammunition for anti-Judaism in 20th century Europe and we must avoid falling into the same trap.