

Pentecost 2016 (9.06.19) Evensong

Exodus 33: 7 – 20; 2 Corinthians 3: 4- end

In this week that's just gone we've commemorated the 75th anniversary of D-Day. Perhaps if any single day can be pin-pointed as the beginning of the end of the Second World War, D-Day is the day. It turned the tide of the Second World War and ensured the defeat of tyranny. The tyranny of the Nazi regime, of course, came in many forms - fear of the Gestapo, the oppression of people who were gay, or disabled or gipsy – but perhaps the defining hallmark of its tyranny was its antisemitism.

Antisemitism is, of course, both persistent and pervasive. It is resurgent today across Europe and within Britain. It can be found at both extremes of the political spectrum, from the very public marches of neo-Nazis to the more insidious infiltration of the British Labour Party from the hard left. And antisemitism is a slippery thing: it's difficult to know

where it begins and where it ends. It is, for instance, difficult to recognise where the threshold is between unacceptable antisemitism and perfectly legitimate criticism of Israeli policy.

Of course, Christianity has a very bad track record when it comes to antisemitism. "Set fire to their synagogues or schools," was what Martin Luther recommended in his 1523 tract entitled *On the Jews and Their Lies*. He also said Jewish houses should "be razed and destroyed," and Jewish "prayer books and Talmudic writings, in which such idolatry, lies, cursing, and blasphemy are taught, [should] be taken from them." In addition, "their rabbis [should] be forbidden to teach on pain of loss of life and limb." Still, this wasn't enough. Luther also urged that "safe-conduct on the highways be abolished completely for the Jews," and that "all cash and treasure of silver and gold be taken from them." Much can be said to defend Luther, or at least mitigate his offensiveness, but those words remain on his record.

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We've got to be careful how we read the New Testament as well. The Gospels, particularly Matthew and John, can be quite toe-curling unless you read references to the Jews as references to "the party of the Jews who were against Jesus." We also need to be careful with this evening's New Testament lesson from 2 Corinthians.

In the passage we've heard this evening, Paul speaks of the "ministry of death, chiselled in letters on stone tablets." That can sound like an offensive way to describe the Jewish faith. He also talks about the glory of the old covenant being set aside by the new covenant that Jesus represents. You may well think that this smacks of supercessionism, of the idea that the Jewish faith is no longer valid because it has been replaced by Jesus.

If that is what this passage sounds like at first hearing, it would repay us to think more carefully about it. This passage is not anti-Semitic; it is not supercessionist.

We need to recognise that there is nothing systematic about St. Paul or the Bible in general, for that matter. Paul did not sit down, in an ivory tower, and write down an abstract, academic treatise on Christian dogmatics. We do not have Paul's opus magnum setting out a comprehensive statement of what he believed or what he thought everybody else ought to believe.

What we do have is a collection of serendipity, incomplete, ad hoc and deeply pastoral material. Paul was writing to particular people, in particular contexts, to address particular issues they were facing. They were intended to be for them. They were never intended to be the foundational documents upon which the entire edifice of Christian doctrine is built.

And one problem is that we only have Paul's side of the correspondence. We have to guess what the other voice in the dialogue is saying. Some scholars even think that what we call 2 Corinthians is really 3

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Corinthians, because somewhere there was a middle letter from Paul which has now got lost. What is clear is that we don't have here an essay written by Paul on the relationship between Christianity and what we call the Old Testament, the scriptures of the Jewish people. We don't even have what might be called a reflection on the differences between Jewish approaches to scripture and the life of a Christian.

What we happen to have, providentially preserved for us and honoured as Holy Scripture, is a letter addressed to a particular group of Christians. They seem to be Jewish people who have converted and have found faith in Jesus. And there seems to have been a controversy between them about whether, now that they were followers of Jesus, they still needed to read scripture like good Jews and follow all the prescriptions and proscriptions of the Hebrew Scriptures. We see particular instances of this played out in the Acts of the Apostles: do people who are Christians have to keep the Jewish requirement of

circumcision? Do people who are Christians have to observe all the Jewish food laws? The answer to these questions is No. The contribution of Paul to the controversy in Corinth is that Jews who have become Christians do not have to have to read scripture the way Jews do. That is the obligation from which *they* have been released. It has been overtaken *for them* by the gift of the Holy Spirit which they received when they became Christians. It does not mean that the Jewish faith has come to the end of the road. It means that these people are now journeying on a completely different road and are not subject to Jewish rules.

And Paul concludes it all with one of his glorious phrases which make wading through all his dense argument worthwhile. He says "And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of God as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit." Isn't that glorious?

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Today we celebrate Pentecost; we celebrate the possibility of God always being able to do something new, whether it's been written down before or not. Two thousand years ago people in Corinth found it difficult to be open to that possibility. We still struggle today. Let us pray that the Holy Spirit will blow away the hardness of our minds and that we will be transformed from one degree of glory to another.

Amen.