

JESUS AND THE JEWS: A NECESSARY TRAGEDY?

I have chosen this title “Jesus and the Jews: a necessary tragedy?” with a question mark because I want to promote reflection rather than give definitive answers. I have chosen this topic for two reasons in particular. First, for the last fifty years since *Nostra Aetate* the priority for the Catholic Church has been establishing relations of trust and friendship with the Jewish community that has suffered so much in the past from our wrong attitudes. This has meant that it has not been possible to address openly the relationship of Jesus to the Jewish people, and the consequences of the Jewish rejection of Jesus for their history. Because of the terrible history of anti-Semitism on the part of Christians and the Church, it has been necessary to make reparation, we may say, and to repudiate clearly all anti-Jewish assumptions and formulations. One of the widespread evils was the accusation that the Jews were all “God-killers,” an accusation that led to much violence and to many Jews being killed. In the paragraph of the Vatican Two decree *Nostra Aetate* treating of the Jewish people, it is stated:

Even though the Jewish authorities and those who followed their lead pressed for the death of Christ (see John 19: 6), neither all Jews indiscriminately at that time, nor Jews today, can be charged with the crimes committed during his passion.

The clear repudiation by the Catholic Church of all forms of anti-Semitism and the affirmation that God has not rejected the Jews as his chosen covenant people have made possible the restoration of positive relations between the Church and the Jewish people. As a consequence, in Catholic conversation with the Jewish leaders it was not the right time to discuss questions or give teaching about the place of the Jewish people in the mystery of Christ-Messiah. As Catholics we had

to confess our sins of the past before it would be possible to talk in a right way about the consequences of the Jewish rejection of Jesus and the teaching of the New Testament about the place of the Jews in the mystery of the Church. We had for a time to set aside such texts as this passage from Luke chapter 21: "There will be great distress in the land and wrath against this people. They will fall by the sword and will be taken as prisoners to all the nations. Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled." (Luke 21:23–24). Here Jesus was predicting the great exile of the Jews from the land of Israel from the second to the twentieth century of which the exile in Babylon was only a figure. However as trust with the Jewish community is built up and their fears are overcome that the Church might abandon them again, we have to address the New Testament texts that treat of the fullness of Israel (Rom. 11:12) and the fullness of the Gentiles–nations (Rom. 11:25). Until we can do so, there will be something missing in our eschatology.

The second reason is connected with the question mark in the title. All Christians agree that salvation comes to all through the death of Jesus on the cross; it is the same for Jews and for Gentiles. The death of Jesus was brought about by the collusion of the Jewish leadership and the Roman occupying power. This collusion is mentioned by the apostles in Acts 4: "The kings of the earth rise up and the rulers band together against the Lord and against his anointed one.' Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed." (Acts 4: 26 – 27). So we are faced with this paradox: the death of Jesus was necessary for the salvation of all, and yet particular people had a responsibility in this political execution. The necessity did not take away the responsibility. So the second motive for

choosing this theme is to help us enter into the many ways in which the whole history of Jesus, of his rejection, and of his acceptance that founds the church, exceeds our powers of understanding and explanation. I want to explore some dimensions that are unsettling, that do not fit our neat schemes and explanations.

I want to explore this dimension of “necessity” that is entering into the “divine plan” for the salvation of the world that involved the choice/election of Israel as God’s chosen instrument to reach the nations. There is key teaching on this theme in Paul’s letter to the Romans, chapters 9 to 11. It is a mistake to view these chapters as a diversion from the main theme of Romans usually stated to be justification by faith. In fact, the whole of Romans is about the relations of Jews and non-Jews within the church of Rome. The teaching on justification belongs to this bigger theme, with Paul insisting that Jews and non-Jews are both justified by faith in Jesus Christ.

Paul’s Dilemma

In Romans 9 to 11, Paul directly addresses the question that political correctness rules out of discussion, namely the situation before God of the Jewish people following their refusal as a people of Jesus as their Messiah. Paul opens his heart to reveal his great distress: he says he has “great sorrow and unceasing anguish” in his heart (Rom. 9: 2). As a Jew believing in Jesus–Yeshua as the Messiah of Israel, he wonders how it could be possible that the Messiah could come, and not be welcomed by the majority of his people. The hope that sustained Israel through the centuries was that God would fulfil his promise to David, that he would send the Messiah–Deliverer, who would set his people free. It is expressed so

vividly in the hymn the Church sings at morning prayer, the Benedictus of Zechariah:

salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all that hate us –

to show mercy to our ancestors and to remember his holy covenant,

the oath he swore to our father Abraham:

to rescue us from the hand of our enemies,

and to enable us to serve him without fear

in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

(Luke 1:73–75)

What was the cause of Paul's anguish? Was it that the leaders of Israel had rejected Jesus and handed him over to the Roman occupying power to be put to death? Almost certainly, that was part of his anguish, though Paul knew that the apostles had proclaimed to Israel, "You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead." (Acts 3:15). But there was also a second rejection of Jesus, that would certainly have troubled Paul, the refusal of most Jews to receive the witness of the apostles and of the Holy Spirit concerning the resurrection of Jesus.

Faithful Jews believed that the salvation and the deliverance of the nations (the Gentiles) would happen through Israel, and would go out from Jerusalem to the nations. "He will teach us [Israel] his ways, so that we may walk in his paths. The law will go out from Zion, the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He will judge between the nations ..." (Is. 2: 3 – 4). This must be at the heart of what Paul was wrestling with. How can Israel fulfil her appointed mission when as a people Israel has not received the Christ of the Lord? How can the word of the

Lord go out from Jerusalem to the nations when the city of Jerusalem has not welcomed the Messiah?

We can sum up Paul's dilemma in this way. At the heart of Israel's life are the promises of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Central in these promises are the hope for a son of David, who will sit on David's throne in Jerusalem; the hope for a Messiah–Saviour–Deliverer, who will free Israel from Gentile domination, and who will establish a kingdom of righteousness and peace. God has demonstrated that Jesus of Nazareth is this awaited Messiah–Saviour. But he was not received by the Sanhedrin, nor by the teachers of Israel, but he was handed over to the Romans and put to death. Paul has learned by revelation that this Jesus has been raised from the dead, that he is seated at the right hand of the Father, and has poured out his Holy Spirit on those who receive him. But the majority of the Jewish people, along with their leadership, have not accepted Jesus as Messiah, and oppose this new “sect” among the Jews.

In chapters 9 and 10, Paul seems to be having a debate inside himself before the Lord. First, he disposes of some false arguments or conclusions. The first false conclusion is that God has failed to keep his promises. Paul insists that “God's word has not failed.” (Rom. 9:6). Everything has not gone wrong as far as God's promises are concerned. Second, Paul rejects the critics who argue that God is being unjust. “What then shall we say? Is God unjust (adikos)? (Rom. 9:14). Paul indignantly rejects this idea. “Not at all!” (Rom. 9:14)¹.

Absolutely not. He quotes God's words to Moses from Exodus 33:19, introducing the theme of mercy that will become key to his understanding. “I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have

¹ See also Rom. 3: 3-4, 9; 6:2,15; 7:7,13.

compassion.’ It does not, therefore, depend on human desire or effort, but on God’s mercy.” (Rom. 9:15). Paul puts his finger on the arrogance of the critics. To accuse God of being unjust is to be guilty of shocking arrogance; it is to place ourselves above God. “One of you will say to me: ‘Then why does God still blame us? For who is able to resist his will?’ But who are you, a human being to talk back to God? Shall what is formed say to the one who formed it, ‘Why did you make me like this?’” (Rom. 9:19–20). This indignation of Paul is still relevant. The same kind of arrogance can also be present today in many of the ways that Christians approach these questions.

Paul’s Prophetic Insight

Let us move to chapter 11, where are two more indignant rejections. The first: “did God reject his people?” (Rom. 11:1). The second: “did they [the Jews who did not accept Jesus] stumble so as to fall beyond recovery?” (Rom. 11:11). To both he gives the identical answer: No way, absolutely not! Then Paul makes this remarkable statement: “Rather, because of their [Israel’s] transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious.” (Rom. 11:11).

It is important for us to grasp what Paul is actually saying. He is saying: It is God’s providence that Israel as a whole did not accept Jesus. This is why my title has the phrase “necessary tragedy.” What was Paul’s answer? Paul clearly teaches that because of Israel’s rejection of Jesus the good news of salvation went out to the whole world. This is a prophetic insight seeing God’s hand and purpose in events that at first sight appear catastrophic for Israel. Paul continues prophetically: “But if their transgression means riches for the world, and their loss means riches for the Gentiles, how much greater riches will their full inclusion [literally their fullness, *plerōma* bring!]” (Rom. 11: 12). Though Israel’s transgression

brings blessing (riches) to the nations, Israel's final salvation (their fullness) will be something even greater.

Further on, Paul will use the word mystery when he is describing this unbelief in Israel, that he calls a “setting aside” in Rom. 11:15 and a “hardening” in Rom. 11:25. “I do not want you,” he writes, “to be ignorant of this mystery” (Rom. 11:25). Mystery is the word Paul uses to describe God's plan from the beginning of creation that is centred on Jesus his Son, hidden for long ages, and now revealed by the Holy Spirit.² This mystery is that Israel “has experienced a hardening in part until ...” (Rom. 11:25). Note each element: a part of Israel – it would seem the majority, until, that is for a time. Until when? “until the full number (plerōma) of the Gentiles.” The words “has come in” found in many translations are not in the Greek text. Mystery means that the way things worked out is not God's Plan B.

Although the Jews who did not receive Jesus have become “enemies” as far as the Gospel is concerned, they “are beloved for the sake of the fathers” (Rom. 11:28). As far as the election is concerned, as far as the heart of the Father is concerned, the Jews remain God's beloved, even though they were currently resisting the Gospel. At his baptism by John, Jesus identified himself totally with his people, not just with the righteous but also with the sinners. This identification of Jesus with his people was not just for the time of his life on earth. This must be borne in mind during all the centuries of the second exile, all the centuries of exile that reach a climax in the Holocaust.

Just as it was necessary for Jesus to die so that salvation could come to the world, so the hardening of part of Israel was necessary so that the Gospel would spread to the nations.

² See Rom. 16:25-26; Eph. 3:4-6; Col. 1:26-27.

In God's plan there is an inter-relatedness of Israel and the nations. We see this in the following verses, particularly vv. 30–32. “Just as you [the Gentiles] who were at one time disobedient to God have now received mercy as a result of their [Israel's] disobedience, so they too [the Jews] have now become disobedient in order that they too may [now]³ receive mercy as a result of God's mercy to you.” (Rom. 11:30–31). In God's plan, the Gentiles who have received mercy because of Israel's unbelief will become in some way God's instrument for the blessing of Israel. This is a major reason why the Christian prejudice against the Jews through the centuries is so horrible. Instead of showing God's mercy to the Jews from whom they had received the Saviour, Christians showed the opposite of mercy: harsh judgment, scorn, even hatred.

So what is Paul's conclusion: “For God has bound everyone over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all.” (Rom. 11:32). The last word is mercy, not judgment. This again is revelation to Paul through the Holy Spirit.

When people set themselves up in judgment over God and consider God's ways unjust, they do not understand God's ways and God's plan. When we humble ourselves before the mystery, we open ourselves to the revelation that all is mercy. So Paul is overcome by the wonder of what started as an apparent disaster: “O the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments and his paths beyond tracing out! Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counsellor?” (Rom. 11:33–34).

Our Dilemma Today

There is one more section to this talk – an application to today. I suggest that in some ways we are in a similar

³ Not in all manuscripts.

situation to Paul – not with regard to Israel, but in regard to the Church. We have a dilemma too, though it probably hasn't yet caused us great anguish! It is not how Israel could come to refuse Jesus, but how the Church could have come to reject Israel. It is definitely a dilemma for Catholics. As Catholics believe that the Holy Spirit has been guiding the Church for twenty centuries, how can it be that the Church did not understand through the ages what the Church teaches since the Second Vatican Council that God has not rejected the Jewish people, they remain his chosen people, the people of the covenant? There are different dimensions to this dilemma: how could the Church not have understood the faithfulness of God in the election of Israel for so long? How was it possible that the Jewish church of the beginnings, the *ecclesia ex judaeis*, without which the Church could not have existed, should have disappeared from history within three centuries?

How are we to approach this dilemma? Do we produce apologetic arguments to show that the Church was always in the right? Or do we join the critics and say God's promise to the Church has failed? Both these approaches are guilty of the arrogance of setting ourselves up in judgment over God.

Let's for a moment apply the approach of the apostle Paul to our dilemma, to the way we approach and understand this history of Christian misunderstanding and rejection of the Jewish people. We can notice first that our dilemma fits into the Israel–nations reciprocity that Paul insists on in Romans 11. Israel rejects the messiah, but God does not reject them. Israel rejects the Jewish believers in Yeshua, but God does not reject them. The Church rejects Israel, but ... The parallel would be that God does not abandon the Church. This does not mean that there was no sin in the rejections, but that God's mercy is greater. God uses the sin to create a greater good.

What does this suggest regarding the way we interpret and understand the sad history of Jewish–Christian relations? Paul’s trajectory in Romans leads from genuine anguish and shock that things have not happened as we think they should have happened. But Paul turns to the Lord and receives revelation, a revelation of God’s total mercy. Paul’s trajectory led him into the prophetic. As he prayed over his anguish, he received revelation. Something similar is found in Psalm 73 where the psalmist is troubled about the prosperity of the wicked: “When I tried to understand all this, it troubled me deeply till I entered the sanctuary of God” (vv. 16–17). We do not need judgment on the history of the Church, but prophetic revelation about God’s plan. We see from Romans how the unbelief and the marginalization of Israel produced blessing for the Gentiles, whose faith will then bless Israel. Paul associates the end of Israel’s hardening with a completion, the fullness, for the Gentiles. The more the mission to the nations is advanced the closer will be the hour of Israel. A prophetic approach will connect the modern awakening of the Christian world to the continuing election of Israel with the biblical promises concerning the fullness of the Gentiles, the end of the time of the Gentiles, when Israel will enter in.

We have to be careful then to avoid any approach that places ourselves in judgment over the history. This is an especial danger for Messianic Jews and for Evangelical Christians. The Catholic danger is to deny or minimize the wrong behaviour of Catholics and the Catholic Church towards the Jews. The Messianic Jewish and Evangelical dangers are to write off centuries of Christian history as only sin, darkness, and rebellion, as though there was no Gospel, no witness to Jesus, no light for the nations – this is falling into judgmentalism, acting as though you are in the place of God. On the other hand, Catholics cannot hold to a triumphalistic vision of

church history any more than Paul did for Israel. He confesses their disobedience. There has been a disobedience to God in the Church's treatment of the Jewish people. There has to be an honesty about the history. But we have to get off the superior seat of the judge and stop pronouncing definitive views on what was right, what was wrong, and what should have happened.

We cannot position ourselves above the history. We may wonder what would have happened had the Christians shown mercy to the Jews in the Middle Ages. Was it God's purpose that they did not show mercy to the Jews? We do not know. What we do know in faith is that God's ways are higher than our human ways as the heavens are higher than the earth. What we know is that God is faithful to his promises. There remain many words of Scripture that we do not fully understand. They speak of the entry of the Jewish people, the end of their hardening in part, that will happen near the end, at the end of the time of the Gentiles. Despite all the human sin, despite our blindness to God's chosen people, God is still working his purposes out in ways that surpass our imagination and our thinking.

I want to leave you with this thought. The rejection of Jesus that led to his death on the cross was necessary for our salvation. The rejection of Jesus by Israel as a people was necessary for the Gospel to go out to the nations. Could it be that the blindness of the Church to Israel has been necessary for the mission to the nations to be fulfilled so that Israel can finally enter in?

In Luke 21, Jesus says that Jerusalem will be trampled underfoot by the Gentiles (the nations) until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled. As we have heard, in Romans 11, Paul says that part of Israel will remain hardened (read not

accepting Jesus as Messiah) until the fullness of the Gentiles. Many questions arise! But I will only raise two: 1. Does the fullness of the Gentiles mean the completion of the preaching of the Gospel to the nations? We think of the words of Jesus: “this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come.” (Matt. 24:14). 2. What does the fullness of the nations means in terms of the unity of the Church? Does the full unity of the Body of Christ have to wait for Israel to enter in (Jew and Gentile being reconciled in one body)? Or does the unity of the nations (their love for one another) provoke the turning of the Jews to their Messiah? Or is there a combination of both? Is it the Church of the nations beginning to receive the Jewish believers that provokes the entry of all Israel?

In our day when the Catholic Church has officially recognized the wrongness of replacement theology, and the Lord has been raising up a Jewish witness to Yeshua as their Messiah, can we arrive at the same conclusion as Paul? The conclusion that God’s ways are amazing to us: they do not conform to our expectations, to our philosophies. Can we too say: “O the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments and his paths beyond tracing out!” (Rom. 11: 33). When we look at this mixture of faith and unbelief, of obedience and disobedience – in biblical times and throughout Christian history – we can see how God is ever faithful, God is working out his purpose in and through all these imperfect instruments. Instead of judgment, we can be led to wonder and astonishment before the Lord.