

## St Mary Abbots, Trinity 4 2021, Matins

Jeremiah 11:1-14

Romans 11:25-36

When I looked at the readings for Matins today my heart sank. Normally there is something uplifting or interesting to latch onto for the preacher, but this morning's readings seemed to me at first sight to be unremittingly grim.

And that is because they both seem to speak of the turning away of Israel and of the Jews from God. St Paul speaks of the blindness of Israel, and even refers to them as '*enemies for your sakes*'. [St Paul is writing to the Gentile Romans.] We all know the ways in which such passages and phrases have been used against our Jewish brothers and sisters down the centuries, from the pogroms of the Middle Ages to Dachau and Auschwitz. And from time to time we notice reports of anti-Semitic assaults in our own city today.

We, as Christians, do of course hold a different belief from Jews, most notably that Jesus Christ is the Messiah; Jews, on the other hand, hold that the Messiah has not yet come.

And yet, there is a whole host of other beliefs which Christians have held which are more troubling, and which have contributed towards the long history of European anti-Semitism. One of the most basic is that Jesus was killed by the Jews. John's gospel says as much. This cannot simply be explained away, and yet, this account was written down by a Jew, and everyone in the story, barring the Roman authorities, was also a Jew, including of course Jesus.

So, the word 'Jew' is used by someone who was a Jew, against his fellow Jews, for not following Jesus, another Jew. The earliest followers of Jesus would still have seen themselves as Jews, but ones who had recognised the Messiah. There is a strong case indeed for 'Jews' in John's gospel largely referring to the 'Jewish authorities', rather than to all Jews.

Thankfully most Christians no longer, on the whole, seek to transfer culpability for Jesus's death onto contemporary Jews, but that is a heinous belief that has also stoked anti-Semitism among Christians over the centuries.

Another is that when Jesus was not recognised by all Jews as the Messiah, and the mission to the Gentiles began, the Gentiles somehow *replaced* the Jews as God's people; that the Jews were now rejected by God, and the Gentiles became 'the new Israel'. This belief is known as 'supercessionism'.

It is the apparent closeness to this belief in our readings that sparked my initial recoiling.

*'For God hath concluded them all in unbelief, that he might have mercy upon all.'*

St Paul is here I think saying that the unbelief of Jews could be God's mysterious way of ensuring that the gospel reached the rest of us, the Gentiles.

Alongside this, our reading from Jeremiah also smacks of certain awful sixteenth century anti-Semitic tracts:

*'And the Lord said unto me, A conspiracy is found among the men of Judah, and among the inhabitants of Jerusalem. They are turned back to the iniquities of their forefathers, which refused to hear my words; and they went after other gods to serve them: the house of Israel and the house of Judah have broken my covenant which I made with their fathers.'*

Except Jeremiah is obviously part of the Hebrew scriptures, and is just one stage in the long salvation history of Israel, in which they form a covenant with God, rebel; form another covenant with God, rebel again. What it most definitely is not, is any kind of final judgment on Israel, cutting them off from salvation.

St Paul was also a Jew, and a Pharisee no less. Though, as I have said, he is writing in Romans to a Gentile audience.

And he began the chapter of the letter from which we are reading (which we did not hear this morning) with: *'Hath God cast away his people? God forbid. For I also am an Israelite, of the seed of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin.'* So much for supercessionism then.

And while he tells us that *'as concerning the gospel, they are enemies for your sakes'*, he goes on to say that *'as touching the election, they are beloved for the fathers' sakes.'* 'The fathers' plural, i.e. their forefathers, rather than God.

What St Paul is doing here is grappling hard with the troubling question of the position of his fellow Jews who have not, like him, come to follow Jesus.

He does not leap, like so many of his followers, to writing his Jewish brothers and sisters out of salvation history. And he warns the Roman Christians not to be *'wise in your own conceits'*. Here we find a humility in working through this difficult question, which St Paul is not known for.

*'How unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out! For who hath known the mind of the Lord? or who hath been his counsellor?'*

If St Paul can say this, then we can all most certainly answer with a loud Amen!

And there is a very particular sentence in the midst of this *'faith seeking understanding'* of St Paul's, which strikes me: *'For the gifts and calling of God are without repentance.'*

God has very definitely called the Jewish people. They have not all followed His Son.

And yet, God's gifts and His calling are without repentance. God does not repent of His love for His people. That is as far as Paul's reasoning will take him, and then he essentially just hands the problem over to God.

Rather than forcing himself into a position which would make God a monster, as so many Christians have done in relation to the Jews, and indeed to anyone they have regarded as outside the fold of pure faith, St Paul goes as far as he can with his mind; and then simply stops, praising God. And might we not adopt this approach in our dealings with all who are outside the church?

If St Paul is convinced that all Israel shall be saved somehow, might we not dare to hope that all of God's creation too will be redeemed?

We cannot know how or when, but it is this hope, against all the evidence which might otherwise make us cynics; this ground for belief that all will be taken up into God's loving arms on the last day, that leads us to see the eyes of Christ in all whom we meet, and to hope that we might see them with His.

Amen

Fr Christopher Rogers