



## **Br Ian for Easter 3 (2021)**

I recently watched a recorded interview with a Rabbi from the Reformed tradition of Judaism. She, a Rabbi may be a man or a woman in Reformed Judaism, was speaking about her experience of being Jewish in the UK and she answered several questions about her beliefs and experience. At one point she spoke about her direct and indirect experience of antisemitism. She gave a personal example of how she was out walking with her husband, who was wearing his Kippah or skull cap and so was easily identifiable as Jewish, when they were both verbally abused. This was not uncommon she said for those who have any distinctively Jewish dress, although in her opinion what was more pervasive was what she called 'dinner table' prejudice against Jews and Judaism. She didn't spell out in detail what she meant by this, but I suppose we might say it is the casual opinions and assumptions of what Judaism is and who Jews are which can all too easily lead on to become prejudice.

In Christianity we are well aware of texts that have been used in the past and continue to be used as justifications for prejudice and even hatred against Jewish people; texts which when given a particular interpretation or use have the potential to become means by which Jews can be targeted. This morning's passage from Acts *could* be one example, quoting from Peter's address to the crowd, 'You handed him over to be killed, and you disowned him before Pilate. You disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked that a murderer be released to you. You killed the author of life'. Texts like that and others have been used down the centuries, taken from their original context and turned into weapons to attack Jewish people and culture, or quoted as evidence in order to supposedly justify persecution and violence and murder.

I suppose for many of us the chances of directly experiencing or witnessing violence or intimidation against Jews is quite low, even if we are well aware that it takes place. Perhaps what is more likely to confront us is the use of particular language or imagery. Take for example a passage from a Bible commentary that I read recently, explaining the ministry and identity of Jesus, 'The law creates divisions into Jews and Gentiles. Jesus has come to end that and break down barriers. Satan and Judaism line up against him. He will destroy them'. In my opinion that is a very poor use of language; placing Satan and Judaism alongside each other and pitting Jesus against them so that he might destroy them shows to my mind a lack of awareness and understanding and, critically, a lack of perception of who Jesus was and what he was about. It may only be words on a page, but the influence that words can have is of course significant, not to mention the underlying environment that is created by their use.

In the light of attacks and prejudice many in the Church have done a considerable amount in recent times to tackle antisemitism, and bodies such as the Council of Christians and Jews are active in encouraging understanding and friendship. This takes place with the objective to be clear about the differences and share honest opinions, but at the same time to recognise the deep shared roots of Judaism and Christianity. So much of Christian imagery and metaphor

and language and theology comes of course from Judaism and you can certainly argue that only by understanding Judaism more can we grow in Christian faith.

In our passage from Acts today it is no coincidence that Peter begins his response to the crowd by saying ‘The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob – the God of our ancestors – he has glorified his servant Jesus.’ The first part of that sentence is, as we know, a direct quote from the book of Exodus and is clearly a way of rooting what is happening in Jesus in Jewish scripture and identity. As God called Moses in the book of Exodus to lead his people out of slavery into freedom so, says Peter, it is happening again through Jesus. The Jewish language and principles are crucial to understanding Peter’s thought process and so his message about Jesus.

It seems to me that affirming and treasuring the common roots of Judaism and Christianity can take place at the same time as recognising the crucial differences between them, and that in doing this it points Christians to a greater awareness of who Jesus was and his message. At a time when attacks against Jews are increasing it is clearly vital that the Church does all it can to challenge antisemitism and to highlight the gifts that we have received from the Jewish faith.