

“For the peace of Jerusalem pray”. And for the whole of the Middle East.

The services to commemorate the beginning of the First World War last week served to highlight the number of wars being fought across the world today. One hundred years after the start of 'the war to end all wars' we remember and we discern how little has been learnt. Mankind continues to fight and bomb and kill and maim, and all to what purpose?

An appeal has been launched to help the victims of the conflict in Gaza and there will be a chance to give at the end of Mass. Our contributions will go through CAFOD.

That catastrophe, for which both sides must carry blame, has led to attacks on synagogues and rabbis. Thugs cannot distinguish between the politics of Israel and the Middle East and the Jewish religion.

Through most of *Anni Domini* Jews have been persecuted and Christians have been the perpetrators. Judas Iscariot provides an example of the demonization which has taken place. In the earliest Gospel, that of Mark, Judas' betrayal of the Lord is noted but without commentary and Judas's fate is untold. When Matthew writes Judas is given a motive: he wants money for his treachery; money he throws away before hanging himself. Luke gives him a different fate in the Acts of the Apostles. There he falls, bursts open and his insides fall out. This mirrors the fate of the proverbially evil Antiochus IV Epiphanes who tried to destroy the Jewish faith at the time of the Maccabees. Even later John will describe Judas as a thief. The description continues to darken. A writer in the second century called Papias describes his death, squashed against a cart in a narrow alley. Judas is hideous with eyes sunk into his head and grossly large.

The name 'Judas', of course comes from the name of the tribe descended from the fourth son of Jacob, Judah. That name became the name of the Southern Kingdom and from it comes the word 'Jew'. Judas thus comes to epitomize all Jews, who are seen as deicides, God-killers, and mocked as money loving no-goods, stereotyped as Shylock or Fagin. Holy men, remembered as Church Fathers and saints have written wicked abuse of Jews.

Only in our lifetime, if you are fifty or more, has the official teaching of the Church been transformed. In my youth a prayer in the Good Friday Service was for 'the perfidious jews' and for their conversion to Christian ways. Everything changed at the Second Vatican Council, and its Declaration “*Nostrae Aetate*” - On the Relation of the Church to non-Christian Religions, the Bishops wrote: “...the Church cannot forget that she received the revelation of the Old Testament by way of that people with whom God in his inexpressible mercy established the ancient covenant. Nor can

she forget that she draws nourishment from that good olive tree onto which the wild olive branches of the Gentiles have been grafted (cf Rom. 11, 17-24). The Church believes that Christ who is our peace has through his cross reconciled Jews and Gentiles and made them one in himself.” (para 4) And a little later they continue, “Even though the Jewish authorities and those who followed their lead pressed for the death of Christ (cf Jn, 19,6) neither all Jews indiscriminately at that time, nor Jews today, can be charged with the crimes committed during his passion. It is true that the Church is the new People of God, yet the Jews should not be spoken of as rejected or accursed as if this followed from holy Scripture. Consequently all must take care, lest in catechising or in preaching the Word of God, they teach anything which is not in accord with the truth of the Gospel message or the spirit of Christ. The Church...deplores all hatreds, persecutions, displays of anti-Semitism levelled at any time or from any source against the Jews.” (para 4).

Subsequently, Paul VI visited the Holy Land; John Paul II prayed in Rome's synagogue; and in his old age re-visited Jerusalem and prayed at the Western (Wailing) Wall of the Temple and placed a prayer of apology between the stones of that sacred wall. Apology was a key-note of his later years. Francis has continued to work towards the vision of reconciliation, journeying on pilgrimage to Jerusalem, accompanied by a Rabbi and an Imam.

For many centuries the Jewishness of Jesus and Paul and the first Christians was passed over. Only in the last half century have scholars taken seriously the fact of his Jewishness, so essential to his person, his view of the world, his relationship to his *Abba*.

Consider Paul's words in the passage from the Letter to the Romans they we heard today. His love for his people is so clear. He will go to any extreme to win them for Christ; even cut himself off from Christ if that will achieve that goal. Paul as a scholar trained in rhetoric, the art of argumentation, was not adverse to hyperbole, exaggerating to make his point, but here his intense feeling powerfully comes across. His words echo those of Moses, pleading with God for his people after the apostasy of the worship of the Golden Calf. God is ready to annihilate his people but Moses asks that he should rather be blotted out of the Book of Life. Paul would make the ultimate sacrifice, damnation, if it wins his people for Christ.

We need to have leaders in the Middle East who show Paul's love; who see beyond human-made boundaries, or the deadly disintegration of that whole area will continue with unimaginable consequences.

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