

“We call it 'the washing-machine'. Come, you must get in there. You'll regret it all your life if you don't”. The speaker was a smiley young man who was greeting everyone with a hug and who had been guiding us through the liturgy, telling us which page we should be on. We were in a small synagogue for the *Shabbat* (Sabbath) evening prayer. The washing machine was rotating and in we went to join the gathering throng of men (the women were segregated behind a curtain on the right), who were dancing around the central prayer table with an arm clasped around the man in front and an arm round the man beside and an arm raised and the swirl increased as did the chant, the energy soared as more joined the broad congar-swarm. Very Fiddler-on-the-Roof. Male bonding on a Friday night in Israel. The chant faded, the swirl calmed. The spin cycle was over. We returned to our places and the chanting of Hebrew Psalms, exhilarated.

The synagogue had not been easily found. It looked un-prepossessing, rather like a school room. But a synagogue, a place of gathering, is as much a place of study as a space for prayer. It was locked, though the time for the service was close. (We had been given the wrong time.)

The passers-by of whom we enquired, were we in the right place, were uniformly friendly, even as they failed to help. One chap came down from his apartment with his children, hearing English voices. He was from north London and we chatted about cricket. Like tens of thousands of other Jews he had decided home must be the land of his forefathers. He was struggling to learn Hebrew.

Friendliness was everywhere. So many pilgrims / visitors to the Land meet few Jews and those they do meet are with the security forces and have not had lessons in Public Relations. Having a five week stay meant we met many ordinary Jews and they were consistent in their friendliness, warmth and openness.

At the end of the service there were genuine and generous invitations for us to come to a *Shabbat* meal. “The celebration is not half over. Come”. How would we respond to thirty visitors descending on us one Sunday morning. Would they all be pressed to come home to have Sunday lunch?

One of the most important developments in our understanding of Jesus has been in the re-discovery of Jesus as a Jew. I hope that sounds absurd. Of course Jesus was a Jew and his background was in Jewish Scripture and culture of the first century in Palestine. Only in the 1970's did scholars begin to take seriously the fact of Jesus' Jewishness. Remember, when I was growing up each Good Friday the Universal Church prayed for the conversion of the 'perfidious Jews'. Only fifty two years ago did the Church, in a solemn decree of an Ecumenical Council, declare that not all Jews were responsible for the death of Jesus. *Nostre Aetate*, of the Second Vatican

Council, was epoch changing. It spoke of other religions as well, but its abiding significance is for our relations with the Jewish faith, which continue to develop.

One of those who gave presentations to us was Dr Marcie Lenk who has written a commentary on a New Testament Letter (1Peter) for the second edition of “*The Jewish Annotated Commentary on the New Testament*”.* Marcie gave a talk on how a Jew understand Chapter 2 of the Acts of the Apostles, Pentecost. It was fascinating and enlightening, and there was nothing to which we could not say 'Amen'.

In today's Gospel-passage, Jesus shows himself to be a teacher in the manner of the Rabbis who would come after him. He interprets the Scriptures in a new and challenging way. The text he is given for his sermon is: “*He gave them bread from heaven to eat*”. Ancient Hebrew in its written form has no vowels. When the Phoenicians invented the alphabet they worked only with consonants. It was the Greeks who added signs for vowel sounds. If this sounds strange, just think of how most people text. Ambiguity is possible but usually the context gives the meaning. The scribes and the lawyers, the literate experts knew their Scriptures. But the absence of vowels makes re-interpretation possible. Without changing anything in the holy script, other meanings can be drawn out. This is what Jesus does.

The usual interpretation of his chosen text is: He, that is Moses, gave – at some time in the past, during the wandering in the wilderness, bread from heaven, namely manna, which appeared and had to be collected, never too little and never too much.

Jesus reinterprets: He, not Moses, but our Father in heaven, gave, no, not a past tense but a present tense, gives – it is happening here and now, bread from heaven, not manna but Jesus himself, who is, as he will go on to explain, the living bread which gives life to the world.

It is all in the Jewish, rabbinic manner of interpretation. The Rabbis believed that every word of Scripture was where it was because God had put it there and its God-given meaning was there for them to discover by prayer, reflection and much debate. There was a clear and obvious meaning, and there were deeper meanings which had to be teased out. We have much to learn from the Rabbis.

Our Christian roots are in *Tanakh*, the Jewish Scriptures. The more we know about them and the culture of Judaism in the first century, the better we will know our Lord and Teacher, the Jewish Jesus.

* Ed. Amy-Jill Levine, (OUP, 1st Ed 2011) who is a practising Jew who teaches and writes about Jesus and the New Testament.