

Tips & Resources

The first step is to become aware ourselves of the history of Jewish-Christian relations and the sensitive issues involved. Some helpful resources are listed at right.

The next step is to share this with our congregation, class or audience – e.g., through a homily, bulletin, website or other catechetical opportunities.

The following comments are offered by the Council of Christians and Jews, Victoria (1994):

- We cannot arbitrarily alter the text of scripture but we may, when it is appropriate, introduce the public reading with a brief explanation.
- In the classroom it is possible to give longer treatment to the topic taking up such issues as the diversity within first-century Judaism and the tensions that may arise quite naturally as a result of 'in-house' differences.
- At appropriate times, when discussing or explaining a text, provided the substance is preserved, phrases open to misinterpretation such as 'the Pharisees,' the 'Jews', could be rendered in a way less likely to cause prejudice. Expressions such as 'some religious leaders' or 'some citizens of Jerusalem' could be used.
- Regarding the expression "the Jews" in John's Gospel where it appears 71 times: Listeners to John's Gospel need to know that the expression "the Jews" cannot possibly be used to refer to all Jews living at that time, let alone all Jews of all time.

Regarding passion plays, the US Bishops Conference notes that:

"Judaism and Jewish society in the time of Christ and the apostles were complex realities, embracing many different trends, many spiritual, religious, social, and cultural values". In their use of texts, props, costuming "presentations of the passion should strive to reflect this spiritual vitality, avoiding any implication that Jesus' death was a result of religious antagonism between a stereotyped 'Judaism' and Christian doctrine." (*Guidelines III*)

Resources

- Marilyn Salmon, *Preaching without contempt: Overcoming unintended anti-Judaism* (Fortress Press, 2006).
- *Rightly Explaining the Word of Truth* (Council of Christians and Jews, VIC, 1994) <http://www.jcrelations.net/Rightly+Explaining+the+Word+of+Truth.2228.0.html?L=3>
- Australian Catholic Bishops' *Guidelines for Catholic Jewish Relations* (1992) http://www.jcrelations.net/The_Faithfulness_of_the_Lord_endures_for_ever.2410.0.html
- Guidelines for passion plays (USCCB) http://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/research_sites/cjl/texts/cjrelations/resources/documents/catholic/Passion_Plays.htm
- Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds. *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* (Oxford University Press, 2011)

Vatican documents: www.vatican.va

- Vatican Council II, *Declaration Nostra Aetate, On the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*.
- Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, *Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration Nostra Aetate* (1974).
- Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, *Notes on the Correct Way to Present Jews and Judaism...* (1985).
- Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible* (2001).

This resource is a collaborative Jewish-Christian effort by Teresa Pirola, Jenny van Proctor, Kate Mannix. Design: Cyrilla Almeida. The authors gratefully acknowledge the assistance of notes by Murray Watson, PhD and the work of the Council of Christians and Jews, Victoria, *Rightly Explaining the Word of Truth* (1994). Scripture: New Revised Standard Version.

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With the liturgies of Lent and Holy Week upon us, this is a good time for us as Christians to remind ourselves of the importance of avoiding unintended anti-Jewish prejudice in our preaching and teaching.

What do we mean by 'unintended anti-Jewish prejudice'?

Since the time of the Second Vatican Council, official Church teaching has carried a message of loving respect for Jews and Judaism. The Church today promotes an appreciation of Jesus' Jewishness and the Jewish roots of Christianity, and teaches that the Jewish people remain the beloved of God who is faithful to divine promises (see Romans 11:28-29; *Nostra Aetate*, 4).

However this was not always the case.

Tragically, in the Church's development, as Christians sought to identify themselves as a distinct religious entity, they did so over and against Judaism.

This negativity developed into a pattern of anti-Jewish attitudes adopted by the Christian faithful for many centuries. Thus Jews have been depicted in Christian writings and images as a cursed people, rejected by God for not accepting Jesus as Messiah. A supersessionist mentality regarded Judaism as obsolete and simply replaced by the Church.

Thankfully, the Second Vatican Council put an end to these distortions by way of official Church teaching. However it takes time to be completely free of such prejudice. We are all products of our time and culture, and may have unwittingly absorbed some of these anti-Jewish messages or insensitivities. It is humbling to realise that we are still part of that process of healing and rehabilitation which began in earnest for the Church only last century.

It is now widely recognised that certain New Testament texts, when not adequately explained and interpreted, can perpetuate anti-Jewish attitudes which in the history of the Church have caused great suffering in Jewish communities.

A number of these texts appear in the liturgical cycle on Ash Wednesday, on Passion Sunday and Good Friday. This leaflet alerts Christian preachers, teachers and catechists to some particular issues of note and encourages further education in this area.

As we approach the Lenten season, all who preach God's Word or share it by way of the spoken or written word, are asked to be vigilant in avoiding the possibility of transmitting prejudice or false interpretations of scripture as we celebrate these important feasts.

Vatican II: *Nostra Aetate*, 4

As the sacred synod searches into the mystery of the Church, it remembers the bond that spiritually ties the people of the New Covenant to Abraham's stock.

[T]he apostle Paul maintains that the Jews remain very dear to God, for the sake of the patriarchs, since God does not take back the gifts he bestowed or the choice he made.

Preaching without unintended prejudice

Lenten notes for homilists, teachers and catechists

Points to highlight

Assist your congregation or class to understand that:

- The interpretation of any particular detail in a gospel text must be in the light of the central core of the Gospel.
- The bible is not a history book and the Gospels are not mere biographies of the historical Jesus. The authors of the Gospels wrote in a selective way, often synthesising various details, and in response to their local situation. Hence it is possible that hostile references to Jews reflect social and political conflicts well after the time of Jesus.
- Wherever Jesus is depicted as being in conflict with a particular Jew or Jewish group, we should remember that Jesus himself was a Torah-observant Jew. These are intra-Jewish debates and should not be misread as Jesus railing against the Jewish people or against Judaism as a whole.
- In the popular Christian mindset the Pharisees are often viewed as ‘the bad guys’. However contemporary scholarship presents a different view. The Pharisees were in the main a lay group well versed in the teaching of the Torah. Many of their beliefs resonated closely with those of Jesus, e.g., belief in resurrection of the body, forms of piety like almsgiving and fasting, the address of God as Father, the priority of the commandment to love God and neighbour. As one Vatican document points out: “If Jesus shows himself severe towards the Pharisees, it is because he is closer to them than to other contemporary Jewish groups” (Notes, 1985). Not all Pharisees opposed Jesus. For instance, there are Gospel texts which depict Jesus as the guest of Pharisees and it is a group of Pharisees that warn Jesus of Herod’s life-threatening designs.
- Christian interpretation of scripture texts should strive to avoid “supersessionism” - the simplistic view that the Church has completely replaced Israel.

Ash Wednesday

So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues... (Mt 6:2).

It is important to understand that this text is not a sweeping ‘attack’ by Jesus on the supposed superficiality and falseness of Jewish piety and synagogue worship. Remember, Jesus was a Jew speaking primarily to Jews at a time when Judaism itself was a complex reality, embracing many different groups, trends, ideas which at times elicited fierce competition.

In times past Christian preaching has often transmitted the impression that a monolithic Judaism in Jesus’ day had a monopoly on hypocrisy and the misuse of religious acts. Nothing could be further from the truth. The specific distorted attitudes described by Jesus are common to all religious traditions, and it is a serious misuse of this text to speak about the ‘hypocrisy of the Jews’ in Jesus’ era, especially if it is an attempt to ‘raise up’ Christianity by ‘putting down’ ancient Judaism.

Christians of our own time are by no means exempt from the same weaknesses, and here each one of us has reason to examine our own lives with humility and repentance. This reading challenges us to pray, fast and give alms, but to do it in a way that honours God, rather than drawing attention and praise to us. Let us not use this key liturgical opportunity to allow hurtful attitudes towards the Jewish people to be communicated, as they have, regretfully, marred preaching on these texts in the history of the Church.

Vatican II: Nostra Aetate, 4

What happened in Christ’s passion cannot be charged against all the Jews, without distinction, then alive, nor against the Jews of today... The Jews should not be presented as rejected or accursed by God, as if this followed from the Holy Scriptures. All should see to it, then, that in catechetical work or in the preaching of the word of God they do not teach anything that does not conform to the truth of the Gospel and the spirit of Christ.

Passion Sunday & Good Friday

Now it was the day of Preparation for the Passover... Pilate said to the Jews, “Here is your King!” They cried out, “Away with him! Away with him! Crucify him!” (Jn 19:14-15)

Who killed Jesus? No exact reconstruction of these events is possible. What is clear is that Jesus was brought before a Roman prefect, charged with sedition against the Roman empire and executed using the Roman method of crucifixion.

Yet in the Christian telling of these events from generation to generation, the Romans were absolved and “the Jews” were blamed for Jesus’ death; and not just some Jews of Jesus’ day, but all Jews. In fact the charge of ‘deicide’ has pursued generations of Jews through history.

In the 1965 document Nostra Aetate, official church teaching addressed this harmful distortion. However the wounds of the past call for careful attention at every level of teaching. Christian preachers, teachers and catechists can play an important part in this healing, as can parents in the religious formation of their children.

The reading of the passion narratives, especially from John’s Gospel with its repetition “The Jews... the Jews” requires proper framing to ensure that the emotions stirred up by these readings are not channelled into false ideas of the reasons for Jesus’ death, or the role of “the Jews” in it.

If we allow people to think that Christ died because of the hostility of Jews, we have not helped our community to understand the true reasons for the Passion – God’s love for us, God’s desire that all peoples should be drawn into the gift of salvation.

To focus the blame on any human group is to badly misread the Gospel message and twists the meaning of Christ’s suffering and death. Rather, our message is a powerful proclamation of hope and healing: God’s love poured out for all humanity.

The author of the following story has taught in a number of schools in Sydney. The school and churches in the story have not been named. Clearly no deliberate offense was meant by those involved, which is why it is a good example of the “unintended prejudice” to which all Christians need to be alert.

What we don’t want to happen again:

An interfaith story by Jenny van Proctor, who has been involved in Jewish - Christian dialogue for many years.

A few years ago I was teaching a Jewish Scripture class to a small group of students in a state primary school. In an effort to build bridges, my small group and I attended the Christian students’ dramatisation of the Easter story.

I was thinking that my students would learn something about Easter and Christianity. I knew that the Vatican had been promoting a positive teaching about Jewish-Christian relations for nearly fifty years and presumed that today’s Christians would be aware of Christianity’s roots in Judaism. I presumed that they would be mindful of the issues that perpetuated Christian persecution of Jews over the centuries.

Imagine our shock when the young actors announced it was “the Jews” who were responsible for Jesus’ charge, trial, verdict and crucifixion.

I felt sick. It was as if in that moment I had been hit by the weight of the world’s antisemitism. I hurried my young Jewish students out of the toxic situation, hoping that they would not take on guilt for being Jewish and for seemingly causing this terrible situation to befall Jesus.

But even more concerning, as I reflected later, was the realisation that young Christian children are still learning the fundamentals of antisemitism through this kind of experience – that it is the Jews who are guilty of the suffering and death of Jesus.

Tip for catechists and teachers:

When preparing a dramatization of the Easter story, imagine a group of Jewish children present. Ensure that there is nothing in your dramatisation that would hurt these children or teach Christian children that it is Jews who bear the guilt for the suffering of Jesus.

Note: the US Conference of Catholic Bishops has published guidelines for passion plays. See page 4 for details.