



**GRAY'S
INN**
—

Gray's Inn

Epiphany (January 26th) 2020

Isaiah 9: 2-7 & First Epistle of John 1: 1-9

This sermon will range rather wide. You may think too widely if I tell you that we will touch on the Holocaust, Anti-Semitism, and Israel/Palestine today. But they are very much connected within the Judaeo/Christian tradition, and the lived relationship between Christians and Jews.

Tomorrow is the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau, the largest Nazi death camp. January 27th has become Holocaust Memorial Day when we remember the murder of six million Jews, alongside all the others killed under Nazi persecution. There have been genocides before and after, but nothing to compare with this monstrous plan, this deliberate evil intent, to remove a whole People from the face of the earth.

After the war some of those responsible were brought to Nuremberg, and our Treasurer intends to mark the 75th anniversary of those trials during his year of office. A book by the American chaplain, a German-speaking Lutheran, who ministered to them in court and on their way to execution, records the terrible things which some admitted, and some even tried to justify.

In Germany the Holocaust grew out of a narrow nationalism, something we need to remember as many countries in our world today veer in a similar direction, forgetting the difference between healthy patriotism and divisive, destructive nationalism. But the Nazis also inherited and exploited an anti-Semitism which had poisoned European culture for centuries.

And here we Christians need to hold up our hands. At the beginning it was different: as the Christian Church took shape, it suffered persecution by the Jews. The former Pharisee St Paul suffered at their hands because he now preached a universal Gospel: Jesus Christ was for everyone, Jews and Gentiles. **But let's be clear that although the Jews rejected Jesus, Paul did not preach that God had rejected the Jews. He's very clear in the Epistle to the Romans that God has a continuing relationship and purpose for the People of Israel.**

But, as the Christian Church gained respectability within the Roman Empire, the tables turned. It was the Jews, then, and ever since, who became persecuted.

They were blamed for the death of Jesus. They were accused of the ritual murder of children. They were said to grow rich as the expense of others.

After the Roman destruction of the Temple in AD 70, the Jewish people were scattered. Small Jewish communities could be found all around Europe, and beyond. Sometimes they were allowed to live quietly alongside the prevailing Christian culture. But sometimes violence erupted and the Jews were forced to flee. Here in the UK they were expelled by Edward 1st and let back in by Oliver Cromwell. In Eastern Europe they were often poor peasant communities, as portrayed in "Fiddler on the Roof" and Tevye's wistful song "If I were a rich man.." But sometimes, and here we really do focus down on anti-Semitism, they were rich.

In order to understand this we need to go on a little digression. The reason why some Jews, then and now, became wealthy was all about something called Usury, a concept which these days we find difficult to understand. We have grown up in a capitalist world in which making money from money is at the root of our economic system. Indeed, that's the only kind of wealth creation which the gleaming towers of Canary Wharf and the City of London now represent. Money, which was once just a means of exchange, has become a product in its own right. In what sense it exists, in what sense it is real, is of course a troubling question. Its value is not like something which has been created or built, or even like gold or silver. Which is why, when we have an economic crisis as in 2007 / 8, the over-riding concern is that the banks must not fail, lest the whole edifice comes tumbling down, and people might see that the Emperor indeed has no clothes.

But all of this is relatively new, and quite unBiblical. The Jewish Scriptures forbade Usury, which was basically taking interest on loans, making money from money, especially if the lender was himself risking nothing in the process. Usury was outlawed in order to protect the poor, and to prevent the kind of increasing inequality which would threaten the covenant community. The Christian Church followed suit. But come the Middle Ages, when the growing mercantile class needed money, Christians and Jews decided that the laws against Usury only applied to lending, for profit, to members of their own communities. So the Christian merchants went to the Jews, and some Jewish people prospered.

But it was a precarious life. As we know from "The Merchant of Venice", trading and avarice got caught up with religious differences and fears. At the Globe production last year there was a horrendous final scene - not in Shakespeare's script but as an interpretation of its underlying theme - of Shylock being forcibly baptised as a Christian. And that stereotype of Jewish people as running our financial systems has continued to this day, even after the Christian Church changed its mind over Usury, with John Calvin's reassessment at the Reformation, and also in the Roman Catholic Church but not, officially, until 1917. Islam still, technically, forbids it.

We need to understand all of these religious, political and economic factors. They led to the terrible events of the Holocaust, or were exploited by those who set it in motion. They all contribute to the Anti-Semitism which we see today in most European countries, including our own.

So, and this is the third and final issue I said I would raise, where does this leave us in thinking about Israel and Palestine today? It needs much more than my remaining few minutes to address that complex situation, but perhaps we can say this. There are two, very different narratives. The first is that after centuries of persecution, culminating in the Holocaust, the Jewish people have finally secured a homeland where they can be safe, and they have the right to defend it against every opponent. For some Jewish people that is shored up by the belief that this is the land once given by God to Abraham, although that does raise the question as to whether being Jewish is a matter of ethnicity or of faith.

Zionism, the claim that the Jews have the right to their own land, and to this particular piece of land in the Middle East, developed in the 19th Century as more of a political than a religious movement. It was Christian Evangelicals, like our own Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour, the man responsible for the Balfour Declaration in 1917, who pressed for their return to Jerusalem as being the fulfilment of Biblical promises. That also explains the very powerful Christian Zionist lobby in the United States today, with its uncritical support for Israel. But the connection between religion and ethnicity is a difficult one: in Israel today entitlement to full citizenship is not based on religious faith but on racial identity.

That's one narrative. The other belongs to those people, the Palestinians, who lived on this land for centuries before the Jews started returning. When Israel proclaimed their new nation state in 1948, they expelled over half of the Palestinians, and then after the 1967 War occupied all their remaining land. The Palestinians (Christians and Muslims) are now either refugees outside Israel, or they live, under strict Israeli control, in East Jerusalem, on the West Bank and in Gaza.

I was on the West Bank again for a week before Christmas. Every time I go I hear the increasing frustration of the young Palestinians, including those in our Church-run schools and colleges. I see how the illegal Israeli settlements encroach more and more upon their land. Every time I come back I ask why Britain – and, after all, we had the Mandate in 1948 but then just ran away – why our country chooses to ignore the violation of the Geneva Conventions, the resolutions of the United Nations, the judgements of the International Criminal Court. And of course one reason is that those who criticise Israel are easily deemed to be anti-Semitic.

So, to finish, what shall we say? There can be no doubt that through the centuries, and culminating in the Holocaust, it is the Jewish people who have

suffered at the hands of (yes) we Christians, but in the twentieth century even more under the atheist regimes in Germany and also Russia. In our own day we cannot ignore the continuing scourge of anti-Semitism, but nor is it right to dismiss any criticism of Israel as anti-Semitic.

The prophet Isaiah, as we heard, looked for a time when the garments rolled in blood would be burned as fuel in the fire, at the coming of the Prince of Peace. Today in the Holy Land, we should give thanks for all those, Israeli Jews, Palestinian Christians and Muslims, who work together for reconciliation. I know a man, even older than me, who waits by his telephone, and when the call comes through saying that the Israeli army is about to demolish a Palestinian house or village, he gets into his car, drives to the spot, and lies down in front of the bull-dozer. **He's a Jew, an Israeli citizen, but for him being Jewish is about,** peacefully but forcefully, standing up for justice. He is, as our Second Lesson put it, **"walking in the light"**.

There is a certain irony about our final hymn. Its author, G K Chesterton, was an anti-Semite. But let us rehearse his words on behalf of not only our own nation, and also that of Israel and Palestine, and with all those who work for justice and for peace: **"O God of earth and altar, bow down and hear our cry"**.