

A NOTE ON THE GOSPEL OF JOHN (Good Friday April 10, 2020)

On this Good Friday 2020, I'd like to share with you some observations from a colleague of mine, an Episcopal priest, about the Gospel text we repeat each year at this service, because we need to know how this passage can be hurtful to our Jewish neighbors if we do not put its words in the proper context. And if God is love, the one thing we want to avoid in this season is hurting others, whether intentionally or not.

John's Gospel is always the Gospel used in the Good Friday Prayer Book liturgy. Misunderstanding of this Gospel has helped fuel deadly Christian anti-Semitism against Jesus' own people for centuries, culminating in the Holocaust.

John's Gospel was written in the late 1st/early 2nd century, by Jews who had come to believe that Jesus was the hoped-for Messiah. They saw no contradiction between that belief and the traditional practices and beliefs of Judaism. In fact, they believed that Jesus fulfilled the hopes and expectations of the Jewish tradition.

Jesus-following Jews were in the minority in the Jewish world, and were eventually expelled from the synagogue late in the 1st century. As they composed this Gospel to encourage one another, to express their experience of Jesus' continuing presence, and to present a compelling Jesus to the world, their anger and hurt found its way into the narrative, where "The Jews" were cast as a monolithic group who were out to get Jesus.

As the Christian Church grew in size and influence, John took its place among the 4 canonical Gospels in the Bible. After Christianity became the state religion of the Roman Empire late in the 4th century, the Gospel of John, wrongly interpreted, became deadly for the Jewish people.

In a real sense, we Christians in the modern era must read this text as observers of one side of a family fight. We encounter one side of a propaganda war. (The Jews who decided not to follow Jesus had their own propaganda.) We are not free to enter it. It is not our fight. And in any case, would Jesus, himself a good Jew, ever have encouraged prejudice or violence against anyone, much less his own people?

As we sit in the pew, and hear and read the words "The Jews," we need to understand this context. We can substitute in our minds "Some Jewish Authorities" or "Some Leaders of the Synagogue" or "Some Religious Leaders," or "Some Jews." The Jewish people and their leadership, as well as their religious traditions, were complex and diverse in Jesus' time, and still are. Furthermore, Jesus' followers and enemies were complex and diverse, as well. Blanket statements about "The Jews," (or any group, for that matter) particularly in the service of a hostile agenda that seeks to harm, marginalize, or disempower are to be rejected.

As we move through Lent, we move closer to Easter. Jesus's Resurrection proclaims God's victory over the forces of evil and death. We do well to remember that God's love is for all people. Everyone. No exceptions. And especially for those who have been, and continue to be, harassed and persecuted. *May our words do no harm, and lead to loving action.* **Amen.**