Lent 2 2022

Genesis 15.1-12,17-18
Luke 13.31-end

At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, 'Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.'

Believe it or not, this business of the Pharisees warning Jesus has been a matter of some interpretive controversy, and remains so even now.

On one hand, perhaps the Pharisees were trying to help Jesus: perhaps they had heard of Herod's malicious intent, and wanted to ensure Jesus's safety. This is reminiscent of the angels that came to the wise men in their dreams, warning them of this Herod's own father, who certainly did have murderous intent.

The word "some" here—*some* Pharisees—thus functions as a reminder that not all Pharisees were out to get Jesus: after all some Christians were themselves Pharisees, including Nicodemus thrice mentioned in John's gospel, and St Paul himself [who just a bit earlier in the letter to the Philippians said of himself that he was " a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee"].

On the other hand, the Pharisees are usually the bad guys, if you like, of the Gospels. And so, perhaps these Pharisees were trying to trick Jesus; trying to get rid of him by scaring him off. After all, it turns out that

Herod Antipas had no interest in killing Jesus at all. Later on in Luke's gospel, Herod is described as being pleased to see Jesus: he was hoping to watch Jesus perform a miracle.

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This interpretive controversy is itself tied to a moral and theological one, which is about Christian anti-Semitism. There is, in summary, a lot of it.

It begins early, within the New Testament itself, though it might be more accurate to say that the New Testament contains themes of *anti-Judaism*, referring specifically to the religious rather than ethnic aspects of Jewishness.

Since the very beginnings of the Church, Christians have found strong contrasts between their own religion and Judaism: this new religion was one of grace, they said, as compared against the old religion of law. Indeed, many of the most eloquent Fathers of the Church—St Augustine, St John Chrysostom, St Jerome—turned their skills toward issuing vociferous invectives against the Jews, wishing upon them persecution on earth and eternal damnation hereafter.

And as soon as the Church gained political power, it saw fit to mistreat Jews. In medieval Europe, Jews were excluded from various professions, forced to pay special taxes, and shoved into ghettoes. And as if legal discrimination wasn't bad enough, regular folk took it

upon themselves to make Jewish life hellish. Jews were accused of spreading disease and poisoning wells and even of the ritual sacrifice of Christian children. They were regularly murdered in riots, and occasionally massacred. And then in the year 1290, and with great popular support, King Edward I expelled all the Jews from England: their property defaulted to the crown, of course. This Edict of Expulsion was only lifted by Oliver Cromwell 350 years later.

In the meantime, Martin Luther would pen his 65,000 word screed titled *On the Jews and their Lies*, urging their persecution including the burning down of synagogues and schools, restrictions on home ownership, and their consignment to menial labour. You might not be surprised to hear that this tract suddenly became very popular in Germany in the 1930s, even making a public appearance during the Nuremberg rallies.

Christian anti-Semitism: there has been a lot of it, and it has caused a very great deal of damage.

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Lent is a fitting time to think about anti-Semitism for two reasons. The first is that it is the season of repentance, and the whole Church needs to repent of its history of overt violence against the Jews and continued complicity in subtler forms of anti-Semitism today. The second is that Holy Week—to which Lent

leads—was historically a scary and dangerous times for Jews living in Christian countries.

At least since the fourth century, Christians have read the narrative of death of Jesus from John's gospel on Good Friday, as indeed we will do at St Mary's Bepton this year. John's Gospel persistently uses the term "the Jews", which has contributed to the accusation against the Jews of being "Christ-killers", never mind the fact that Jesus was executed by the Romans.

At least since the eighth century, Christians have also read prayers for "faithless Jews", the Latin word being "perfidis", which lent itself to interpretation as *perfidious* or deceitful, playing directly into offensive stereotypes. In the Book of Common Prayer, we still pray for God to "have mercy upon all Jews, Turks, Infidels, and Hereticks", and to remove from them "ignorance, hardness of heart, and contempt of [God's] word".

Cranmer at least saw fit to suppress another ancient part of the liturgy called the Reproaches, in which the voice of God accuses the Jews of faithlessness and betrayal. It is still recited in many churches; it even came back to the Church of England in Common Worship. But Christians are now encouraged to imagine ourselves—and not the Jews—as the targets of these accusations.

Anyway, that's what happened inside churches on Good Friday in the middle ages: outside churches, life

imitated liturgy: Jewish homes were commonly stoned, and these acts of vandalism were not infrequently led by clergy.

Perhaps unsurprisingly and quite rightly, the Church did a lot of soul-searching about all this in the wake of the Holocaust. In the 1950s, the Roman Catholic Good Friday prayers were rewritten, and other churches have followed suit: churches continue to pray for the Jews, but no longer for their conversion. There was a real theological shift: a new recognition that God's covenant with Abraham's children—which we heard today in our first reading—is valid even now. Here in the Church of England, the liturgy in Common Worship has us pray for better understanding between Christians and Jews.

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Which brings us to some liturgical changes we will make this Holy Week.

The first has to do with the Bible translation we will use on Good Friday [here at St Mary's]. Don't panic. We will still use the King James Version, but with a few amendments, based on the works of a friend and mentor of mine—Fr Dan Joslyn-Siemiatkoski—who has produced a translation for the Diocese of Texas of the Episcopal Church in the United States. The changes pertain to the the Greek term *hoi Iudaioi*, usually translated "the Jews" but can also be rendered

"the Judeans" and sometimes better as "the leaders of the Judeans".

The second has to do with the celebration of Passover that used to take place in Cocking on Maundy Thursday evening. This Passover *seder* is not that described in the Book of Exodus or even the gospels, but a tradition that post-dates Christianity. This means that it is not part of the ancient shared heritage between Jews and Christians, and so to copy it would just be a kind of cultural theft. Worse still, it risks being parody or pastiche: there is a long history of Christian parodying of the Jewish Passover. However well-meaning, even if this is not offensive, it is deeply weird: not least because Christians already have own own Passover meal, which is called the Eucharist, which we celebrate it every single Sunday in this Benefice, and also on Maundy Thursday itself.

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I had hoped to end with sermon by resolving that interpretive controversy about the Pharisees. But I don't really know what to make of it myself.

At first, I thought that the assumption that the Pharisees were trying to trick Jesus was driven by prejudice on the readers' part, seeing in the text more than is there. But then I found that one of my favourite Jewish biblical scholars—Amy-Jill Levine—shares this assumption, because she assumes that the

gospel itself is prejudiced against the Pharisees. Perhaps she's right.

Perhaps this is yet another example of the challenge ahead of us, as prejudices runs deep, and this is true whether we are talking about anti-Semitism or Islamophobia or racial prejudice or xenophobia or sexism or homophobia. Prejudices run deep and much is tangled up with it. Weeding out our prejudice is going to prove no less difficult than the work we take our time to do in our beautiful gardens in this part of the country. And it is arguably much more important.