On March 12, 1998, the Commission for Religious Relations With the Jews released the document “We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah.” This document calls upon us to remember and to reflect upon the times when we as a Church have been a “counterwitness and scandal” (Commission, 1998, 671). The Commission expresses “deep sorrow for the failures of her sons and daughters in every age . . . since as members of the church we are linked to the sins as well as the merits of her children” (Ibid., 674). We are also challenged to make this awareness of past sins into a firm resolve that the “spoiled seeds of anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism must never again be allowed to take root in any human heart” (Ibid., 674).

This document presents a clear moral challenge to all of us as teachers and preachers to reexamine the way that we interpret the Scripture and the way we preach. In this column I would like to examine the interpretation of a problematic text in the Gospel of Matthew (27:25) that has been used to foster anti-Jewish hatred. I would also like to expose the perhaps unconscious negative portrayal of Jews in much contemporary preaching.

Matthew’s Gospel is both the most Jewish and the most anti-Jewish Gospel (Harrington, 1991, 20–22). In chapter 23, Jesus pronounces seven woes against the scribes and the Pharisees for their hypocrisy. This passage has contributed directly to the modern understanding of a pharisaic person as one who is a hypocritical, hair-splitting legalist. Four chapters later there is an even more problematic passage:

So when Pilate saw that he could do nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took some water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, “I am innocent of this man’s blood; see to it yourselves.” Then the people as a whole answered, “His blood be on us and on our children!” (Matt 27:24-25).

Some have interpreted this passage to mean that the Jewish people as a whole bear the responsibility and the guilt for Jesus’ crucifixion and indeed have called down a curse upon themselves. So-called Christians throughout the ages have been all too willing to exact blood vengeance on the Jews citing this passage as the justification for their
atrocities (Brown, 1994:383–97). This wrong interpretation has allowed the “spoiled seed of anti-Judaism” to take root.

To interpret this text correctly we need to place it within its historical and literary context. The historical context for Matthew’s Gospel is after the destruction of Jerusalem in the 70s. The Gospel, written in the 80s, is addressed to a largely Jewish Christian community recently separated from the synagogue. As a result of this separation, the Church (Matt 16:18; 18:17) of Matthew’s community is in direct confrontation with the synagogue, led by the Pharisees, now called rabbis (Matt 23:8). This “parting of the ways” led to the vitriolic comments that we find in Matthew 23 and elsewhere in this Gospel. When we are preaching from this text, we need to present this polemical context to counter stereotyping of the Jews and the Pharisees.

Moving to a literary analysis, we see that in chapter 27 the evangelist has set up two contrasting judgment scenes: Pilate declares Jesus innocent and the Jewish people declare Jesus guilty (27:24-25). The hypocrisy in this scene, however, is not on the part of the Jews who view Jesus as a blasphemer but on the part of Pilate who condemns an innocent man. The phrase of the Jewish people, “His blood be on us and on our children,” is a stereotyped biblical phrase accepting responsibility for judgment (Lev 20:9, 11, 12, 13, 16, 27; Brown, 1994: 837–39). One should note, first, that this responsibility is limited to at most one generation. But it is even more limited than this since Matthew’s Gospel is addressed to a largely Jewish Christian community. Matthew certainly is not cursing the Jewish members of that community. In preaching and teaching this text in the aftermath of the Shoah we have a moral duty to make people aware of this historical background and the limited notion of responsibility. But beyond making people aware of these historical limitations we need also to sound forth clearly the counter-testimony in Luke’s Gospel: “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing” (23:34-35).

Beyond the issue of the interpretation of problematic texts is the issue of the portrayal of the Jews in much contemporary preaching. Think of the number of times that you have heard preachers portray Jews, and specifically the Pharisees, as hard-hearted, hair-splitting legalists, concerned more with the letter than the spirit of law. Paul before his conversion is pictured as a self-righteous wretch (Rom 7:24) unable to find a merciful and loving God. This preaching forms people’s images of Jews and their religion. Historically, however, these portrayals are wrong. Paul before his conversion was righteous not self-righteous: “... as to righteousness under the law, blameless” (Phil 3:6). Modern scholars do not see Rom 7:14-25 as autobiographical but as a description of the plight of all humanity (Fitzmyer, 1993: 472–73; Stendahl, 1963). Scholars who have searched for the historical
Pharisees would caution us against using the polemical twenty-third chapter of Matthew as an accurate description of the Pharisees (Saldarini, 1988). The Pharisees were a zealous reform movement within Judaism, very much concerned with the things of God. Certainly there were hypocritical Jews and Pharisees in Jesus’ time just as there are and have been hypocritical Christians throughout history. Nevertheless, it is both historically inaccurate and morally irresponsible to tar one religion or even one sect within Judaism, the Pharisees, as particularly prone to hypocrisy and/or legalism. All too often, the Jews in general or the Pharisees in particular become the negative example or the foil in preaching. This creates a negative image of the Jews and allows us to escape judging the hypocrisy and hard-heartedness in our own lives. The reflections on the Shoah by the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews calls each of us to repentance and a deeper understanding of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. It also calls us to exercise great caution in the words and the images that we use to portray the Jews and their religious tradition in our preaching.

REFERENCES


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