

The Rt Revd Michael Doe

Old Royal Naval Chapel, Greenwich
Sunday April 14th (Easter 3)

Acts 3: 12-19 & Luke 24: 36-48

The readings set for today could not be more topical, but that only increases the sensitivity of what I want to say. The background to what's happening in the Middle East, the atrocious acts of Hamas on November 7th, and Israel's violent response throughout Gaza, is hugely complicated. But it can't be understood without going back to Scripture, both the Old and the New Testaments, and what has happened within Judaism and Christianity in the centuries which have followed.

On Easter Day we read about how the disciples had barricaded themselves in the Upper Room, "for fear of the Jews". They were afraid that those who had arrested and killed Jesus would now come back for his followers. One of the testimonies for the reality of Jesus' resurrection is how that fear turned into joy and confidence when they met the Risen Christ. Instead of cowering in the corner they came out and proclaimed the good news of what had happened, as we heard just now in that reading from the Acts of the Apostles.

Peter does not mince his words. He addresses the people: the God of Abraham, of Isaac, of Jacob, the "God of our ancestors" (for he is also a Jew) has glorified Jesus by raising him from the dead. They had rejected him, handed him over to be crucified, demanded that a murderer be freed rather than God's holy and righteous son. Maybe, he says, you and your rulers acted in ignorance. But you should have known because the prophets had said that the Messiah would suffer and be put to death. Now they must repent and be saved in the name of Jesus.

Some of his Jewish hearers came over, but most did not. These first Christians were made to suffer. As the church grew so did the persecution, led in particular by a man called Saul, a most zealous Pharisee, until one day, on the road to Damascus, he met the Risen Christ. And so Paul became the most ardent and articulate apologist for the Christian faith. He saw it as the fulfilment of everything within

Judaism. And wherever he went he suffered for it at the hands of the Jews.

Now Paul himself never believed – we see this in his letter to the Romans - that God had given up on the People of Israel. But as the church grew, and certainly when it was adopted by the Roman Empire, a terrible history began. The tables were turned, and the Jews were condemned as the people who put Jesus to death. It's there in the Gospels, in the chilling words attributed to the Jewish crowds – “his blood be on us and on our children” – and it turned into often violent persecution. One scribe copying the Gospel of Luke omitted the words of Jesus from the Cross, “Father forgive them for they know not what they do”, because he thought that God could never forgive the Jews. Having already lost their homeland they became a scattered people, Antisemitism grew, until in the last century it combined with secularist fascism to result in the Holocaust.

What we call Antisemitism is only one facet of religious violence. The Early Church Fathers wrote some terrible things about the Jews, but they only reflect what the Jews had been saying about people outside their own community, according to the Psalmist, “Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!”

The Jews believed that they were defending their faith, keeping it pure. They believed that God had given them a special calling, a unique vocation. They were the chosen people. And key to that was the land promised to Abraham and his successors for all time.

What should Jews and Christians make of that today? Many scholars would now say that the promise doesn't go back to some patriarchs in the second millennium BC, but originated when they returned from Exile in the sixth century. More conservative Jews continue to claim that the land still belongs to them, “from the river to the sea”: long before that slogan was taken up by those Arabs who challenge the very existence of Israel, it was adopted by the Jewish settlers returning to the land after an absence of nearly two thousand years. It's used today by Netanyahu and his ministers, meaning that there is no room for a separate Palestinian state. More generally, what's the connection between Jewish ethnicity and Judaism as a religious faith and community? If you are Jewish and an atheist, can you claim the promise, even if you no longer believe in God?

All of this is there in the background of what's happening in Israel and Palestine today. Jewish communities the world over see it in different ways. Many defend the creation of Israel as a nation state because it's necessary for the safety of Jewish people and identity. But amongst more liberal Jews there has also been great uneasiness about the fifty plus years of military occupation of Gaza and the West Bank, and what's happening on the ground today.

Christians also see Judaism in different ways. There are some who believe that everything Jewish, the special calling, all the promises, have been fulfilled in Jesus Christ. The Jews just need to repent and be saved. There are others with an equally conservative reading of Scripture but who welcome the Jewish return to Jerusalem because it will lead to the Second Coming of Jesus, when the Jews will either convert or be lost for ever. These are the so-called Christian Zionists, one of strongest religious forces in the United States today, and in November they will vote overwhelmingly for Donald Trump.

Such Christian Zionism has also played a significant role in British foreign policy. There's not time this morning to talk about Britain's role in Palestine, but in the period since the centenary of the Balfour Declaration some of us have been working on a project which exposes our country's complicity and duplicity over the land of Palestine, and our repeated failure to try and put right what we largely caused at the end of Empire. When we watch what's happening in Gaza on the TV news, we are not innocent bystanders.

My final point takes us back those Bible readings. Peter's appeal for repentance is addressed to all of us, Christians and Jews. We are called to be saved from the sins we commit today, but also from the history and the culture we have inherited and where we have done such great damage to one another. But the most significant thing is how God brings about that change. Addressing the crowd Peter takes up what we also heard the Risen Christ say to his disciples in that Gospel reading, that the Messiah comes not to force and overpower but to suffer and to die. This should have been what the Jews were expecting. This is certainly what we have seen in Jesus.

And yet how often we have turned our back on it, reverted to the pursuit of power, and used religion to justify it.

There is no place for religious violence, Jewish or Christian, in the purposes of God. When the Risen Christ says to his disciples, when he says to us here and now, "Peace be with you", he lifts up his hands and we can see not a sword but the marks of the nails.

Pray for the Jews, the Christians, and indeed the Muslims, in Israel and in Palestine. Pray for the people of Gaza. Pray that we may all be rescued from the old ways of sin and death. Pray that we may hear again the words of the Risen Christ: "Peace be with you".
Amen.

This sermon was prepared before the Iranian drone attack on Israel the night before it was preached. In an already complicated history, it does not touch on the role of Islam, either historically during the period of the Crusades or today. The declining presence but also the still strong witness of the Christian Churches in the Holy Land should also not be ignored. On what is called the British complicity, see <https://balfourproject.org/> The Bishop of Southwark is a patron of the Balfour Project and our preacher is a trustee.