

**Brancepeth Sermon**  
**Fourth Sunday after Trinity; 10 July 2022**

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*Heb 12:18-end; Luke 13:10-17; Ps 103*

*Open our ears, O Lord,*

*to hear your word and know your voice.*

*Speak to our hearts and strengthen our wills,*

*that we may serve you today and always.*

*Amen*

This morning, I think I need to talk about *antisemitism*.

That may seem like a rather odd choice,

but I say it because our readings today

have often been read as contrasting

the *Christian* way with the way of *Judaism* -

very much to Judaism's disadvantage.

So our Hebrews passage, for instance, seems to pit the *Old* Testament against the *New*.

That is, it contrasts Mount *Sinai* with Mount *Zion*.

Mount *Sinai* is the mountain on which Moses received the law, a mountain that was covered with all sorts of terrifying portents when Israel encountered God there: ‘darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that not another word be spoken to them.’

And Hebrews contrasts that with Mount *Zion* - which, in this epistle, seems to mean the Christian community, ‘the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven’, with ‘innumerable angels in festal gathering’ - the church, gathered around Jesus.

It's darkness versus light,  
terror versus joy,  
the old religion of *Moses* versus the new religion of *Jesus*.  
  
*Or so it has often been read.*

And then in our gospel passage, we read another contrast –  
this time between *Jesus* and the *Pharisees*.  
We get *Jesus* who brings *healing* on the sabbath,  
and the *Pharisees* who think that  
observance of the *law* matters more than healing.

Jesus places loving care  
at the heart of our relationship to God;  
whereas the Pharisees see that relationship in terms of  
strict compliance with rules.

We're given a contrast between  
the Christian religion of *love*,  
and the Jewish religion of *law*.

*Or so it has often been read.*

Now, I don't think *either* of those readings adds up,  
but these are contrasts that run very deep  
in Christian consciousness:  
law versus grace;  
wrath versus love;  
the Old Testament God who casts down versus  
the New Testament God who lifts up;  
an old covenant replaced by a new;  
cold hearts replaced by hearts of flesh;  
*Judaism replaced by Christianity.*

And the thing is: that whole way of thinking is murderous –  
*literally* murderous.

It has, over the centuries, fuelled a Christian belief  
that Jews are a problem,  
their religion outmoded,  
their difference from Christians a matter of  
blindness and obstinacy.  
It has fuelled Christian *hatred* of Jews.

And that hatred has not been a problem  
confined to a few bad apples.

It has not been an occasional aberration.

It has been pervasive, persistent, and utterly deadly.

And it is a problem that is still with us.

I worked in inter-faith relations before moving to Durham.

In a programme that focused on relations between Christians,  
Jews, and Muslims.

I worked closely with Jewish colleagues,  
and their testimony was that antisemitism  
is very much *not* a problem that is over and done with.

It's a daily reality.

And the more explicit forms of antisemitism -

the attacks on synagogues,

the threats of violence,

the discrimination, the insults -

are underpinned by less obvious forms,

by ways of thinking that stereotype Jews  
and caricature their religion.

And my Jewish colleagues said that even  
nice, open-minded, well-meaning Christian churches  
are ones where, if a Jewish visitor listens long enough,  
they will hear people saying that the  
Jews of Jesus' time - and implicitly of our time -  
are legalists with no real idea of grace.

They will hear that Jews are people of law rather than of love.

They will hear that Jews belong to the past  
their religion now superseded by Christianity.

And they will eventually hear  
stories and sermons and hymns that insinuate,  
that they as Jews bear special responsibility  
for the murder of Jesus.

And even when none of that turns into active hostility,  
or even into slurs and exclusions -

though it very often has in the past,  
and still regularly does in the present -  
the seeds of disdain are always there.

Now of course, I don't mean Brancepeth -  
except that I do.

Some of the patterns of talk, of imagination, of feeling,  
that - however inadvertently -  
create a seedbed for antisemitism *are here too*.

If you listened with Jewish ears to some of what we say,  
some of what we sing,  
it wouldn't take long before you'd hear things  
that would make you distinctly uncomfortable.

I do cringe, for instance, when we sing songs that talk about  
how *'they'* crucified Jesus.

'Were you there when *they* crucified my Lord'. Or  
'Then "Crucify!" is all *their* breath,  
and for His death *they* thirst and cry.'

Those lines both come from beautiful hymns –  
but I could wish those hymns did better at avoiding the idea  
that there is some ‘*them*’ out there responsible for Jesus’ death.

Because, for centuries, Christians have not only  
blamed the Jews for Jesus’ death, but punished them,  
turning Holy Week into a time of terror  
for the Jewish community.

So I wish we did better at avoiding even the *edges*  
of that way of thinking and talking.

But, in the light of all that,  
what should we say about the two biblical passages  
we looked at this morning?

First, we should notice that there is *no* contrast in them,  
nor in the Bible more generally, between wrath and love.

The God of the Old Testament  
is a God of love as much as a God of wrath,



and the God of the New Testament is a God of wrath  
as much as a God of love.

It was our Psalm, after all, right in the heart of the *Old* Testament,  
that talked about God's loving kindness,  
and it was our *New* Testament passage from Hebrews that said,  
'See that you do not refuse the one who is speaking;  
for if they [the people of Israel in the Old Testament]  
did not escape when they refused  
the one who warned them on earth,  
*how much less will we escape* if we reject  
the one who warns from heaven!'

And that both the Old Testament and the New  
talk about both love *and* wrath  
should not surprise us, because  
love and wrath go together.

That may sound surprising, but  
if you love someone, you hate what harms them.

It is *because* you love them that you  
fight against what harms them,

you work against it, you set your face against it,  
you desire its end.

If I see something harming my children, for instance,  
I'm going to burn against it *because* I love them.

God's wrath against evil *is* God's love;  
it is the face that God's love turns towards anything that harms,  
anything that threatens to destroy, all that God loves.

If God was not also a God of wrath -  
if God was simply *okay* with the forces that harm and kill us -  
then how could we say that God was a God of love?

So there is no room for a contrast between  
Old Testament and New,  
or between Judaism and Christianity,  
in terms of wrath and love, judgment and healing.

And look again at the dispute between Jesus and the Pharisees.  
Remember that *everyone* involved in this dispute  
is a Jew, an observant Jew.

The Pharisees are, obviously – but so are Jesus and his disciples.

They're *all* Jewish.

And we know that Jesus and his disciples

worshipped in the temple;

and we know that they kept the Jewish food laws

Peter says early in Acts that he has

'never eaten anything that is profane or unclean' –

and that's after years eating with Jesus.

Jesus, it seems, kept kosher.

So the dispute in this passage is a dispute amongst Jews

about different ways of inhabiting their Jewish heritage.

For *all* of them, God's law –

what we think of as the Old Testament law –

was a gift.

It was a gift given by God to reveal to God's people

how to live flourishing lives,

lives that fit with God's purposes,

lives that fit within the world God has made,  
lives that respond to God's promises.

It was not a burden.

For the Pharisees in particular, this God-given gift  
was a blueprint for flourishing life  
with God and with one another,  
and they interpreted it as a gift of God's loving-kindness.

And so, they thought, if God is now doing something new,  
it will fit with what God has said in the past:  
it will fit in with the blueprint,  
the instructions given in the law.

Yes, God can and does heal - they knew that -  
but if healing is really from God  
it will surely fit in with God's other gifts,  
including the gift of the sabbath.

When they looked at Jesus, they saw someone who,  
to their eyes, was clearly cutting corners -

or even outright ignoring the blueprint God had given.

They therefore *knew* that something was not right.

So, yes, many of them were opposed to Jesus,

and opposed to the way he seemed to disregard the law.

Because Jesus was someone who pushed *further* the idea

- the idea they all shared -

that the whole purpose of the law is love.

Because he pushed that idea further,

he was willing to take more liberties with the law -

to take more liberties in reinterpreting it,

to take more liberties in deciding how to apply it.

So there *is* a real disagreement there.

But it is not a disagreement between law and love,

between judgment and grace,

between legalism and freedom.

It is a disagreement between two ways of understanding

*how* God's gift of the law embodies God's love.

And certainly Christians and Jews today differ  
in their understandings of God's law -  
though there's huge variety on both sides  
which makes any quick summary of the difference impossible -  
but Judaism is as much a religion of God's love as Christianity.

And God's love should be our focus when we think about our  
Jewish friends and neighbours today.

The church has not somehow  
replaced the people of Israel in God's affections.  
God has not turned *away* from them and *towards* us.

Paul - another observant Jew - says of his people in Romans 9,  
'They are Israelites,  
and to *them* belong the adoption,  
the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law,  
the worship, and the promises'

And two chapters later, he says,

‘as regards election they are *beloved* ...

for the gifts and the calling of God are *irrevocable*.’

So when we give in to stereotyping,

when we take polemics from the New Testament

and use them to depict Judaism as a whole,

when we use contrasts with Judaism to explain

how much Christianity has to do with love and grace,

we are giving in to one of Christianity’s

deepest besetting temptations,

and we are demeaning a people chosen by God

and loved by God.

And so we are denying the very love of God

that ought to be our touchstone and our guide.

*Bless the Lord, O my soul,  
and do not forget all his benefits.*

*God heals all your diseases,  
and crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,*

*The Lord is merciful and gracious,  
abounding in steadfast love.*

*Lord, help us to sieve out from our words and actions  
all the seeds from which antisemitism can grow,  
and help us to reflect your steadfast love  
in all our dealings with our Jewish friends and neighbours.*

*Amen*