
What Becomes of the Church When it Forgets Israel

Jeremiah 31.31-4, Mark 7.24-37

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on September 10 2006 by the Revd Canon Dr Sam Wells

I want to tell you a story that begins about 587 years before Christ and ends around 15 years ago. It is one of the saddest stories in God's pocket book – made all the sadder because Christians never tell it.

It begins with the words of comfort from the prophet Jeremiah in the desperate circumstances of the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple and the Exile of the people of Judah. 'The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.' These words tell us that God made the world so he could claim a people as his friends. In other words the purpose of creation was that God would make a covenant. That covenant was made with a people, Israel. God did not choose Israel because it was special but Israel became special people because God chose it. God and Israel had a passionate love affair for many centuries, a relationship damaged by sin and evil. Eventually God sent his son Jesus to sum up everything about Israel and everything about God. This was the time, it seemed, to open that precious covenant out to the Gentiles, and graft them into Israel's covenant. The Gentiles could become part of the body of Christ and thus part of the body of Israel. The Holy Spirit came to gather the Gentiles and all creation into the passionate and everlasting covenant between God and Israel.

What went wrong? Well, initially the Jews were split between those who recognized Jesus as the embodiment of Israel and the Jews who didn't. And the latter group asked the former group, now called the Church, a very legitimate question. 'If the Messiah has come, how come the land of Israel is still run by the Romans and God's universal reign of peace hasn't appeared?' The Church has seldom fully answered this question. And the Jews have never stopped asking it. The early Church came up with three broad answers.

- (1) The first was, 'Don't worry, redemption isn't visible now, but it's coming'. This was the promise of a sudden, total, and transforming end of the world and return of Christ. The trouble with this answer is that it didn't explain how Jesus had made any difference when he came the first time. God could have ended the story in a blaze of glory whether Jesus had come or not.
- (2) So the Church came up with a second answer. 'Redemption is spiritual, not visible to the senses.' This second answer made Christianity and Judaism unrecognizable to one another. Jewish faith was very physical: it was all about the body, the land and the community. Spiritualizing redemption made faith all about the soul, the inner life and the individual. Historical events became of secondary interest. It's easy to see how the Old Testament starts to seem irrelevant or worse to this spiritualized gospel. (Except parts like today's reading from Jeremiah, so long as you concentrate on the 'new heart' bit, and ignore that the new covenant is still being made with Israel, not the Gentiles.)
- (3) And then in the fourth century along came a third answer when the Roman Emperor became a Christian. Redemption, it seemed, had come in the fleshly here and now, not with a new Jerusalem but with a new Rome. This looks much more like a Jewish idea of redemption – a universal reign of peace. (Not that peace was particularly evident, mind you.) But the real irony was that the land of Israel was still run by the Romans. In other words the Christian empire was salvation for everyone except the Jews. Which meant of course it wasn't really salvation at all – at least not as the Bible understands it.

It's no coincidence that this period, the fourth century, was the time the Church sat down to agree about its faith. The invisibility of the Jews is perhaps nowhere more striking than in the words of the Christian creeds. 'We believe in God the Father, who made the earth, and in God the son, born of Mary who redeemed us...' Hang on, how did we jump from the beginning of Genesis to the beginning of Matthew, skipping over 38 whole books of the Old Testament? Isn't God's covenant with Noah, Abraham, Jacob, David and Jeremiah what most of the Bible is all about? Christians were only interested in how Jesus could be God if God was still one, and

had missed the other vital question of how God could possibly have stopped loving the Jews, if he was a God who kept his promises.

For most of the history of the Church, Christians have responded to the accusation, 'You don't look redeemed' with the same three answers with which they began.

- (1) Some have always said, 'Wait until the end of the world (which by the way is coming any day)'. These people seem to leave no significant role for Jesus: Jesus becomes a check that is only cashed at the end of time.
- (2) Many have preferred to say 'It's the soul that counts, not the body'. These people have no place whatsoever for the Jews, whose faith seems to represent the opposite of this spiritualized remix.
- (3) And many have always said, and still do, 'Redemption lies in a Christian nation'. These people are interested in God's promises to Israel, but only in order to replace them with God's promises to themselves.

The modern nation state that emerged from the seventeenth century onwards was based on a combination of the second and third answers. It said to the Church, 'You deal with answer number two, and look after the soul, and we'll deal with answer number three, and look after the body'. The state's rhetoric was that Israel had disobeyed the covenant and so God had chosen to make a new covenant with the nation state instead. As a political platform, you have to say this is a winner. You just borrow everything God promised to Israel and start promising it to yourself. Britain was one of the first states to start doing this; why do you think it started calling itself 'Great Britain' after all? France was not far behind, and this habit justified these two nations' colonial ambitions. When Germany started doing it, things started to get really ugly. And then the Afrikaners got on the bandwagon, and started sifting through the Old Testament in search of texts that might be used to justify flagrant racism. And that brings us near the end of our story. You'll no doubt have guessed where it's heading. There's only one nation left that continues this habit of regarding itself as having inherited the promises God made for Israel. There's only one nation left that has looked at the way God chose Israel out of all the peoples of the earth for reasons that will always be a mystery of grace, and turned that choice into the choice of itself for the plain and simple reasons of its superior government, geography, and general beneficence. There's only one nation left that has translated God's election of Israel into the nation's election of itself. And that nation is the United States of America. Other nations have laid claim to being the new chosen people. But the United States has declared itself a 'chosen people with tenure'.

And I'm saying the story ends in 1992 because in that year Bill Clinton accepted the Democratic nomination to the presidency by saying that he was bringing a 'new covenant'. Think of that – the very words we read today in Jeremiah. Three years later in his State of the Union address Clinton again referred to the New Covenant, and recalled what he called the 'first and most sacred covenant – life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness'. This is the end of the story because it represents not just the Church's appropriation of all the promises God made to Israel, dubious as that may be, but America's scarcely credible appropriation of all these promises to itself, and its retelling of the 'most sacred' story (note those words 'most sacred') not as a story in which God chose Israel, but as a story in which America chose itself.

What can we learn from this somber story? Well, let's assess the damage, before imagining how God might rescue the story from here. The damage begins with the centuries-long and shameful Christian persecution of the Jews. Let's not get into the suggestion that the Jews brought this on themselves by rejecting Jesus or putting him to death. The Romans put Jesus to death, and certainly the Jewish leaders had a hand in it, but this was not a national apostasy. Jesus was a Jew. And, in an important sense, he still is. The first Christians were all Jews. If a large number of Jews after the resurrection never accepted Jesus, it was out of faithfulness to their Scriptures as they read them, not in brazen denial of God's covenant with them. God's rejection of his people Israel is simply unthinkable. God's passionate love for Israel runs throughout the Old Testament, and that love does not come to a sudden halt on Good Friday. As Paul makes clear in Romans 11, the Gentiles only become part of the promise by being grafted *into* Israel, not by *replacing* Israel. The Gentile Christian community is always a *guest in the household* of Israel. *God keeps his promises*: if we don't trust the promises of God to Israel in the Old Testament, how can we trust the promises of Jesus to the Church in the New?

This isn't all. The damage isn't limited to Christian sin. It extends to Christian theology. The modern state took over the body and left the Church to deal with the soul. And so the Church has created an extraordinary spiritualized Jesus who bears little or no resemblance to a first-century Jew. This is the Jesus who belongs to me, who lives inside me, who writes self-help manuals, who gives me emotional therapy when my team loses a ball game and is more or less my pet poodle. And of course the Church struggles to distinguish between this Jesus and the real one. *And this is because without Israel the Church doesn't know who Jesus is.* Jesus is the embodiment of God's promise to Israel, and the embodiment of Israel's covenant with God. Fully divine, fully human. But we know very little about God that we don't find out in God's relationship with Israel. Israel isn't a ladder we can climb up by reading the Old Testament and then toss away when we get to Jesus. Israel – the Jews – are still *with us*, and God is still in *relationship* with them, and if we want to know who God is we need to be talking to the Jews about it. We may believe Jesus gives us the key to the door but it's a door to a house the Jews have been living in since Abraham and are still occupying, thank you very much. So without Israel, we know next to nothing about Jesus and next to nothing about God.

And that's not the end of it. Because first the Jews, and in due course many others, kept asking the Church a question ("Why don't you look redeemed?"), a question it couldn't answer, the Church has created a spiritualized gospel. It has handed over the bodies of its members to the nation state and held onto this invisible thing called a soul. In other words the state deals with everything that matters (think about that word 'matter' – of course it means 'has tangible significance') and the Church deals with errr... it's hard to say. The irony yet again is that while the spiritualization of Jesus has rendered the Church practically invisible, one group after all these centuries is still visible as a distinct and recognizable body. And that is the Jews. Despite interminable persecution, the Jews are still with us. And painful and humbling as it is for Christians to realize, in many, perhaps most, respects, *they've* been a better witness to what it means to be the people of God over the last twenty centuries than has the Church. The Jews are still teaching the Church what salvation is.

So, after this tale of woe, what's the good news? How might God work to rescue the Church from what has become of it through its forgetfulness of Israel? And how might we become an active part of what God is doing? Well, first of all we need to remember that we are the early Church. Two thousand years is not a long time in God's sight. We've made some ghastly and catastrophic mistakes but this is still early days. It's not too late for God to transform this story. Next, we need to rediscover what Ephesians 2 describes as the heart of the gospel. Listen to these words: 'At one time you Gentiles were strangers to the covenants of promise. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. In his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us, [creating] in himself *one new humanity in place of the two*, thus making peace, and [reconciling] both groups to God in one body through the cross. For through him *both of us* have access in one Spirit to the Father.' In other words in Christ's body Jew and Gentile become one body. For Jew and Gentile to try to be redeemed without one another is like a Siamese twin saying 'I'm hoping to get to heaven but I'm not sure my sister is going to make it'. Jew and Gentile are now one body. That is part of what Christ achieved. If we forget that it's not surprising the Church finds it hard to articulate what Christ *did* achieve.

One body. This is what the Church is all about. This is what baptism proclaims and Eucharist performs. The Holy Spirit is working in and through all things to gather the Gentiles and the whole creation into the covenant between God and Israel. This is what the Church is saying to Israel. The covenant is not finally, fundamentally, about land. The State of Israel is an understandable creation in view of the story I've just told, and criticisms of it by the Church have to bear in mind the long and gruesome Christians part Christians have played in making the State of Israel seem necessary. But Jesus was not fundamentally about land. He was about making one body, a body shaped for friendship with God forever. Because the Church has so seldom been interested in being one body, because it has so easily translated redemption into something else, Jews have always had good reason to say 'your Messiah doesn't seem to have brought much redemption'. Instead, through history, the Jews have arguably been more one body in the world's eyes than the Church.

So perhaps the sin is not so much that the Jews have failed God by not joining the Church. Perhaps the sin is that the Church has failed God by not exhibiting in any way convincingly to the Jews that Jesus has saved us

by making us one body. And the result is that the world has yet to see the new body made possible by the cross and resurrection of Christ.

So what the Church has to do is to say 'We thought all we needed was Jesus. But now we see we can't understand who Jesus is and what he's done without understanding Israel. And when we begin to understand Israel we discover the faithfulness of God and the deep sin of the Church'.

And after the Church has said that it's up to you and me. We need to say to our Jewish friends, 'We've been missing half the gospel for two thousand years. We can't do this without you. We want to talk to you, essentially not for your sake and salvation but for ours. We are guests in your house. God has destined us to be one body with you. Jesus has made it possible. We need you. We've horribly abused you. We'd like to start by saying sorry.