

Materials for Virtual Worship 8th Sunday After Trinity – 2 August 2020

Collect

Lord God,
your Son left the riches of heaven
and became poor for our sake:
when we prosper save us from pride,
when we are needy save us from despair,
that we may trust in you alone;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Readings

Letter to the Romans 9:1-5

I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience confirms it by the Holy Spirit— ²I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. ³For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people, my kindred according to the flesh. ⁴They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; ⁵to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah, May he who is God over all be blessed for ever.

Matthew's Gospel 14:13-21

¹³ Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. ¹⁴ When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. ¹⁵ When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, 'This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.' ¹⁶ Jesus said to them, 'They need not go away; you give them something to eat.' ¹⁷ They replied, 'We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.' ¹⁸ And he said, 'Bring them here to me.' ¹⁹ Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. ²⁰ And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. ²¹ And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

Reflection

On Friday 24th July, Muslim worship resumed in Hagia Sophia, Istanbul, 85 years after the mosque was closed for prayers and opened as a museum. As you may gathered from the media this has been a controversial move, partly because it suggests that Turkey is moving away from its secular constitution, but more particularly it has stirred up resentment amongst Orthodox Christians for whom Hagia Sophia is a symbol of the foundation of the Orthodox Church, just as St Peter's in Rome is for Catholics.



At stake here is what we might call the 'Islam Problem' – one we are familiar with in both its political and religious guises.

To understand the Hagia Sophia controversy we need to go back in time and remind ourselves about the history of the building. It is a very ancient Christian monument and was constructed in 537 AD by Justinian I – at a time when Constantinople (as Istanbul was then called) was the centre of Christianity. So, for 900 years it served as a church until 1453 when the Byzantine empire fell to the Ottomans. Then for the next 500 years it became a mosque until 1935 when under Ataturk it was opened as museum.

What makes Hagia Sophia's history particularly significant in terms of the Christian-Islam view of each other is the story of her exquisite mosaics. The oldest one which survives is that of the Virgin Mary and the infant, placed high up in the apse. Another depicts the emperor Leo VI paying homage to Christ sitting on a throne holding a book which says, 'I am the light of the world'.

Yet for Muslims as well as for Jews and many Christians, representational art of this kind in places of worship breaks the commandment not to worship graven images. At various times in Hagia Sophia's history the mosaics have been destroyed or partially covered up or plastered over. This censoring of images tells us so much about how each religion sees the other.

So, for example, in its the early days as a mosque, most of the mosaics were white-washed but Jesus and Mary were not. For the Qur'an especially venerates Mary's obedience to God and regards Jesus as a



prophet. By allowing these images Islam acknowledges its roots in Judaism and Christianity. Plastering over all these images negatively re-writes this relationship.

Now, in a sense, St Paul faced a similar problem with his own roots and identity as a Jew. The question which dominated a great deal of his theology was just how much should he retain of his Judaism or should he remove it altogether? This question occupies his Letter to the Galatians, but it is in his Letter to the Romans chapters 9-12 where Paul gives it his most mature thought.

Many suggest that originally these chapters formed a separate sermon which Paul probably delivered on many occasions as he travelled round Asia Minor preaching in the local synagogues. The opening of the sermon, which we heard read a moment ago, captures something of his awkwardness and sensitivity about the issue. The main issue is this: Judaism has provided him with so many great gifts – the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac and Jacob), God's covenants revealed to them and to Moses; the law; worship in the Temple and in synagogues and finally the promises of the messiah. So, despite all these gifts, why have so many Jews rejected Jesus as the messiah?

Is Judaism defective and beyond repair – should Paul root it out?

One answer is yes, but the problem with that solution as Paul goes on to say in chapter 9, is that it would suggest that God is somehow defective and that what he revealed in the law and the prophets was also defective. This cannot be the case, says Paul, the defect lies not with God but with those who fail to respond to his revelation.

Paul's answer to the Jewish Problem, is provided in his image of the olive tree in chapter 11. The ancient olive tree is the Judaism in which he has been brought up and which has given him so much, but now some of its branches are dead and need to be removed and in their place new branches grafted in. The new branches are the faith made possible in Christ; the old tree is revived – and there is still the hope that the 'natural branches be grafted back into their own olive tree' (11:24). Paul certainly doesn't consider that Christianity is exclusive – Jews are definitely not denied God's salvation.

So, we see that Judaism and Christianity have much to offer each other. For us today in a globalised and multi-cultural environment, Paul's Jewish Question has extended to the Religions Question. What is the relationship of non-Christian religions with Christianity? This is probably one of the most significant

issues which we and other people of faith face and to which we need to give much time, prayer and discussion. It can be awkward, but open and honest discussion is not only fruitful and reinvigorating but in the end reminds us that the good news of Christ transcends religion, class and gender; for as Paul famously said that in Christ there is neither Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female (Galatians 3:28).

Wouldn't it be a wonderful gesture if the mosaics in Hagia Sophia were to remain fully uncovered even during Muslim worship?

Paul's gesture of fruitful Jewish-Christian relationship comes at the end of his introduction where he recites a Jewish blessing or berakhah – the very same blessing which Jesus must have used when he blessed the bread before distributing it to the five thousand (Matthew 14:19):

May he who is God over all be blessed for ever. Amen (Romans 9:5)

Michael Wilcockson

Hymn (Gradual)

- 1 God of grace and God of glory,
on thy people pour thy power;
now fulfil thy church's story;
bring her bud to glorious flower.
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage,
for the facing of this hour.

- 2 Lo, the hosts of evil round us
scorn thy Christ, assail his ways;
from the fears that long have bound us
free our hearts to faith and praise.
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage,
for the living of these days.

- 3 Cure thy children's warring madness,
bend our pride to thy control;
shame our wanton selfish gladness,
rich in goods and poor in soul.
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage,
lest we miss thy kingdom's goal.

- 4 Set our feet on lofty places,
gird our lives that they may be
armoured with all Christlike graces
in the fight till all be free.
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage,
that we fail not man nor thee.

Harry Emerson Fosdick (1878-1969)

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Hymn (at Offertory)

- 1 The Spirit lives to set us free,
walk, walk in the light.
He binds us all in unity,
walk, walk in the light.
*Walk in the light, walk in the light,
walk in the light, walk in the light of the Lord*
- 2 Jesus promised life to all,
walk, walk in the light.
The dead were wakened by his call,
walk, walk in the light.
Chorus
- 3 By Jesus' love our wounds are healed,
walk, walk in the light.
The Father's kindness is revealed,
walk, walk in the light.
Chorus
- 4 The Spirit lives in you and me,
walk, walk in the light.
His light will shine for all to see,
walk, walk in the light.
Chorus

Damian Lundy (1940-1997)

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Post Communion Prayer

Strengthen for service, Lord,
the hands that have taken holy things;
may the ears which have heard your word
be deaf to clamour and dispute;
may the tongues which have sung your praise be free from deceit;
may the eyes which have seen the tokens of your love
shine with the light of hope;
and may the bodies which have been fed with your body
be refreshed with the fullness of your life;
glory to you for ever