

John 20: 19. For fear of the Jews.

Ten years passed, then twenty; maybe forty. Bit by bit they were realising that there was hardly anyone left who had met Jesus in the flesh. Hardly anyone who could say “I remember when he...”; or “I’ll not forget when he said...” What was to be done. How to make sure the stories did not disappear? Matthew, Mark, Luke and John had an idea. One by one, they picked up their pens and began to write. The last of the four was John

Clever scholars have spent much time and patience working out who the audience was for St John’s gospel. As they have weighed up all the clues that are contained in its 21 chapters they have concluded that John was writing for one particular little group of people. The Christian community – you might call it a congregation- he was writing for were people who were Jewish by birth but who had become followers of Jesus. Maybe they lived in Jerusalem, but more likely they lived in Alexandria in Egypt. Their situation was not good.

They were afraid. And they were afraid of the very people they had once felt at home with. There had been a huge rupture in relationships between those early Jewish Christians and the leaders of the synagogue. The leaders of the Jewish community had come to feel that those of their number who were calling themselves Christians had betrayed their faith and they were not having it. They were big and powerful and the Christians were weak and small and the Christians were afraid.

So John writes his 20th chapter and he tells them this. “Seventy years ago at Eastertime the disciples were afraid. Just as you are today they were afraid of the Jews; and do you know this. Jesus who had been crucified them came among them and his first words were “Peace be with you”. I have no doubt John wants his readers to see themselves like these first disciples – that is why he puts in the words “for fear of the Jews”. And then his message is

about Jesus and peace. In those days Jesus came to those who were afraid and gave them his peace. That means that you, this small Christian community here in Egypt, when you are afraid, you too can face what is ahead in the peace of Jesus.

It is a very powerful Easter message he gives them. And fearful Christians ever since have found the promise and the presence of the peace that Jesus gives their best hope of dealing with the anxiety and fear which threatens all they are and all they do. Jesus gives the peace which the world cannot give and the world cannot take away. The peace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

These fearful Christians to whom John was writing must have been glad to hear John chapter 20. And Christians ever since have been glad to hear the story. Yet how I wish, how I wish, that five words in it had never been written. I wish the story did not say that the disciples were behind locked doors “for fear of the Jews”. You understand why these words are there: because John was giving heart to a group of Jewish Christians in Egypt who had reason to be afraid of the synagogue authorities. But when these five words “for fear of the Jews” have been taken out of the context in which they were written they have done immense harm.

The immense harm I am talking about is anti-semitism. Hating Jewish people. And the particular harm is that abuse of words in the Bible like these five words in John chapter 20 has allowed anti-semitism to blossom – never were there blossoms more foul-smelling – in the Christian church. It is almost beyond belief that people who claim, to follow Jesus of Nazareth, a full-blooded Jew himself, of the royal line of David indeed, should contaminate their minds and their mouths with persecuting Jewish people. But Christian anti-semitism has a long and poisonous history. The tragedy is that if you look for it you can find verses in the Bible which appear to fools and wicked people as Christian justification.

It's not just that we should be ashamed of prejudice against Jews among Christian people. We need to confess its sinfulness before God and ask for

forgiveness. Maybe you think I am making this up. Maybe you believe that Christians always respect Jews and Judaism. If only. What about Martin Luther, the great Reformer whose five hundredth anniversary will be celebrated later this year? Listen Luther about Jews – and I defy you not to be ashamed. *They remain our daily murderers and bloodthirsty foes in their hearts.. .. Undoubtedly they do more and viler things than those which we know and discover.....everyone would gladly be rid of them.*

Pages and pages of that sort of stuff. Can you trace a connection to the Christian churches in Germany which blessed the rise of Hitler and encouraged him to find a final solution to what they called “the Jewish problem”?

I could make you ill with examples of Christian anti-semitism down the centuries. But what good would that do? The only real repentance will be one which not merely acknowledges our past but seeks to change the present and to make the future safe. The time has come for Christians, who once went along with wicked prejudice, now to be in the vanguard of the struggle against hatred of the Jews today.

A few years ago you might have said that this was a dead horse: that no-one really hated Jews today. You would not say that now. In the USA in the first six weeks of this year alone there have been 67 bomb threats against Jewish Community Centres. There has been a large increase in online anti-Semitic threats and hate speech. Swastikas have been spray painted on the streets of New York. A few weeks ago the head of the European Jewish Congress met the Pope to tell him of his deep concern about the rise throughout Europe about the rise of intolerance of minorities. He said *When minorities are alienated, history tells us in its blood-stained pages that it is usually the Jews who lead the suffering.* And in Scotland – shame on us – a government report last year found that one-third of Scottish Jews are considering leaving Scotland because of rising anti-semitism. People even thinking of fleeing from Scotland! Does that not make you ashamed.?

This is no time for apathy. The German theologian Martin Niemoller was famously critical of the apathy of the German churches in the 1930s He is best remembered for these words: words for our time

First they came for the Jews and I did not speak out because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for the Communists and I did not speak out because I was not a Communist.

Then they came for the trade unionists and I did not speak out because I was not a trade unionist.

Then they came for me and there was no one left to speak out for me.

I'm not always sure what politicians mean when they speak of "our values". But I hope they mean tolerance and the protection of minorities. If that is what they mean then these values are at risk today and today is when they need to be defended.

One final point. On Saturday I will land at Tel Aviv airport. For the next ten days I will see dreadful evidence of the cruelty and injustice of the Israeli government. When I come home I will say so and I will be accused of anti-semitism. I hope you are wise enough to know that there is a great difference between criticising a government and hating a people. Both Jews and Christians read in the Hebrew Bible

*Let justice roll down like a river,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream*