

Department of Dialogue and Unity Committee for Catholic/Jewish Relations

READINGS DURING ADVENT

Readings During Advent (PDF)

2004

The four weeks of Advent offer many opportunities to present the modern teaching of the Church on Judaism in the homily. During this time the Church remembers that the coming of Jesus ushered in the reign of God but that the Kingdom of God has not yet fully arrived. We Christians await its fulfilment just as our Jewish brothers and sisters look forward to the coming of the messianic age. The readings in Advent give us occasion to explore the relationship between the Old and New Testament readings which are 'paired' to bring out the theme of promise and fulfilment. This leaflet is meant to help the preacher or catechist to read the texts sensitively, putting them in their historical context as well as opening up their theological import.

Promise and Fulfilment

The Lectionary readings from the prophets are selected to bring out the ancient Christian theme that Jesus is the fulfilment of that biblical message of hope and promise, the inauguration of the days to come described, for example, by the daily Advent Masses, and on Sundays by Isaiah in cycle A and Jeremiah in cycle C for the first Sunday of Advent. This truth needs to be framed very carefully. Christians believe that Jesus is the promised Messiah who has come (see Luke 4:22), but also know that his messianic kingdom is not yet fully realised. The ancient messianic prophecies are not merely temporal predictions but profound expressions of eschatological hope. Since this dimension can be misunderstood or even missed altogether, the homilist needs clearly to raise the hope found in the prophets and heightened in the proclamation of Christ. This hope includes trust in what is promised but not yet seen. While the biblical prophecies of an age of universal *shalom* are fulfilled (i.e. irreversibly inaugurated) in Christ's coming, that fulfilment is not yet completely worked out in each person's life or perfected in the world at large. [1] It is the mission of the Church, as well as that of the Jewish people, to proclaim and to work to prepare the world for the full flowering of God's Reign, which is, but is not yet. [2] Both the Christian 'Our Father' and the Jewish 'Kaddish' exemplify this message. Thus, both Christianity and Judaism seal their worship with a common hope: Thy kingdom come!

The Messianic Age

Christians proclaim that the Messiah has indeed come and God's Reign is at hand. With the Jewish people, we await the complete realisation of the messianic age. In underlining the eschatological dimension of Christianity, we shall reach a greater awareness that the people of God of the Old and the New Testament are tending towards a like end in the future: the coming or return of the Messiah — even if they start from two different points of view (1985 Notes 11:10).

The Vitality of Judaism

Other difficulties may be less theologically momentous but can still be troublesome. For example, the reading from Baruch in cycle C or from Isaiah in cycle A for the second Sunday of Advent can leave the impression that pre-Jesus Israel was wholly guilt-ridden and in mourning, and Judaism virtually moribund. In fact, in their original historical settings, such passages reveal Judaism's remarkable capacity for self-criticism. While Israel had periods of deep mourning (see Lamentations) and was justly accused of sinfulness (e.g. Jeremiah), it also experienced periods of joy, return from Exile, and continuing *teshuvah* i.e. turning back to God in faithful repentance. Judaism was and is

incredibly complex and vital, with a wide variety of creative spiritual movements vying for the people's adherence.

Old and New Testament Readings

The reform of the liturgy initiated by the Second Vatican Council reintroduced regular readings from the Old Testament into the lectionary. For Catholics, the Old Testament is that collection that contains the Hebrew Scriptures and the seven deuterocanonical books. Principles of selection of passages vary. Sometimes the readings are cyclic, providing a continuity of narrative over a period of time. At other times, especially during Advent or Lent, a reading from the prophets or one of the historical books of the Old Testament and a Gospel pericope are 'paired', based on such liturgical traditions as the *sensus plenior* (fuller meaning) or, as is especially the case in Ordinary Time, according to the principle of typology, in which biblical figures and events are seen as 'types' prefiguring Jesus.

'Pairings' of Readings

Many of these pairings represent natural associations of similar events and teachings. Others rely on New Testament precedent and interpretation of the messianic psalms and prophetic passages. Matthew 1:23, for example, quotes the Septuagint, which translates the Hebrew *almah* (young woman) with the Greek word for virgin in its rendering of Isaiah 7:14. The same biblical text, therefore, can have more than one valid hermeneutical interpretation, ranging from its original historical context and intent to traditional Christological applications. The 1985 Notes describe this phenomenon as flowing from the unfathomable riches and inexhaustible content of the Hebrew Bible. For Christians, the unity of the Bible depends on understanding all Scripture in the light of Christ. Typology is one form, rooted in the New Testament itself, of expressing this unity of Scripture and of the divine plan. As such, it 'should not lead us to forget that it (the Hebrew Bible) retains its own value as Revelation that the New Testament often does no more than resume' (1985 Notes, 117; cf *Dei Verbum*, 14-18).

Recommended Reading

Catholic-Jewish Relations: Documents from the Holy See (1999), CTS.
(Contains: *Declaration on the Relationships of the Church to non-Christian Religions (Nostra Aetate)* (1965); *Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration Nostra Aetate* (1974); *Notes on the Correct Way to Present the Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church* (1985); and *We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah* (1988), with an introduction by Dr Eugene Fisher and a bibliography).

Footnotes:

[1] Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration *Nostra Aetate* No. 4, Holy See, 1974 (hereafter 1974 Guidelines) No. 21

[2] *Notes on the correct way to present the Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis of the Roman Catholic Church*, Holy See, 1985 (hereafter, 1985 notes) 11:9-112

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