

Sam Wells - Sermon

It was 1986, and I was in northern Israel. A few weeks before I'd asked my uncle where it was that my grandparents had lived when they were there in the early fifties. It was that address that I held in my hand as I wandered around Haifa one August morning.

My grandparents were Jews from in Kiev. They converted to Christianity and escaped Stalin's Soviet Union in the 1920s. They came to Berlin, where they married and had three children. They fled Hitler's Berlin in 1938 and arrived in London as refugees. Over the next few years they shared their Christian faith with Nazi prisoners of war.

Still holding my uncle's scrap of paper, after a lot of searching, I stood before the dwelling where my grandparents had lived. I was open-mouthed: I said to my companion, 'I've been here before!' Two years previously I'd worked on a kibbutz, and one Sunday I'd travelled into Haifa to go to church. After the service, kind people said 'Come back to our youth hostel for lunch.' It turned out that very same youth hostel had once, 35 years previously, been my grandparents' home.

I want you to hear this story as a fourfold analogy for the church's relationship to the Jewish people. I want first to reflect on how it felt to find a house and to realise I'd been there before. That's what it's like for Christians to encounter Judaism. Christians seldom appreciate why Jews don't follow Jesus. Christians have tended to treat Jews as people who get half the story, have half a history, and read only half the Bible. But that's a colossal misunderstanding. Because Judaism since the first century AD has developed profound traditions of which many Christians are entirely unaware.

The reason I say this is like finding a house you've been in before is that when Christians truly come to know Judaism, and find out what makes their Jewish neighbours tick, they discover a tradition that in many respects puts their own tradition to shame. Christians need to recognise with utmost humility that someone else has been living in this house for a long time. Christians who dwell with Jews as they live and breathe their tradition quickly discover they've been living an impoverished spiritual life.

Next I want to ponder what it meant to realise this house in Haifa was inhabited by my ancestors. Judaism isn't simply another faith. It's the parent of Christianity. It's the manger in which Christ is laid. The incarnate Jesus is a Jew. The risen and ascended Jesus, sitting at the right hand of the Father, is still a Jew. Jewishness is part of the Holy Trinity. God's promise to Israel is not broken. The Jews are still the chosen people.

It's Christianity's sin, perhaps the greatest of all its many sins, to have forgotten this. Medieval Europe found diversity difficult to comprehend. Jews were vilified and persecuted. The universal ban on usury inhibited the economy. The Jews' willingness to break the usury ban became vital to finance, and a source of enrichment to some Jews; but at the same time it became a pretext to despise and yet envy the Jews. Christians who rejoiced in the salvation Jesus brings seemed meanwhile eager to make every Jew culpable for the crucifixion. This tendency to ostracise, blame, fear and yet depend on the Jews culminated centuries later in the Holocaust.

Christians today think of the Holocaust as part of the horror of the Nazis and the rationale for the slaughter of the Second World War. But we don't dwell sufficiently on those events as a religious catastrophe. We perceive Jews wondering why God did not prevent this apocalyptic swathe of

death; but we seldom recognise that its justification was based on a thousand years of Christian antisemitism. The Holocaust was an act not just of genocide but of fratricide – these were not vulnerable strangers, but our brothers and sisters. This was my family.

Which brings me to the third element of my search. It was complicated. It took me till well into adulthood to begin to disentangle the German, Jewish and Ukrainian parts of my family's story, and so much of it was shrouded in secrecy, anxiety and fear. And this confusion has characterised Christian interaction with Jews since the Holocaust. A sense of guilt, shame and pity has created a reticence in talking about faith and identity; and that has led to treating Jews not as family, but as an imprecise other faith, or racial minority, or interest group.

I want to finish with a fourth image from the story. Imagine yourself as that young adult searching around Haifa holding a scrap of paper. That scrap of paper is the Bible, which is a gift to Jews and Christians; and yet that scrap of paper is also 2000 years of history, in which Christianity has shown all its worst features in relation to the Jews. And when you do find the right address, you'll find a dwelling place where Jews and Christians are together a blessing to one another and to the world. Because that's what God's promise to Abraham was originally about: bestowing a blessing upon all the families of the earth.

In Genesis 12 God says to Abraham, 'I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse.' Can Christians really say they have blessed the Jews? Genesis 12 goes on to say, God called you to be a blessing to all the peoples of the earth. That's what Jews are called to be: a blessing.

And we Christians owe our existence to them. We have to admit: we really have made a terrible job of saying thank you.

Lord, have mercy upon us. Christ, have mercy upon us. Lord, have mercy upon us.