



A Note on the Gospel of John for Lent, 2023

John's Gospel will be our Gospel for the remaining Sundays in Lent; all told we will hear from John on four of the six Sundays in Lent of 2023. It is always used at the Maundy Thursday and Good Friday Prayer Book services during Holy Week and on the Sunday after Easter as well. It is also the featured Gospel during Lent in the Sunday lectionary in year B (as well as our current year, A), and always used on the last Sunday of Lent in year C.

Misunderstanding of this Gospel has helped fuel deadly Christian anti-Semitism against Jesus' own people for centuries, culminating in the Holocaust. Even in our own day, we are aware that the fatal miasma of anti-Semitism is never far below the surface. In fact, the most recent audit of anti-semitic incidents by the Anti-Defamation League documents a 34% increase in our country. <https://www.adl.org/resources/report/audit-antisemitic-incidents-2021>

John's Gospel was written in the late 1st-early 2nd century, by Jews who had come to believe that Jesus was the hoped-for Messiah. They saw no contradiction between that belief and the traditional practices and beliefs of Judaism. In fact, they believed that Jesus fulfilled the hopes and expectations of the Jewish tradition.

After the destruction of the Temple by the Romans in the year 70ce, Jewish people everywhere were devastated. The navel of the universe had been destroyed. Various stripes of Judaism in the ancient near east at the time—the Sadducees, Essenes, Sicarii, Zealots—disappeared into the mists of history. The two remaining streams of Judaism—the Pharisees, which became Rabbinic Judaism that exists in great diversity today; and Jesus-following-Jews, who grew into Christianity, also of great diversity—developed in parallel, both set adrift by the violent end of the Temple-based Jewish tradition.

As history unfolded, Jesus-following Jews remained in the minority in the Jewish world and were eventually expelled from the synagogue late in the 1st century. As they composed this Gospel to encourage one another, to express their experience of Jesus' continuing presence, and to offer a compelling portrait of Jesus to the world, their anger and hurt found its way into the narrative, where "the Jews" were cast as a monolithic group out to get Jesus. This point of view colors every aspect of the narrative. It does not mean that John's picture of Jesus is not also deeply powerful and true; but it does mean that there is also a harmful agenda that needs to be disentangled from that picture.



As the Christian Church grew in size and influence, John took its place among the four canonical Gospels in the Bible. After Christianity became the state religion of the Roman Empire late in the 4th century, the Gospel of John, wrongly interpreted, became deadly for the Jewish people.

In a real sense, we Christians in the modern era read this Gospel as observers of one side of a family fight. We hear only one voice in a complicated conflict. (The Jews who decided *not* to follow Jesus had their own points of view and communication strategies.) We are not free to take sides in a fight that is not ours. And in any case, would Jesus, himself a good Jew, *ever* have encouraged prejudice or violence against *anyone*, much less his own people?

Therefore, as we hear and read the words “The Jews,” we need to hold fast to this context. We can substitute in our minds “some Jewish authorities” or “some leaders of the synagogue” or “some religious leaders,” or “some Jews.” The Jewish people and their leadership, as well as their religious traditions, were complex and diverse in Jesus’ time, and still are. Furthermore, *both* Jesus’ followers *and* enemies were complex and diverse as well. Blanket statements about “The Jews,” (or any group for that matter) particularly in the service of a hostile agenda or one that seeks to harm, marginalize, or disempower, are to be rejected.

As we move closer to Easter, especially in a world roiled by hateful politics, social polarization, and cancel culture, we hold fast to the truth that Jesus’ Resurrection proclaims God’s victory over the forces of evil and death. We do well to remember that God’s love is for all people. Everyone. No exceptions. And especially for those who have been and continue to be harassed and persecuted. May our words do no harm, and lead to loving action.

The Rev. Nick Morris-Kliment
Christ Church, Needham, Massachusetts
Lent/Easter 2023