



The homilist will find it helpful to make Church teaching on Jews and Judaism the starting point when preaching on passages that seem to denigrate the Jews.

# Discerning God's Grace in the Gospel of John

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Many parishes joyfully sing “Lord of the Dance” during the Easter season. It’s a catchy tune, and the notion of dancing in reckless abandon in celebration of the resurrection, God’s love, and the defeat of death feels quite liberating. But as the song progresses the devil, not God, is literally in the details. Verse two vilifies “the scribe and the pharisee” for not dancing with the eponymous “Lord of the Dance”; verse three declares that the “holy people” whipped and crucified this dancing lord; and verse four sings out “it’s hard to dance with the devil on your back.” The song strongly echoes the Gospel of John, in particular 8:44. As do many interpretations of the Fourth Gospel, it indiscriminately blames all Jews for the death of Jesus and traffics in demeaning anti-Jewish tropes of Jews as Christ-killers, demonic, and hypocritical. Do we really want to celebrate Jesus’

resurrection by damning his very own people?<sup>1</sup> How can we sing the Lord’s song throughout the liturgical year if our song, our proclamation of God’s Word, and our preaching sets up a zero-sum binary of “us” over “them,” as does this peppy hymn with dark lyrics?

## STEPS FOR PREACHING ON THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

### **Begin with Church Teaching**

While a hymn can be eliminated easily from our parish’s repertoire, the lectionary readings cannot be dismissed. John’s Gospel stands out as posing some significant zero-sum challenges for preaching when it comes to the Jewish people. The Fourth Gospel has often been referred to as the most anti-Jewish of the Gospels.<sup>2</sup> Counterintuitively, I would suggest that one of the first

moves for addressing what appear to be denigrating and belittling accounts of Jews in any of the Gospels is to begin not with the Gospel but with Church teaching about Jews and Judaism since the Second Vatican Council. Secondly, one must raise the question of the inviolable dignity of real human beings in living relationships and the complexity of the Gospel genre. This may sound like too much to do in a homily, but not to do so risks allowing misconceptions and animosities to linger, grow, and do real harm to our Jewish coreligionists as well as to the quality of our own faith.

Pope John XXIII made changing the Church's relationship to Jews and Judaism a priority of the Second Vatican Council. His concern for the Catholic-Jewish relationship was motivated by his experience of rescuing Jews during the Holocaust and the audience he granted in 1960 to French historian and Holocaust survivor Jules Isaac, who discussed the long, tragic history of Christian anti-Judaism with the pope. In 2025, we will commemorate the sixtieth anniversary of the Council's promulgation of *Nostra aetate: Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*; yet sadly, this document's revolutionary teaching is still unknown to most Catholics. This groundbreaking document famously decreed that "what happened in [Christ's] passion cannot be charged against all the Jews, without distinction, then alive, nor against the Jews of today . . . [T]he Jews should not be presented as rejected or accursed by God, as if this followed from the Holy Scriptures." The Council utterly rejects the persistent deicide charge that Jews are "Christ-killers," cut off from God, and demonic. The teaching of an ecumenical council holds the highest authority for Catholics, and *Nostra aetate* is clear: anti-Jewish preaching is wrong. Negative depictions of Jews in preaching or hymnody are morally unacceptable and theologically and historically untenable. In fact, *Nostra aetate* makes a point of teaching what should be a basic historical fact, that the apostles and "most of the early disciples" were Jewish. It also teaches a theological datum—Jesus died freely "because of the sins of men and out of infinite love, in order that all may reach salvation."<sup>3</sup>

The Council's teaching in *Nostra aetate* was deepened by documents issued by the Vatican's Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews (CRRJ) in 1974, 1985, 1998, and 2015. This continuing attention to the Church's relationship with Judaism demonstrates that the first step in preaching about difficult passages such as John 8:44, in which Jesus appears to call Jews "devils," or the parts of the passion in the Gospel of John that paint all Jews as clamoring for the death of Jesus must be to teach the doctrinal stance of the Church toward Judaism. Visiting the Great Synagogue of Rome, in April 1986, Pope John Paul II emphasized fundamental points from *Nostra aetate*; he decreed:

The Jewish religion is not "extrinsic" to us, but in a certain way is "intrinsic" to our own religion. With Judaism, therefore, we have a relationship which we do not have with any other religion. You are our dearly beloved brothers and, in a certain way, it could be said that you are our elder brothers.<sup>4</sup>

With this teaching, John Paul indicates the theological reason for why preaching about Jews and Judaism in the Gospel of John (and the New Testament generally) should include clarity about the Church's doctrine: we cannot fully understand our Catholic tradition unless we understand its roots in the various forms of Judaism existing at the time of Jesus (understood by scholars as "Second Temple Judaism").

### Respect the Dignity of the Jewish People

The second step in preaching about Jews and Judaism is to turn to the inviolable dignity of real people and their relationships with each other and with God. In 1974, the CRRJ issued *Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration Nostra Aetate, No. 4*.<sup>5</sup> It is worth quoting at length for its emphasis on dignity and relationship:

While referring the reader back to [*Nostra aetate*], we may simply restate here that the spiritual bonds and historical links binding the Church to Judaism condemn (as opposed to the very spirit of Christianity) all forms of anti-Semitism and discrimination, which in any case the dignity of the human person alone would suffice to condemn. Further still, these links and relationships render obligatory a better mutual understanding and renewed mutual esteem . . . Christians must therefore strive to acquire a bet-

ter knowledge of the basic components of the religious tradition of Judaism; they must strive to learn by what essential traits Jews define themselves in the light of their own religious experience.

*Guidelines* emphasizes the fact that Jews and Christians live in the world together and, therefore, protecting the dignity of each individual as well as honoring the spiritual truth and vitality of each religion is of paramount importance. The document instructs Catholics to learn not only facts about Judaism but to strive to understand such facts from the context of Jewish self-understanding. In other words, we Catholics cannot impose assumptions about what Judaism means for Jews at the time of Jesus, in the formative rabbinic period, or in any era through to our own. We must do the hard work of learning about Judaism at the time of Jesus and about Judaism in our time. Ideally, before preaching we could check our understandings and interpretations with a Jewish dialogue partner. What better way to honor our Jewish elder sibling in faith than to learn in dialogue



The Second Vatican Council document *Nostra aetate* teaches that what happened during Christ's passion cannot be charged against the Jews.

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Homilists should emphasize that Jesus, his family, and his followers were all practicing Jews.

together, to be in relationship with each other in search of the living God?

### Honor Jewish History

Understanding how Jews and Judaism define themselves leads to the third step in contextualizing the Gospel of John for a congregation. We must broadly identify the complexity of the Gospel genre and its historical context. A homily is not a class in biblical interpretation, but passages need an interpretative framework. A few quick reminders about rhetoric, composition, and history can go a long way toward preventing uncharitable hearings. Basic items to mention include the following:

- Catholics do not interpret the Bible in a literalist fashion; the Gospels are not written as we write history or biography today but are reflections on the religious experience of Jesus and his resurrection—they are theologies reflecting the theological preferences of their authors.
- The Gospels emerge from a three-stage process of development: the life and death of Jesus; the insights of the disciples post-resurrection; and, finally, the evangelists take decades of oral tradition from stages 1 and 2 and create the Gospels through the lenses of their particular theological perspectives

with the needs of their community foremost in mind.<sup>6</sup>

- In light of the above, it is important to learn about the socio-historical realities of the time of Jesus and the later times of the Gospel writers in order to open Gospel passages more richly and completely for the congregation; what was happening at the time of the writing of a Gospel may have influenced how the writers crafted the story.
- Rhetorical excess is part of the culture of the Graeco-Roman society of the evangelists; in a society where issues were debated in person, one needed to draw attention to one's position, and that sometimes resulted in harsher language than one might expect.
- Emphasize that Jesus, his family, and most of his first followers were religiously practicing Jews of the first century of the common era.
- Recall that just as there are a variety of ways to be Jewish in the contemporary world, so too, the ancient Jewish world of Jesus was diverse and Jewish groups debated the best way of being Jewish; the Jesus movement was one among many Jewish groups even at the time of the writing of the Gospel of John; one could expect agreement and disagreement within and among these groups as necessary expressions of religious identity. When a text appears anti-Jewish from our twenty-first century perspective, we need to consider whether it is instead reflective of intra-Jewish debates at the time of Jesus or the time of the writing of the Gospel. If so, then our responsibility is to preach in ways that respect Jewish identity by explaining the first-century context and not let it color our contemporary moment in a literalist way that fosters anti-Jewish motifs.

None of these points is distinctive to the Gospel of John, but all are necessary in avoiding anti-Jewish interpretations of the Fourth Gospel. As Vanderbilt University professor of Jewish studies and of New Testament studies Amy-Jill Levine states: "When Jewish history is misunderstood, the 'good news' of the New Testament is deformed."<sup>7</sup>

### TURNING TOWARD OUR JEWISH SIBLING

Before looking at two examples, I would add to Levine's insight two other cautions when seeking to preach without harming our Jewish sisters and brothers. Johann-Baptist Metz, a German Catholic priest who was conscripted by the Wehrmacht in World War II, has famously warned that we cannot continue to do theology with our backs toward Auschwitz. Similarly, Rabbi Irving "Yitz" Greenberg admonishes all of us to not speak a word that could not be spoken in the presence of a burning child at Auschwitz. Bringing a post-Holocaust awareness to our Catholic preaching helps us to hear our sacred texts and the way many have been interpreted throughout history in a new key—a key that is tuned in, not tone deaf, to real intra-Jewish relationships at the time of Jesus and to actual relationships between Catholics and Jews today. Anti-Jewish theology fueled anti-Semitic racial stereotypes throughout history, and we do well to take pains to avoid anything in preaching that unintentionally continues that history of interpretation.

## Interpretation of a Phrase

The use of the phrase “the Jews” (Greek plural: *hoi Ioudaioi*), appearing over seventy times in the Gospel of John, creates interpretative issues. Scholars and those engaged in Jewish-Christian relations struggle with the best approach to translating sensitively the appearances of *hoi Ioudaioi*. Some knowledge of the history of and Jewish self-understanding of the phrase is helpful. *Hoi Ioudaioi* refers equally accurately to the area of ancient Judea, to Jews from Judea, and to Jews more generally. Jews today understand themselves as standing in continuity within a tradition and changing the use of “the Jews” in our text would break that continuity of self-understanding for Jews.

Given the sheer weight of the repetition of the phrase “the Jews” and with more than half of the usages deployed polemically, some commentators have suggested that the phrase be replaced with something more specific to the action in the narrative. For instance, when “the Jews” appears in English translation in the passion narrative, some suggest that it be replaced with phrases such as “some Judeans” or “Jewish leaders in Jerusalem.” Others argue persuasively that we do not have enough historical data to make a change to the text and that removing “the Jews” from the text in an attempt to be sensitive to and prevent anti-Jewish interpretations can have the unintended but exact opposite result.

Changing the text actually removes “the Jews” from consideration as a group, and our well-meaning intervention creates the untenable situation of a “Jew-free” text, eliminating Jews who followed Jesus, disagreed with Jesus, and were neutral toward Jesus. In trying to avoid a proclamation of the Gospel that sounds anti-Jewish, we remove Jews and Jewish identity! Instead, if we learn about the difficulties with translating this phrase, recall the historical context of Second Temple Judaism, and highlight the many positive accounts of Jews and Jewish practice in the Gospel (including Jesus’ own faithful practice), we can shape our preaching to prevent an anti-Jewish hearing of the phrase. Not all Jews at the time of Jesus were hostile toward him (Jesus and his followers are Jewish). Furthermore, the use of “the Jews” when used in a negative way never refers to all Jews then and now. Confront the text’s rhetoric and the fact that negative preaching on “the Jews” has fostered anti-Jewish thoughts and actions that have harmed the Jewish community throughout the centuries. Recall the clear teaching developed since the Second Vatican Council that uplifts Judaism as intrinsic to our faith, prohibits anti-Jewish theology, and counsels Jewish-Catholic dialogue. Then we can move to a focus on the spiritual



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When preaching is done with our faces turned toward our Jewish brothers and sisters, the dualisms in John’s Gospel can be turned on our humanity and our failings.

riches we want to share that come from reflection on the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Jew, without risking praising Christianity at the expense of Judaism.

All four Gospels have a version of Jesus confronting the money changers in the temple. John 2:13–22 sets the scene at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry in contrast to the much later setting in the synoptics. One danger of this story is allowing it to be a source of stereotyping that leads to the repugnant anti-Semitic racial stereotype of Jews as controlling economies and money systems. The other danger is presenting Jesus and Christianity as centering love, and Judaism as centering oppressive law. Understanding the central role of the temple in Jerusalem for Jews in the first century (wherever they lived) and its operation can refocus both dangers.

## The Cleansing of the Temple

For instance, the people described as “money changers” had to be at the temple because they were providing the service of currency exchange. Pilgrims coming to the temple to pay a tax in support of the temple had to exchange their foreign currency for the currency of the temple (the Tyrian half-shekel). Paying the tax was a religious act and expression of identity and solidarity with one’s wider Jewish community, especially for those who lived abroad and for whom the pilgrimage to the temple was a rare event. Cattle, sheep, and doves are examples of acceptable sacrifices. People coming from a distance had to buy the animals for sacrifice upon arrival because if an animal were injured while traveling to Jerusalem, it would no longer be fit for sacrifice. The money to pay the tax, the act of currency exchange, and

the presence of animals in the temple complex had nothing to do with temple desecration, money conspiracies, or fulfilling “legalistic” rules.

Yet all too frequently these details in the story are used to defame Jews then and now. Further, at times, the erroneous language of “money lenders” is carelessly used when there is nothing in the narrative about loans and interest. It is incumbent upon us to know our Christian history and culpability in creating the pernicious anti-Semitic stereotype of Jews as unethical money lenders. Through anti-Jewish legislation, Christians forced Jews to take on the very task of lending money that on biblical grounds Christians wanted to avoid; then we blamed the Jews for doing the job.

Preaching on the “cleansing” of the temple could first include positive descriptions of ancient Jewish faithfulness to God in observing Passover and reminders that Jesus and his disciples observed Passover as faithful Jews. Jewish religious practice, whether expressed in paying the temple tax, making sacrifices, or offering daily prayers wherever one lived, should never be presented as a burdensome legalism. For Jews these acts were simply a part of being Jewish, a joyful expression of being in loving relationship with God. Instead of falling into a trap of a law versus love dualism, parallels between God’s liberative power in the Passover and the paschal mystery can be expressed. Then the focus on faith in God through Jesus, part of John’s very high Christology and a main focus of the temple passage can be explored as good news for Christians without having to demean Jews and disparage Jewish faith to do so.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The Fourth Gospel’s well-known dualisms serve John’s focus on Jesus’ absolute divinity. Images of light/dark, life/death, spirit/flesh, and God/Satan, to name a few, all “correspond to the opposites of belief/unbelief in the person of Jesus,” according to Fr. George Smiga. Anyone who does not believe is on the “wrong” side of the dualism, but John’s Gospel is often read as making Jewish non-believers “the paradigm of unbelief.”<sup>8</sup> If we teach and preach about the Gospel without turning our backs to Auschwitz and with turning our faces to our Jewish sisters and brother with whom we live and share Scripture, we can turn the dualisms on ourselves and our humanity—without blaming Jews for our inevitable failings in faith. Then we can turn to our Jewish brother Jesus for help in discerning God’s grace for us.

Finally, for help understanding the Jewish context of Jesus and the Gospels to avoid anti-Jewish interpretations the following scholarly but accessible resources are essential: *The Misunderstood Jew* (HarperOne, 2007) and *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* (HarperOne, 2015), both by Amy-Jill Levine; *The Gospel of John Set Free: Preaching without Anti-Judaism* (Paulist Press, 2015), by George M. Smiga; and *The Synoptic Gospels Set Free*, (Paulist Press, 2009), by Daniel J. Harrington, SJ. Finally, two 1988 documents from the USCCB are good starting points (with the caveat that some of the historical research may need updating): *God’s Mercy Endures Forever: Guidelines on the Presentation of Jews and Judaism in Catholic Preaching* and *Criteria for the Evaluation of Dramatizations of the Passion*. ♦

## Notes

1. Happily, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops published *Catholic Hymnody at the Service of the Church: An Aid for Evaluating Hymn Lyrics* in 2020. In its fifth evaluative category “Hymns with Doctrinally Incorrect Views of the Jewish People,” “Lord of the Dance” is used as an example. The document is available as a ten-page pdf on their website.

2. Those who work in Jewish-Christian relations often prefer the word “anti-Jewish” to “anti-Semitic,” for a variety of theological and linguistic reasons; there are, however, both Christian and Jewish scholars who reject the distinction.

3. Around 2000, given the anti-Jewish reception of the Johannine passion, the Bishops’ Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs added a theological disclaimer to disposable worship aids at the end of the reading on Good Friday to avoid interpretations that blamed the Jews. It quotes *Nostra aetate*. Don’t assume the disclaimer is read: address it.

4. See <https://ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/pope-john-paul-ii/jp2-86apr13>.

5. <https://ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/vatican-curia/guidelines>.

6. See “An Instruction on the Historical Truth of the Gospels,” Pontifical Biblical Commission (1964) and *Dei verbum: Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation* (1965).

7. Amy-Jill Levine, “Bearing False Witness: Common Errors Made about Early Judaism,” in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, 2nd edition, ed. Marc Zvi Brettler (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011, 2017), 763.

8. George Smiga, *Pain and Polemic: Anti-Judaism in the Gospels* (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1992), 136, 173.

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