

## Against anti-Semitism

Some passages in the NT are quite critical of some of the Jewish authorities in the days of Jesus and the apostles. Our reading today Acts 25:23-26:23 is one such.

Paul makes his defence before King Agrippa and says: "I make my defence against all the accusations of the Jews" and he goes on to say: "The Jews seized me in the temple courts and tried to kill me."

Sadly, such passages have been quite illegitimately used to support anti-Semitism down to this day. But we need to remember the facts:

Firstly, only certain Jewish leaders and people opposed the Christian Faith. Many of them accepted it, including Paul himself.

Secondly, we have a Jewish Saviour.

Thirdly, the opposition of certain Jewish people to Christianity does not justify an antagonistic response to them, let alone to all Jewish people.

Fourthly, God is a God of justice who hates injustices such as racism.

After 2000 years of terrible persecution of the Jews by Christians, we need to be careful to explain these points whenever the NT (a thoroughly Jewish document) refers critically to Jewish opposition.

It is only as we love our Jewish neighbour that we can hope to commend Jesus the Messiah.

In today's reading we read of the conversion of one of the greatest Jews of all time: Saul of Tarsus, later called Paul.

He records how religious he had been. He writes: "The Jews all know the way I have lived ever since I was a child, from the beginning of my life in my own country, and also in Jerusalem. They have known me for a long time and can testify, if they are willing, that according to the strictest sect of our religion, I lived as a Pharisee."

He does not say this was wrong (though he admits that persecuting Christians was wrong) but he came to realise it was not enough.

It happened on the road to Damascus in Syria, where he was going to arrest more Christians. Suddenly, he says: "About noon as I was on the road, I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, blazing around me and my companions." For those of you who know how bright the noon day Sun is in the Middle East this was some light!

Paul continues: "We all fell to the ground, and I heard a voice saying to me in Aramaic, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.'

Just think for a moment of the mercy of Christ. Here is this fanatical young Jew rounding up Christians for imprisonment, simply because of their faith and trying to force them to blaspheme. And Jesus mercifully confronts him and seeks to win him over. What a fantastic example of divine mercy!

As he lay in the dust, temporarily blinded by the light, he said to the Lord: "'Who are you, Lord?' "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,' the Lord replied.

The NT makes it quite clear that the way we treat Christians is the way we treat Christ. That's quite a challenge isn't it. Jesus wasn't literally being persecuted. But because of his great love for and identification with Christians, if they were hurt, he was hurt. If we are treating Christians badly, we are treating Christ badly.

To cap it all, as if it wasn't merciful enough for Jesus to forgive the fanatical young persecutor, he goes on to call him to an exalted ministry in the church, in effect right down to the present day. He was appointed as an apostle

both to Jews and, especially, Gentiles “to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins”

*A Prayer* Lord, thank you for your amazing mercy. Help us to be merciful as we realise that the way we treat Christians is the way we treat you. And help us to counteract all anti-Semitism and other racism. For the sake of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

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