



God's Unfailing Word

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Foreword

By Archbishop Justin Welby

As Christians, our understanding of the revelation of God in Christ is impoverished when we fail to appreciate God's calling of and upon the Jewish people. In simple terms, the Church is being less than its true self when it refuses the gift of Christian–Jewish encounter. As such, I am delighted that the Faith and Order Commission have produced a teaching document to synthesize and resource the Church of England's theology on Christian–Jewish relations.

Understanding the relationship between Christianity and Judaism is not an optional extra, but a vital component of Christian formation and discipleship. It informs our daily Bible reading, prayer and worship, as well as our relationships with Jewish neighbours, friends and colleagues. My hope is that God's Unfailing Word will also impact the teaching, preaching and liturgies of Church of England congregations. At clergy and lay levels of leadership, I believe we still have much to learn about a more truthful and faithful presentation of the gift of Christian–Jewish encounter.

I am privileged to be a President of the Council of Christians and Jews (CCJ), an organization founded by my predecessor Archbishop William Temple and Chief Rabbi William H. Hertz in the dark days of the Second World War. It is a joy to see how CCJ's work today brings together Christians and Jews in a spirit of mutuality. In large part this has been made possible by Nostra Aetate's reframing of the Christian–Jewish encounter, which Bishop Christopher's Preface rightly highlights. Together with Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis, I have sought to encourage reciprocal relationships through the 'In Good Faith' initiative, which brings together priests and rabbis for dialogue and collaboration. Given the kindness, wisdom and scholarship of the Chief Rabbi, to count him among my friends is one of my greatest privileges. Both the warm relationship between his family and mine, and the work of CCJ and In Good Faith, are testament to the remarkable progress in Christian–Jewish relations over the last fifty years. These things are to be treasured and celebrated.

The shift that has taken place is most vividly epitomized in the symbolism of the statue 'Synagoga and Ecclesia in our Time' outside the Institute for Catholic–Jewish Relations at St Joseph's University in the United States; a photograph of this is on the cover. The image reimagines the relationship between Judaism and Christianity as one of mutual affection and interdependence. Yet only by looking back and recognizing our failures as Christians can we begin to move forward with authenticity. Too often in history the Church has been responsible for and colluded in antisemitism – and the fact that antisemitic language and attacks are on the rise across the UK and Europe

means we cannot be complacent. I reflected on this as I stood alongside other Christian leaders in ankle-deep snow within the camp of Birkenau in 2016, amid the ruins of the gas chambers. The leader of our visit called on us to hear the voices of the millions murdered in that place – the vast majority of whom were Jewish. The bitter cold and the colourless outline of the landscape reflected the horror in our spirits, minds and hearts, that this had taken place and Christians had done much of it. In light of this, I welcome the way that God's Unfailing Word is unflinching in rejecting Christian failings, while hopeful in signalling the rich promise of Christian–Jewish encounter.

That said, there remain many difficult, contested areas to Christian–Jewish theology and few definitive answers! Instead, the word 'mystery' will become familiar to readers of God's Unfailing Word and necessarily so. The Christian–Jewish encounter raises questions of salvation, monotheism, trinitarianism and covenant. The Christian conviction that God has been revealed in the life, death and resurrection of the first-century Jewish rabbi, Jesus, rubs up against Jewish accusations of idolatry and the apparent elusiveness of the Messianic era of peace and justice. Christianity's relationship to Judaism is marked by both continuities and discontinuities – a tension which is not easily resolved. Yet within this paradox of intimacy and strangeness, we receive the gift of God.

Chief Rabbi Mirvis has done Anglican Christians a great service by writing an Afterword that reflects his misgivings over one of the 'critical issues' this document explores: the question of mission and evangelism. His words are written as a friend, and they are received in a similar spirit, however tough they are to read. As a result, I take the challenge of his Afterword with immense seriousness. To share the hope of salvation within us, a hope coming from Jesus Christ, is core to what Christians do, but we are told to do so with gentleness and grace. Any sense that we target Jewish people must carry the weight of that history. The Chief Rabbi has opened, with characteristic honesty and affection, a challenge upon which we must reflect. We cannot do that reflection honestly until we have felt the cruelty of our history.

What even this brief exchange with the Chief Rabbi highlights is that the work of Christian–Jewish relations is not finished, and that this teaching document should spur us towards more and deeper encounters where we can hear and understand each other. God's Unfailing Word reminds us that the diversity of contemporary Judaism, the community of lived traditions, is often very different to that presumed by Christians. The text of this document will ultimately have to be judged by the extent to which it resources neighbourly engagements between Christians and Jews in all their rich diversity; that the theological would become practical. Jews and Christians share a belief that we are all made in the image of the one God, a God of covenant, and the hope of the whole world. May God be glorified in our relationship!

JUSTIN CANTUAR

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