Reflections for Easter

31.03.2016 | Philip A. Cunningham

Dear Members of the ICCJ Family, The year 2016 presents the somewhat unusual situation of almost a month interposing itself between the Christian celebration of Pascha/Easter (in the West on March 27) and the Jewish commemoration of Pesach (April 22).

An even greater span of time elapses between the Easter observances of Western and Eastern Christianity (the latter on May 1!). A complex interaction of astronomical, calendrical, historical, sociological, and religious factors is the cause of the wide disparity of this year's observances. So I'd like to offer separate personal thoughts for Pesach and Pascha, with these reflections focusing on the Christian community.

For Western Christianity, this week is Holy Week. For churches that use lectionaries, it begins on Passion or Palm Sunday with the reading of the passion narrative from the Gospel of Luke (Luke 22:14-23:56) and concludes on Good Friday with the proclamation of the passion narrative from the Gospel of John (John 18:1-19:42). As those of us in the ICCJ are well aware, the passion narratives contain some of the most problematic New Testament passages in terms of Christian-Jewish relations.

This year's lection from Luke portrays Pontius Pilate repeatedly declaring Jesus' innocence despite the political charges that have been brought against Jesus (23:2) by "chief priests and the crowds" (23:4)—charges one would think a Roman prefect would not inexplicably dismiss. The accusers become a nondescript "they" to whom Pilate eventually "hands over" Jesus for crucifixion (23:24-26). Despite references to a sorrowful crowd (23:27,48) and distinctions made between the leaders and the crowd (23:35), it is again a vague "they" who crucify Jesus and divide up his clothing (23:33-34).

More disturbing is the Johannine narrative, despite its clearer mentions of (Roman) soldiers (John 18:3,12; 19:2,23,25,32,34). The phrase "the Jews" is repeatedly used in a collective sense as the foes of Jesus to whom he has been "handed over" (18:36), with whom Pilate argues in a vain effort to release him (18:38), and who pitilessly demand that the flayed and bleeding Jesus also be nailed to a cross (19:1-16; only in John's Gospel is Jesus scourged before the sentence of crucifixion has been imposed).

I thought of these passages recently after a troubling incident at a recent high school basketball game in a major American city. An all-male Catholic high school was playing a co-educational public high school with a large Jewish student body. After students from the public school yelled taunts from the bleachers mocking the single gender population of the Catholic high school in a homophobic way, some of the Catholic students chanted in reply "You killed Jesus!" Taking this adolescent outburst very seriously, the Catholic school administration banned student spectators from at least the next game. Ironically, this episode occurred a day after the local Catholic bishop had spoken movingly to the local Jewish community about the rapprochement brought about by Nostra Aetate.

Whatever one thinks of the episode and its consequences, it is safe to assume that the Catholic students were not taught that "the Jews killed Jesus" in their religion classes. Such polemic has been totally removed from religion textbooks. Moreover, in this city there have been many interfaith

and Holocaust-related educational programs for years, both in schools and in the wider community, aimed at informing students of the deadly impact that the infamous “Christ-killer” accusation has had for Jewish communities for centuries.

So how is this perennial vilification being transmitted to younger generations? Or is it passed along in our culture, perhaps through movies or intergroup polemics, even in the United States and other countries that have enjoyed friendly interaction and dialogue between Christians and Jews for many decades?

This Holy Week, as we Christians reflect on our own sinfulness and the death of Jesus, we need to reconsider the possible impact of the proclamation of the Gospel passion narratives in liturgies. Point 7 of the “Ten Points of Seelisberg” advised as long ago as 1947: “Avoid presenting the Passion in such a way as to bring the odium of the killing of Jesus upon all Jews or upon Jews alone.” Does the liturgical proclamation of the passion narratives unintentionally foster this very thing despite homiletic efforts to the contrary?

Since 1947 many churches have admonished that “what happened in His passion cannot be charged against all the Jews, without distinction, then alive, nor against the Jews of today” (to cite Nostra Aetate as an example). But can preachers really be expected to give an annual academic lecture on scriptural hermeneutics in the pastoral context of bringing out the profound religious meaning for Christians of the death of Jesus? How can Christians bring to life the defining importance of the passion narratives for Christian faith today without inadvertently perpetuating their tendency to minimize Roman responsibility and heighten the roles of Jewish figures?

There are no easy answers to these questions, but they must be sought. The high school incident I related above may or may not directly connect to how the passion narratives are used in Christian worship during Holy Week. But don’t we Christians—out of fidelity to the Gospel—have an obligation to ensure that there is no possibility of any such linkage in the future?

As the diverse Christian traditions all celebrate the resurrection of their Lord, may the One who brings new life out of death enliven all Christians to strive to be bearers of Good News.

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