

**2017-08—20 Barbara Mitchell**

**Trinity 10: Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32 Matthew 15:21-28**

I've always liked the Gospel story we had today – a feisty young mother determined to do the best for her sick child, bantering with the rabbi who seems to offer hope, but at first refuses to help her.

And since we were adopted by Mungo the Labrador it is a story which makes a lot of sense. Even though in Biblical times dogs were free-running creatures who depended on scraps to survive, not our pampered pooches who get fed dishes of scientifically balanced dog food, evolution does not seem to have affected that particular part of the life of the average dog. Sunday lunchtimes in the Vicarage have cat and dog sitting side by side next to the table waiting for any scraps to fall so they can wolf them down. If anyone wants to re-enact this particular parable, then we have the perfect furry stars for it!

But Mungo, being a Labrador, isn't content just to wait for scraps – having bought a beautiful coffee and walnut cake at the Crockham Hill fete, we had enjoyed a slice each for our tea when we discovered that he had reached up to the kitchen work surface to consume HIS share! He had clearly been listening carefully at his last visit to the vets' when it was decided he was a little underweight and so decided to take the advice of his medical advisor!

The relationship between Jews and gentiles at the beginning of the Christian church was a tricky one. Since the Exile in Babylon Jews

had lived outside Israel. And the rise of the Roman and Greek empires had meant that more Jews lived outside of Israel than in their traditional homeland. This raised all sorts of questions for the Jewish community – how could they stay faithful to the laws given to them by God while living in a world where many different gods were worshipped? It is a question which Jews still struggle with today – should they assimilate into the norms of the societies in which they live, as Reform and Liberal Jews have done, or should they live parallel, separate lives, as Hasidic Jews have chosen to do?

In the story in Matthew's Gospel Jesus seems to be taking the second option. If he was the Messiah, then his message was just for God's Chosen People. Any healing miracles he might have performed were not simply an act of kindness to help out people in need. They were a way of flagging up his true nature to people who knew the words of the prophets in the Jewish scriptures – that when the Messiah came the blind would be able to see, the deaf be able to hear and lame people would be able to walk. So helping this woman would not be about demonstrating his messiahship to the people who needed to know who he was.

But in the end her words touched him and he decided to help her because she was another human being with the same needs as his fellow Jews.

But such incidents left a problem for the early church. How should they relate to Judaism? Some, especially Jewish followers of 'The Way', saw this not as a new religion, but as a group within Judaism and therefore not a place for non-Jews. The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947 shed new light on the nature of Judaism in the

first Christian century and showed how divided the Judaism of that period was. This new sect of Jews who believed that Jesus was their long-awaited Messiah fits perfectly into the picture we now have of Israel in this period and so it is not surprising that some of the early followers of Jesus, who would have included Pharisees and members of the group responsible for writing the Dead Sea Scrolls, saw themselves as distinctly Jewish and therefore needed to distance themselves from Gentile would-be converts – unless they were prepared to become Jews first.

But Peter and Paul had a very different vision for the church – Peter because of his vision at Joppa in Acts 10 where he believed God was commanding him to include faithful Gentiles within the church community and Paul because of his experiences on his missionary journeys when the message of Jesus was rejected in synagogues, but embraced by the Gentiles to whom he preached.

But if Christianity was to break away from the religion of Jesus himself and become a new, separate faith what was the relationship to be between Jews and Christians in the future? It is this dilemma that Paul addressed when he wrote his letter to the church in Rome – a church which he had not founded, or indeed, at this stage, visited. But which he knew to be seeking to establish a Christian foothold in the most multicultural city of the Roman Empire.

As a Jew, indeed as a trained Pharisee, Paul cannot divorce himself from his roots. The Jews must continue to be God's Chosen People, because God and his promises can't change. But if that is the case, how does the Christian Church, now beginning to separate from

Judaism, fit into the picture? It is a problem which has dogged the two religions for the past 2000 years.

In the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Franz Rosenzweig, a young assimilated German Jew who had studied philosophy at university was contemplating this problem for himself – and he had a lot of time to think it over while he sat manning an anti-aircraft gun in the Balkans during the First World War. His inclination as a young man had been to convert to Christianity – it would have made him more like his friends and it would certainly have made his life in Germany easier. Determined to embrace the faith in the same way the first Christians did, he resolved to live as an observant Jew first, before becoming Christian. But after attending Yom Kippur services at a small Orthodox synagogue in Berlin shortly before his planned baptism in 1913, he underwent a mystical experience and, as a result, felt that he should remain a Jew.

In his book 'The Star of Redemption' published in 1921 Rosenzweig set out a philosophical justification of his position. He saw the relationship between God, the world and humans as being central to God's plan of salvation. This was not based on a metaphysical belief system, but need to be lived out within the world as it really is – and having been in mortal danger in the cold trenches of the Balkans he was very well aware of what that reality could be like.

Rosenzweig's issue with Christianity was that it runs the danger of becoming too philosophical and dogma centred and thereby loses touch with the key idea of redemption, which needs to take place within the physical world created by God. Judaism, on the other hand, is based on a law code revealed by God which addresses the

needs of that physical world more directly. When Jesus talked of 'Loving your neighbour' he was speaking within the world of the Torah observant Jew who therefore knew how to put that love into practice. But Jesus' criticism of the legalism of many Pharisees had led the increasingly Gentile Church to reject the Old Testament and its laws as out-dated and irrelevant. Maybe the reason why the Old Testament is not so regularly read in Church services today!

In the *Star of Redemption* Rosenzweig argued that the world needs both Judaism **and** Christianity for its redemption. The Torah observance of Jews should act as an anchor for Christians, keeping them grounded in the revelation of God as they reach out to the wider population of the world. I know from the experience of teaching Christian Ethics that it is very hard to construct moral guidelines based solely on the teachings of the new Testament. Joseph Fletcher tried to do this in the 1960s in his book 'Situation Ethics', where he argued that the guiding principal in any situation should be to do the most loving thing – in line with Jesus' words. But the difficulty with that approach is that we do not always know whether what we are doing IS the loving thing – largely because we cannot see the long-term consequences of any action we may choose. Sometimes we need to fall back on the moral absolutes presented to us in the Old Testament to guide us to what is most likely to be the loving way forward, as Jesus and his fellow Jews would have done.

So our readings today present us with a salutary reminder of what we as Christians owe to our Jewish siblings. As our religious traditions have grown and matured through the centuries we have

received more than scraps from the table – more like a whole coffee and walnut cake! But I think Franz Rosenzweig was right in his assessment that without an appreciation of the faith in which Jesus, not to mention St Paul, was nurtured, we can never fully understand the way in which God seeks to redeem all the people of this world.