

Jewish Roots

Elgin – population 250. I grew up there. The kids with whom I graduated from grade 13 were the same ones I started grade 1 with. In Elgin, car keys were left in the car. No doors to any of the houses had locks. Everyone knew everyone. Elgin had a United, Anglican, and Roman Catholic church. We were a very diverse community. We had one Jamaican teacher and one East Indian teacher at the high school. We had one Jewish family in the village. The Fischmans. They owned the general store. Sam always chewed gum and constantly had a tape measure around his neck. Annie wore her glasses half way down her nose and she always had a pair of knitting needles in her hands. So my experience of being with Jewish people is rather extensive.

My friend Tom Vais is the minister of Thornhill Presbyterian church and his church and home are surrounded by people of the Jewish faith! His children went to the local schools where students of the Jewish faith were the vast majority.

We move along in this series entitled **The Jesus I Never Knew**, (Slide #1) leaning upon the good work of Phillip Yancey and his book by the same name. The purpose of this series is that first of all it might help you and I acknowledge what we do already know about Jesus and we are clear as to our perception of who Jesus was, and from there to further explore what we might not know about Jesus. Are we willing to allow our picture of Jesus to change? Or are we happy to keep Jesus exactly where we already have Him?

Consider what Jewish theologian Martin Buber says, (Slide #2) “We Jews know Jesus in a way – in the impulses and emotions of his essential Jewishness – that remains inaccessible to the Gentiles subject to him.”

You and I are Gentiles -non Jews. Martin Buber claims that we can't know Jesus the way a Jew can know Jesus. What do you think about that?

I wonder if as non- Jews, we unconsciously allow most of Jesus' Jewishness to get lost. We see Ghandi as Indian? I wonder if we see Jesus as a Jew.

Ask yourself if this sounds even close we mostly see Jesus as a Christian, a Christian who had Jewish roots.....we see Jesus more like us than like the Pharisees and Sadducees. Do you see Jesus more at home in the synagogue or the church?

Do you know what a phylactery is? (Explain if necessary)

Perhaps you can picture, or imagine, or recall from something you have seen, a Jewish rabbi from Jesus' time.....dressed in black, the head covered and a phylactery... either hanging from a

leather strap around the neck or tied around the head and the left arm. Is that how you picture Jesus? (Slide #3)

Here are a few things that might be helpful in appreciating Jewishness.

#1. The Jews considered the name Jesus very common....like Jim, or Bill, or Joe today. For the Jews, the name of God was so Holy that they would not even say His name. The idea that such an ordinary person like Jesus with such an ordinary name could be the Son of God seemed scandalous!

#2. After the first century, Christians appropriated Jewish Scriptures and renamed them “Old Testament”. At that time they put an end to most Jewish customs.

#3. At the time of Jesus’ birth, the Jews were under the iron thumb of Herod the Great. Years of long wars with Rome had drained both the spirit and the resources of the Jews. They felt oppressed.

#4. There were 5 major groups within the Jews: Essenes, Zealots, Sanhedrin, Sadducees, and Pharisees. Jesus managed to confound and alienate each of them! But in spite of all their differences, these groups shared one goal – to preserve what was distinctively Jewish no matter the cost. Jesus represented a threat to all of this! Jesus offered a different way – a different way of living, a different way of treating others, a different way of being. His focus was on the Kingdom of God.

So here was Jesus with his very common name - a virtual nothing from Nazareth but nevertheless one of their own. The Jews were fearful of Rome. They were oppressed. And here comes Jesus – this non-phyllactery wearing upstart. Initially, Jesus attended Jewish festivals, He worshiped in the synagogue and temple, He followed Jewish customs and spoke in terms his fellow Jews would understand. But after his Baptism, after God gave him the gift of the Holy Spirit, Jesus did not hold to their customs – he healed on the Sabbath, he associated with the outcast, he dined with sinners. He declared that the first shall be last! In almost every way, his ways confronted his heritage, and his membership in their club.

If we are serious about seeing Jesus in a way that we have never known him, we must see this –

First and foremost, Jesus was a Jew! Our Savoir was not a leading Christian.....he was a Jew. The Son of God, with a very common name, and a very simple way of being, was a Jew! But he was a Jew who thought and taught and lived according to the Spirit of God’s law, not the letter of the law. If healing is good, it should not be withheld because of the particular day nor time of day. If sharing a meal is good, a person should not be excluded because of their gender, or

race, or socio- economic status, or education, or righteousness. Being served is nice, but serving is more honourable. Having is enjoyable. Sharing is essential.

He turned their world upside down. He knew the Scriptures very well. But he saw them and he interpreted them through new eyes with a new Spirit. Jesus could never rid himself of his Jewishness....nor would he want to.

If we are serious that we really want to know Jesus in ways we have yet to know Him, we need to understand and welcome his Jewishness. Jesus was, first and foremost, a Jew. Writing in an article in Christianity Today, Harold Myra writes, "Integrity demands we try to understand the depth of others' experiences." I wonder if we understand the depth of Jesus' Jewishness. Jesus was a man of integrity. He understood the experience of the downtrodden, the ostracized, the marginalized. He calls us to do the same.

To understand Jesus as a Jew.....my guess is that we usually don't connect him with that....we see him apart from that, in opposition with that, in fact the enemy of that.

To understand Jesus first and foremost as a man of God, determined to right the wrongs, dedicated to endlessly express love, and justice, and mercy into the lives of others....all others...that is our job.

What difference does it make to know Jesus as a Jew? Jaroslav Pelikan asks, "Would there have been such anti-semitism, would there have been so many organized massacres, would there have been an Auschwitz, if every Christian church and every Christian home had focused its devotion on Mary, not only the mother of God, but as a Jewish maiden? And what if every Christian church and every Christian home had focused on Christ, not as a leader and ruler, but as the rabbi of Nazareth?"

What do you think of our church learning about and even incorporating Jewish holidays, Jewish customs, Jewish practices? It is in fact our heritage and yet we seem so divorced from it. That was the faith of our Lord and Saviour, and we know so little about it. To understand the Jewish faith better is to understand Jesus better.

8 million Jews lived in the Roman Empire then. They were persecuted by the Roman government and they tried to erect a fence around their culture, in hopes of saving their tiny nation of high ideals from the pagans around them. They were looking for a Messiah in the form of an earthly king, a powerful ruler – not some common Jewish kid from Nazareth.

Jesus comes out of a very particular context. To know more about that context is to know more about Jesus.

God bless you on the journey.

Amen