G. Appleton

The Jewishness of Jesus

Jesus was born a Jew, he lived as a Jew, he died a Jew. This should be a significant fact for both Christians and Jews. For it is Jesus who both unites and divides us.

Christians have often longed to get back to the historical Jesus. In my student days two very different books on this subject were widely read and discussed: Glover's 'Jesus of History' and Schweitzer's 'Quest of the Historical Jesus'. The first suggested that a study of the Gospels could re-capture the days of his background and ministry; the second came to the conclusion that it was almost impossible to do so. One of the pleas of this lecture is that Jesus the Jew is the historical Jesus and that therefore we need the help of Jews to discover the Jesus of the first 30 years and so see the relevance of his personality and teaching. In the age in which we live there is much emphasis on the humanity of Jesus, almost a demand that he must be fully human if he is to be of real help to his followers and to those interested enough to discover his mystery. To the former the hope is to come to Godhood through the manhood; to the latter to find in him the pattern of God-willed human living. Both hopes can be helped forward by a neighbourly and brotherly interest from Jews, though an open and humble receptiveness is needed by those who call themselves disciples of him who began his mission from God as Jesus the Jew. In addition there is in the mind of Christians the desire to deepen their understanding of the Jesus of Christian faith. The basic documents of my study will be the Hebrew Bible which we Christians call the Old Testament and which was the only Bible that Jesus and his first followers knew, and the additional Testament which recorded the experience and faith of those first followers who except for one writer were all Jews. So we may say that Jews wrote the New Testament also.

In the first days there was considerable speculation about the spiritual lineage of both John the Baptist and Jesus. Did each of them claim to be the Christ, or Elijah, or 'that prophet', meaning the successor whom

Moses looked forward to carrying on his work, expressed in Deuteronomy 18: 15, 'The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brethren and him shall you heed' strengthening the hope of Moses with a divine promise in 18: 18 'I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brethren; and I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him.' This reference is quoted by Peter in Acts 3: 22 and by Stephen in Acts 7: 37. I quote these texts not to prove that we Christians are right in claiming that they were fulfilled in Jesus, but to suggest that Jesus took them as his personal vocation and that his earliest followers recognised that he had done so convincingly.

Let me try to adduce evidence that Jesus deliberately modelled himself on Moses. After the spiritual experience of his baptism Jesus went apart into the harsh countryside around Jericho for 40 days. Moses on Mt. Sinai had spent 40 days alone with God, seeking to find from the mind of God a divine law by which his people should live. Jesus in his 40 days in the desert was seeking from the mind of God how he should further the Kingdom of God and fulfil his own calling from God. Ought we not to see that the Law of the Lord by which both individuals and the first people of God should live, and the Rule of God in the hearts and affairs of other peoples of God are related and could possibly be talking about the same thing? If this is a possibility, then those exquisite parables of Jesus about the Kingdom as a seed, a treasure, a net gathering all kinds of human fish, a divine banquet to which all kinds of people are in the end invited, are surely describing the Torah as well as the Kingdom.

In the implication that the Torah and the Kingdom are available for all, was Jesus not showing himself a devoted son of Abraham, who believed that through him and his family all the families of the world should find a blessing and discover themselves as peoples of God? Did Jesus not accept the revelation of the Torah that man, all men were created in the image of God and therefore capable of communion with the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, open to hear his word and revelation, and receive the salvation that He wills for all?

Whatever may have been the historical facts of the gospel incident which Christians speak of as the Feeding of the 5,000, there would seem to be little doubt that Jesus thought of it as related to the providential feeding of the Israelites with manna in the exodus. Both feedings, in his thought, were provided by God. The first nourished and strengthened their bodies and brought great encouragement to the anxious minds of those journeying to the promised land, the second, a logical development, was meant to be spiritual food, bread of heaven, to sustain all who were journeying to the heavenly Jerusalem, the eternal home of the human spirit.

Moses, encouraged by the non-Israelite Jethro, appoints 70 elders to help in his task, on whom the Spirit fell: Jesus appointed 70 additional messengers whom he sent out to the villages and towns of Israel, over whom he rejoiced in the Holy Spirit when he heard of the victories over Satan and the healing of men's minds and spirits. Perhaps we are permitted to see in the choice of 70 in each case, a reference to the symbolic number of the nations of the world. (Numbers 11: 24-25, Luke 10: 17-21).

Another parallel that fascinates me is the incident of the brazen serpent in the desert, which Moses caused to be lifted up before the terrified people attacked by venomous serpents. The initial lifting up may have been that of a dead snake, which both relieved their fear and convinced them that the brood of vipers was not invincible. (Numbers 21: 8,9). Jesus in John 3: seems to be saying that the lifting up of his body will deliver men from the fear and sting of ubiquitous death.

There is one more incident that is relevant in the account of what the Second Testament calls the Transfiguration, in which Jesus is facing in anticipation growing hostility and probable death. To the three watching disciples it seemed that he was conferring with two spiritual figures who then or later were identified as Moses and Elijah, two of the greatest prophets, who both felt keenly the sinfulness and opposition of the people of their own time. Their spiritual presence on Mt Tabor must have been a great help to Jesus and an assurance to us that the God of Moses and Elijah, of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and the God of Jesus, is the God of the living. One last

point can be added from the parable of Dives and Lazarus in which the rich man in purgatory pleads with Father Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his brothers, a request met with the response, doubtless expressing Jesus' own conviction of faith 'If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead', (Luke 16: 31), a text seldom quoted even by people like myself who believe that God works in and through Judaism to-day.

It would seem clear from this study of New Testament texts dealing with the relation of Jesus and Moses, that any Christians and Jews who claim to see opposition and rivalry between them are mistaken.

Chapters 5-7 of St Matthew's Gospel show how deeply Jesus had studied the Torah, how he applied it to his own life, and how he took its commands down into the realm of thought, character and motive. 'Think not that I have come to abolish the Law and the prophets. I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them. For truly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. Whoever then relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches men so shall be called least in the Kingdom of heaven'. Doubtless there were discussions about the interpretation and application, and arguments about oral additions and modifications. In the Sermon on the Mount murder is traced to hatred in the heart; adultery to undisciplined looking and imagination; truth is demanded whether on oath or in ordinary speech; the love of neighbour must apply to enemies as well as friends; all must be perfect as the heavenly Father is perfect. The Sermon on the Mount must not be taken as a negativing of the Torah, but a deep fulfilling of it, an exposition of the observance of the Torah which Jesus expected from his disciples.

In this last sentence there may be a possible resolving of the tension between present-day Christians and Jews about non-violence and love towards enemies. An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth, is an expression of justice, in itself a great advance on unrestrained retaliation. It is Jesus the Jew who has laid on his followers the duty of returning good for evil, and of being

ready to go further than statutory duty - dutifully going the required mile, but ready to go an extra mile out of generosity and love. He expects those who enrol as his disciples to do this, perhaps he hopes that one day others will accept this law of unrestricted love. A final word to his Jewish disciples was not a further endorsement of the golden rule to love one's neighbour as one's self, but something new, namely that those disciples should love one another as he loved them. One of the saddest moments in my life was at a discussion between Christians and Jews when I was rash enough to ask the Jewish speaker how far the year of release, and the jubilee of jubilees of the Torah was observed today, to receive the reply 'We Jews can no more fulfil this idealism than you Christians obey the Sermon on the Mount'. We both have to plead forgiveness from a God of justice and love.

There was another vocation which Jesus accepted from his Bible - that of the Servant of the Lord, worked out in the four Servant poems of the second half of the book of Isaiah (42: 1-4, 49: 1-6, 50: 4-9, 52: 13 - 53: 12). In the first song the Servant's call is described: he will not crush a broken reed nor quench a dimly burning wick: he will bring true religion to the earth. In the second song, the Servant feels that he has laboured in vain with his own people and is then told that it is too small a task to raise up again the tribes of Israel, he is to be a light to the nations, an agent of God's universal salvation. The third song tells us of growing opposition and suffering. In the last song the Servant is dead and those who knew him confess that they had thought his suffering and death were a punishment by God, but now they realized that he was wounded for their sins and that through his death forgiveness and redemption became available for all.

The direct quotations and indirect references to these four passages in the New Testament, make it clear that Jesus accepted the role of the Suffering Servant, and out of this experience came his dedication 'I am among you as a servant' and his hope that his followers would become a community of love and service to the world. Jews believe that the Suffering Servant represents Israel having to meet hostility and persecution both from the nations and the Christian Church. The more I learn of the relationship be-

tween Jews and Christians down the centuries, the more appalled I am at the record of the Church.

It was in his emphasis on God as the central fact and priority of his life that Jesus was so magnificently a Jew. He picked out the Shema as the first and greatest commandment 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, mind, soul and strength', and he put 'Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself' as the second, thus making the same choice as contemporary rabbis.

To Jesus the Jew God is essentially 'Father', that is the word that best expresses to him the meaning of God, and to it he adds from Jewish family life the word 'Abba' with its content of family love and familiarity. God is not only 'My Father' but 'Your Father' as well, Our Father, Father of all. Jesus is always wanting to do the things he sees God doing, always wanting to speak the things he hears God saying. Let me quote just four texts from the 4th Gospel to illustrate the priority of his thinking about God, the intimacy of his relationship with God, and the totality of his dependence on God:

> He who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what is pleasing to him (5:29) I can do nothing on my own authority; as I hear, I judge; and my judgment is just, because I seek not my own will, but the will of him who sent me (5: 30) My teaching is not mine, but his who sent me (7: 16) I do not speak on my own authority; but the Father who dwells in me does his works (14: 10).

There was a moment in his life when God seemed hidden, when he seemed forsaken by God as well as by man. At that moment of desolation on the cross, it was a cry of an earlier Jew which expressed the extent to which he missed God. 'Eloi! Eloi! My God! My God! why hast thou forsaken me?' That cry revealed not only the depth of desolation, but the height of faith (Psalm 22:1) - in spite of the physical agony and the spiritual loneliness, he still cried out 'My God!' Christians as well as Jews will remember a similar cry from an earlier sufferer. 'Though he slay me, yet will I wait for him' (Job 13: 15), and we Christians and Jews of this generation will remember a contemporary cry of Jewish faith inscribed on the wall of the Warsaw ghetto:

I believe in the sun, even if it does not shine,
I believe in love, even if I do not feel it,
I believe in God, even if I do not see him.

I pray that I may be as theocentric in my thinking and devotion as Jesus was.

Jesus lived his whole life within the culture and cultus of his own people. His parents observed the sacramental ceremonies of childhood - circumcision and presentation to God as a firstborn. He became a bar-mitzvah, and it may have been at that first visit to Jerusalem for the Passover that he was chosen to ask the question 'What is the meaning of this service?'. It was on that visit that he became so excitedly happy in asking the rabbis the questions arising in his boyish mind and hearing their answers that he forgot the time and imagined that his parents would know where to find him. It was probably on that visit that the Fatherhood of God became real to him, so that from then on the Temple was 'my Father's house' and the meaning of life was to be about the Father's business.

His custom was to attend the synagogue on the sabbath day, he went up to Jerusalem for the great feasts, he spent hours in prayer in the silence of the night and the quiet of the hills. Some Biblical scholars think that the Last Supper was on the occasion of the Khiddush, rather than the Passover, and the two disciples at Emmaus recognised him by the way he took bread, broke it and said over it a blessing of God. He died a Jew, perhaps on the day when the Passover Lambs were killed. His last words 'Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit', were as Jewish then as they are now. He was hastily buried and his body only partially embalmed, because the sabbath hour was at hand.

Any meditation on the death of Jesus cannot avoid the question of who was responsible for it. All down the centuries since the first Good Friday Christians have held the Jews guilty of his killing, not just some Jews but all Jews. To many Christians the crucifixion is still the unforgiveable sin, regardless of the benefits which we profess to see accruing to us from his death - the revelation of faith to the uttermost, the manifestation of invincible love, the assurance that if a true man could forgive all that inflicted pain of body, mind and spirit, the true God, the Father to whom he was obedient son, could forgive the

sins of the whole world. The sacrificial system of the first volume which Jews and Christians possess in common breathes a deep longing for forgiveness, a deep sense of the wide gap between the holiness of God and even the best efforts of man. From an early point in his ministry it was clear that Jesus expected and experienced opposition, as most of the prophets did. He also thought that in the end he would be called upon to die, and he was prepared to do this willingly if it should be the Father's will. Both he and the writers of the New Testament, as well as the writers in the First Testament believed that any covenant with God needed to be ratified by the seal of blood. He believed that his vocation was to ratify the new covenant longed for by Jeremiah by his own blood, as the accounts of the Last Supper relate. It was almost as if he felt that his death was necessary, to seal the sacrifice of his life's obedience. The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews sums up this sacrificial willingness in a verse from Psalm 40. 'I am come to do thy will, as it is written of me in the roll of the book, O my God. I delight to do it, for thy Law is written within my heart'. Psalm 40: 7-8, Hebrews 10: 7. The ideal of the Suffering Servant, the new covenant for the forgiveness of sins and his interpretation of Messiahship all seemed confirmed by his death. Once more basically Jewish. The Gospels also show the sharp pain in the mind of Jesus, his bearing on his heart the humanly intolerable burden of the sins of the world. Surely in this Jesus was being truly Jewish. The sins of the world grow more evil, more destructive, more intolerable, more deeply individual and more extensively social and corporate. It is perhaps providential that Ash Wednesday, Good Friday and the Day of Atonement punctuate the yearly calendar, with their call to penitence.

Undoubtedly some Jews were involved in the physical liquidation of Jesus. But I would hazard the opinion that more regretted it. Jesus was not without his friends in that last week: there were the pilgrims from Galilee, the man who lent him the ass for the ride into Jerusalem, the owner of the upper room, Simon of Cyrene was almost certainly a Jew, there were the women of Jerusalem who wept as Jesus dragged his cross to the place of execution, there were the crowds mentioned by Luke as smiting their

breasts in despair as they watched what happened, there were those who knew Jesus and the women from Galilee who stood at a distance and watched in silent dismay. There was Joseph of Arimathea, a Jew of standing, who determined to give the body of Jesus honourable burial, and Nicodemus, now full of courage and open commitment. There were too many friends of Jesus to justify any sweeping condemnation of the whole nation.

The authority to sentence a man to death and to carry out the execution lay in the hands of the occupying power. The Roman governor had the last word and he wrote it over the cross - Jesus of Nazareth, the king of the Jews - both a taunt to those who would not accept him as such, and a brutal reminder of how Rome treated anyone who might be suspected or accused of such a pretension. Yet one cannot help feeling some sympathy with Pilate. He was the representative of an unpopular occupying power, he had been in trouble earlier with the authorities at Rome, the provocative entry into Jerusalem of Jesus, accompanied by a crowd of cheering Galileans joined by Jerusalemites who probably welcomed any nationalist demonstration, put him in a dilemma. Passover time was an anxious time and he only knew Jesus from what was reported about him by anxious members of the establishment or his own officials, though his cross-examination of Jesus suggested that he was harmless. He could take no risks - sentence was passed and hastily executed. That should have settled the matter, but it did not, and 2000 years later we are still arguing and writing books about it, and 1000 million Christians believe that there was a divine intervention.

Had Christians been true to the spirit of Jesus there would not have been the endless hostility and persecution of Jews, acquiesced in and often initiated by the Church. Today we are becoming aware of our un-Jesus-like attitudes and actions. There is not time in this lecture to enlarge on this. Let a prayer of Pope John XXIII show penitence and change of heart:

> O God, we are conscious that many centuries of blindness have blinded our eyes so that we no longer see the beauty of thy chosen people, nor recognise in their faces and features our privileged

brethren. We realise that the mark of Cain stands upon our foreheads. Across the centuries our brother Abel has lain in the blood which we drew or which we caused to be shed by forgetting Thy love. Forgive us for the curse we falsely attached to their name as Jews. Forgive us for crucifying thee a second time in their flesh. For we knew not what we did.

I must not pass over a reciprocal and more deserved accusation and judgment of Christians by Jews, who see in the holocaust the logical consequence of the theological condemnation by Christians and the Church. There seems no doubt to me that this condemnatory, unforgiving attitude helped to create an atmosphere in which Hitler and the Nazis found it easy to carry out their policy of extermination. I can understand the bitterness of many Jews at the failure of the Churches to intervene. Looking back, I remember that I read Mein Kampf with horror, but could not believe that even Hitler would be evil enough and ruthless enough to put it into practice. When he did, with the apparent acquiescence of the majority in his own nation, the opportunity to intervene in any effective way had been lost. Our prayer must be 'Father, forgive us, for we know not what to do'. Both our communities need forgiveness and both need to forgive. We need to be merciful as our heavenly Father is merciful. Yet having pleaded for forgiveness, we need to be on the watchtower with Habbakuk, on the lookout for the earliest signs of anti-semitism.

We also need to look at a frequent criticism that the New Testament is anti-semitic. I think there is some truth in this. In the Gospels Jesus was often critical of individuals and classes of people, conscious of their temptations and class failings. But those were within the nation, following the example of the prophets, who could never have been popular. I would like to make two points. The first is an insight from Krister Stendahl the Chairman of the World Council of Churches Consultation on the Church and the Jewish people, who emphasises that the New Testament was written in a minority situation, so that it is understandable that there should be defensive attitudes from time to time, even aggressive defences. The Church soon

became a majority community, says Stendahl and failed to adjust itself to the new situation.

There is one situation, however, in which I have been personally involved, in which the Church is in a decided minority, and that is in the modern state of Israel, where there are 3½ million Jews, ½ million Muslims and only 50,000 Christians. This, to my mind, is a very wholesome situation for the Church to be in, for now we Christians have to listen, have to be in a subordinate position, occasionally accept legislation which we may feel to be discriminating, be in contact with a Jewish theological faculty of splendid scholarship and vigorous confidence, which resents any aggressive approach and forcefully rejects the centuries-old Christian assumption that with the separation of Church and Synagogue, Judaism lost any theological validity and spiritual effectiveness.

My own spiritual life is nourished deeply from St. John's Gospel, with its mystical interpretation of Jesus, but for some years now I have been troubled by the seeming hostility to Jews generally, as if Jesus were speaking from a point in time after the separation. My first explanation to myself was that this seeming wholesale hostility was a sign of the late date of writing, reflecting the situation after the influx of Gentiles into the Church and the destruction of Jerusalem. An insight from a Jewish Biblical scholar has brought me light, in the convincing thought that the term 'the Jews' so often used by the fourth evangelist does not refer to Jews generally, but is descriptive of Jews from the south or the authorities from Jerusalem, much in the same way as the term 'Galileans' is used of Jews from the north.

There are some notable but not often noted references in other books of the New Testament, where a more friendly and inclusive note is struck. St Paul in Romans 9 - 11, where he is wrestling with the problem of Jewish-Christian relations, asks the question 'Has God rejected his people?' and answers it with an emphatic 'By no means'. In his illustration of the olive tree, it is Christians who are grafted on to the original cultivated olive - it is not another completely different olive. Even in a growingly polemical relationship, we are still together.

Further misunderstanding has come about by the way in

which one word in Greek and in English is used to cover more than one meaning, 'nomos' and 'law', where the word can sometimes seem to apply to the Torah and sometimes to a legalism or literalism which is not confined to any one community of faith, but which is a temptation in all communities of faith. My heart rejoices when the writer of the book of Revelation speaks of four and twenty elders worshipping before the throne of God and of the Lamb, two sets of twelve and in his description of the holy city, the spiritual Jerusalem, where the foundations of the wall of the city have the names of the twelve apostles on them, and the twelve gates have engraved upon them the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. Still more heartening in the writer's vision is the perception that the gates of the city are never shut by day or night, and there is no need of sun or moon to shine upon it, 'for God is its light and its lamp is the Lamb'.

Yet ultimately Church and Synagogue separated, and each went its own independent and often rival way, developing on parallel lines, which in the geometrical metaphor never meet, except in an inaccessible infinity. In our age can we not see that the lines are beginning to veer towards one another, can we not accept that infinity is a symbol of God? The separation of Christians and Jews, the first break in the unity of the people of God, was to my mind a great tragedy, and one which I dare to think was never envisaged by Jesus, nor by his great interpreter Paul, who also, like his Master, was born a Jew, lived as a Jew, and died a Jew.

Let Paul the Jew have the last word about our possible coming together. I paraphrase Romans 11: 26 for my own faith and devotion, trying to see its relevance for our relationship today: 'if our mutual rejection of each other has resulted in innumerable millions of non-Jews coming to a knowledge of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, what would our coming together mean to the world, but life from the dead? And for Jews, after the persistence of Judaism through so many centuries, a vindication of their faith in the providential working of God in history. Let me ask another question: are we Christians and Jews together called to give back to the Western world faith in the Living God?'

In answer to this last question of mine, I find inspiration and encouragement from a Jewish writer. Hans Schoeps

in his book The Jewish-Christian Argument has this relevant paragraph: 'If there is anything this age demands, if there is anything that gives reason for hope, it is this: Christian and Jew, each within the common religious dialogue and also independent of it, each faithful to his own beliefs and his own way of life, bear common witness together before the world that they possess tidings from the divine realm; they go through history together as corporeal evidence of the truth of God'.

Note

1. This Lecture was given as the St Paul's Lecture for 1979 at St Botolph's Church, Aldgate, on 14 November,1979. It will be printed as one of the annual pamphlets of CCJU and copies may be obtained from that body, at St Botolph's Church, Aldgate, London, EC3 at a cost of 33p, including postage. Bishop Appleton also included the lecture on"The Jewishness of Jesus" in a 1978 series of lectures in Union Theological College.