



Christian Education

A series of Sermons and Occasional Papers
From the clergy and members
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Title: **"A Broken Glass"**
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My on-going experience of being in Repertory Philippines' current production of "Fiddler on the Roof" has had a profound effect on me personally, in particular as relating to my attitude about two ethnic groups: Filipinos and Jews. In the first case, I have now had an in-depth experience of working professionally with pinoy and pinays who are not related only to the Episcopal Church in the Philippines. This has been an eye-opener. I have come to appreciate the talent, the discipline and the insight of my friends and neighbors here. I don't think I'll view the country quite the same again. And the second group I now view differently is that represented by my fictional family and neighbors in Anatevka- in other words, the Jews. I did extensive research not only into the character of Tevye, but also the religion he so proudly professes while preparing for the part. I learned so very much that I never knew before and, like my attitude towards Filipinos, I will never deal with the Jews or the Old Testament ever the same way again.

Those of you who have been to a Jewish wedding, or even just seen the version that takes place on stage in "Fiddler on the Roof", will have noticed a strange rite that concludes the ceremony. A small glass is wrapped in cloth and put on the floor. The bridegroom then loudly smashes the glass with his foot. In the play, we all then shout "*Mazel tov!*" and begin the celebration. This might make one think that the smashing of the glass is a happy sign. The fact is that in a life "laden with happiness and tears" (as the song in the play goes), this is part of the tears. The ceremony is a sign of sorrow about something that happened thousands of years ago when the Romans destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem. This was considered just about the greatest tragedy that could happen to the Jewish people, and the ceremony in the

wedding rite is a reminder that however happy an occasion might be, it is sweet only by comparison to the tragedies that went before it. In fact, the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed several times in the course of its history, and Jewish legend and teaching suggest that at least two of these times was on the same day of the year, called "Tish b'Av" an annual commemoration that is marked with fasting and mourning. It is also a part of every traditional Jewish wedding where the glass is broken- a connection with the past and part of the all-important "Tradition."

Christians no longer appreciate the significance of the destruction of the Temple. Once upon a time, we did. The earliest Christians, we must remember, considered themselves faithful Jews and attended worship in synagogues and the Temple itself until they were excluded by the rest of the Jewish congregation. For the Jews, and the earliest Christians, the Temple was a sacrament- the sign of God's choice to dwell among his people on earth. When the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple with it, it was as though the universe had been turned upside down. Life, as it had been known, was forever changed, and Jews had to adapt to a whole new way of relating to God that didn't involve a fixed place in the land of Israel. First the pagan Romans, then the Christians, and then the Moslems took control of the sacred, but empty site. The Dome of the Rock, a very important mosque, now occupies the space where the Temple stood, and Jews still consider the foundation wall on the Western side of the Temple complex, to be the most significant place to offer prayer since ironically, but to keep the peace, prayer by Jews and Christians is forbidden by the Israeli authorities on the Temple mount itself.

We hear Jesus refer to the tragic event commemorated at Jewish weddings in today's Gospel. The Temple that Jesus knew was widely considered to be one of the wonders of the world in its time, constructed at enormous expense by King Herod the Great (the villain of the Christmas story) and covered in white marble and gold plate. One can imagine what fishermen from rural Galilee must have thought when they saw such a marvel. Jesus is almost dismissive: "the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down."

It might be said that the Temple's destruction was the point where Christians and Jews parted ways and developed into two separate religions. With the destruction of Jewish society, all religious parties except the much-misunderstood Pharisees disbanded, and they in turn became the foundation of the rabbinical Judaism we know today. The Temple, while still remembered and mourned, gave way to the synagogue as the center of Jewish worship and study, and the sacrifice of animals stopped completely. Christians, on the other hand, began to see the Temple as the Body of Christ, not the building in Jerusalem: the sacramental presence of God was not within its four walls, but in the Person of Jesus and the Church he had established, and the ultimate sacrifice was his death, commemorated in the Holy Communion. Here we have two ways of dealing with a tragedy, but holding within itself the seeds of even greater tragedy. Christians began to see themselves as not only different from the Jews, but altogether better. And this is the atmosphere in which the New Testament was written- long enough removed from the days of a shared identity as Children of Abraham for that important tie to be forgotten. Long enough also for the essential Jewishness of Jesus himself to be down-played and the first notes of the two-thousand year discordant piece of music called anti-Semitism to be heard.

While this may sound very foreign to our experience here in Manila, we should be aware of the role the Philippines played in giving refuge to Jewish refugees after World War II, and the presence of a small, but vibrant Jewish community in our city, centered in its synagogue here in Makati. It is a little-known, but important part of our life and history here: more local than we might think.

However, we as Christians hear about the destruction of the Temple, and we are conditioned to respond, "very sad, but it served the Jews right." Our "tradition" treats the Jews as those who had their chance, but threw it away when they "rejected" the Messiah, Jesus. And so, we read the record of the New Testament as though it somehow gives us the right to gloat over the fate of our Jewish brothers and sisters over the course of our shared history. This is the result of an uncritical reading of Scripture, including the words of St Paul who was always proud of his Jewish identity and heritage. It is the kind of thinking that led first to accusations of

the Jews having been the ones to have killed Christ, and then proceeds to the Russian pogroms and the Nazi death camps.

Does this all seem a bit much to tie in to a Broadway musical? Not if we realize that the kind of persecution that takes place in that fictional village is basically historical, and that it got worse as the years progressed. More disturbing still, this persecution was perpetrated in the main by Christians. When the character of the priest comes on stage at the beginning of the play, he is wearing my cassock and my silver cross. That's a sober reminder to me, and a rather personal one, of the role that the Christian church has all too often played in the victimization of its older sister, the People of the Old Testament and of Jesus' own ethnic strain.

Perhaps the thing that can help us to begin the process of opening our hearts and our minds to those whose religious roots are our own is to revisit the issue of the Temple in Jerusalem and to see it again as the sign of God's dwelling with humanity before its destruction. Then we can see how two responses to the tragedy of its destruction developed: one in faithfulness to the original Covenant and its way of life, the other, focused no longer in the physical world of Jerusalem and its Temple, but in the Person of Jesus Christ and his followers, Jew and non-Jew, through the world.

When confronted by his daughter's marriage to the Russian Fyedka in the play- a marriage that would have involved her first being baptized into the Russian Orthodox Church- Tevye asks defiantly, "How can I turn my back on my faith, on my people?" It is time for us to recognize that we as Christians have too long turned our backs on the faith and people of Israel, ignoring the fact that God has never proved false to the Covenant He made with them through Abraham. To "read, mark, learn and inwardly digest" the Old Testament is to admit the special calling of Abraham's children. To be faithful to Jesus as He really was and is, we must come to terms with the specialness, the chosenness and the essential importance of His immediate brothers and sisters, the Jews. Tevye asks, "It's true we are the Chosen People, but once in a while can't you choose someone else?" God's answer, apparently, is "not really": the Covenant remains.