

Jews and Gentiles

Sunday before Lent 08.00 & 10.30 11th Feb 2024

H & P Comm'n St James Church Alderholt

Readings: Isaiah 56 : 1 – 8

 Luke 2 : 25 – 32

Sermon:

For some weeks now Vicar Simon has preached on Inclusive Church so, as he is away today, he has asked me to continue his theme, with a focus on 'Ethnicity – Jews and Gentiles'. Ethnicity can be a complex subject to define that depends on the context in which the term is used. 'Ethnic' can be defined as the identification with a social group that shares a common and distinctive culture, religion, language, colour, gender, or other customary elements. Today's sermon then will be an attempt to identify some of the differences between Jews and Gentiles, and what it may mean to Christians.

Jews are people who are descendants through the line of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Jacob; while Gentiles are – everyone else. In early biblical times Gentiles would have been seen as descendants from Abraham and Hagar, through their son Ishmael, who became the nomadic Arab tribes. Later in biblical history, the Romans and Greeks were also referred to as Gentiles. Therefore, all of us here are Gentiles – aren't we! Well, no, not all of us – we have at least one Jew among us today and that is – me! Let me explain why I can claim to be Jewish.

My mother's family were Jews who escaped from Russia during the pogrom of the late 19th century when the Tsar's Cossacks were ordered to eliminate all Jews from the country. Doesn't that sound like a familiar story? Granddad and Grandma came to England as refugees but unfortunately, I have very little detail about them. Quite understandably, they were very secretive about their past identities, for fear of persecution in this country too.

What I know as fact is that they are included in the 1911 national census as Morris and Rachel Bronovitch, resident in Brick Lane, East London within a large Jewish refugee community. O.K. – but how does that make me Jewish. Well, I am Jewish because my mother was Jewish and descendancy is passed down through the maternal line. This means that the descendancy line is broken with me so my children are not Jewish, but the line has continued through my sister to her children.

A few years ago, I had my DNA analysed and, not surprisingly, it confirmed that I am 52% Ashkenazi Jew. The Ashkenazi's are Jews that, during the dispersion, travelled from the Middle East to settle in Eastern and Northern Europe. So, my descent from Russian Jews seems pretty much confirmed – much to my delight. By the way, I doubt if my Jewish descent registered with Simon when he asked me to preach this sermon.

My brother Brian is very much into Genealogy and some years ago he had research carried out on our family, with some interesting revelations. Our father's line was traced back with links to royalty – well of course – and particularly to the Irish kings of more than two thousand years ago. From my DNA profile I know that I am 25% Irish and I know that my paternal granddad was a Roman Catholic who originated from Dublin. So, there you have it – I am descended from Jewish refugees, Royalty, Irish Roman Catholics, with a little Scots Presbyterian blood thrown in on grandma's side – and to crown it all – I am an Anglican priest. In short, I am a crazy mixed up kid – but our Father, God has a way of sorting all that out, hasn't he!

I'm going to take us back now to the time of the first apostles and particularly Peter and Paul. I know – Paul was not one of the original twelve, but he considered himself to be an Apostle to the Gentiles. Peter's ministry was predominantly to the Jews in and around Jerusalem, he believed that only Jews could be followers of Christ. Paul, on the other hand, travelled far and wide preaching and converting Gentiles of various nations.

We should remember that in the time of Jesus' earthly ministry the term 'Christian' did not exist. Acts 11: 25 – 27 tells us that the Antiochian society were the first to refer to the early Church as Christians. Antioch was known as 'all the earth in one location' since it included all of the world's diversity and richness in one place. Antioch was built like a typical town, with a round wall on the outside, a market in the middle, and the city's interior enclosed in a fashion that separated distinct population groups. After Paul founded the church in Antioch, the social divisions began to be dismantled in a way that threw the established categories into disarray, with Jews and Gentiles from all walks of life being gathered in one place. The reframed community was so unusual and distinctive that it necessitated a new term, so the name 'Christian' was coined in response

to the recognition that something fresh and unprecedented was happening.

This is the origin of the term 'Christian Church', formed from a very diverse group of people, both Jews and Gentiles. Our Gospel reading reveals that when Jesus was presented in the temple at just 8 days old, Simeon recognised the baby Jesus as the Messiah and declared that he would be ".... a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." Peter did eventually accept that Gentiles too could be followers of Christ.

People today can be distinguished as Christians by how they conduct their lives in this world. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5 : 17, "Therefore, if someone is in Christ, the new beginning has come: The old is gone, the new is here." But today, Christians often have difficulty in anticipating new outcomes because they attempt to live in their old ways. However, when Jesus redeemed them, he gave them a new life of love for one another. As John 13:35 states, "If you have love for one another, then everyone will know you are my followers." This is the best reminder to us that being a Christian is about following the teaching of Jesus and loving each other; regardless of culture, race, colour, religion or gender.

Coming back to Vicar Simon's theme of Inclusive Church – how can I object to inclusivity? I'm descended from both Jews and Gentiles, ancient royalty, Irish Roman Catholics, Scottish Presbyterians and a few percent of 'other', whatever that means. The one thing I don't seem to be able to claim is any descendancy from black people, or 'people of colour' if you prefer; but some of my best friends are 'people of colour' and I'm certainly not going to speak against them. I'll leave you to think through your own position on Inclusive Church and I'll close with a prayer:

Father God, help us and all the different peoples of the world to understand each another better. Increase among us love, sympathy, tolerance, and goodwill, that we may learn to appreciate the gifts that others bring to us, and to see in all people our brothers and sisters for whom your Son, Jesus Christ died. Amen.