
Letters to a Young Episcopalian: Confession

This letter is part of a series of fictional letters by Canon George Maxwell intended for Episcopalians young and old who wonder what it means to be faithful in the world today.

Last Week's Letter: [Resurrection](#)

[Back to All Letters](#)

Next Week's Letter: [Altruism](#)

Dear Anna,

You are not alone. Many of us wince when we hear “the Jews” in the passion narratives read in church as we prepare for Easter.

Some people have translated the original Greek as Judeans, religionists, religious authorities, or some subset of those groups.

Amy-Jill Levine, a Jewish New Testament scholar, reminds us, though, that, “Such bowdlerizing obscures part of the reason why Jews have been persecuted over 2,000 years, divorces Jews from Jesus and his earliest followers, and even serves to delegitimize the relationship of Jews today from the land of Israel.”

I wonder if our wince is really just about anti-Semitism in the text.

Jesus was a Jew, after all, as were his followers. We read the passion narrative from John this year. John was probably Jewish. Sometimes, he seems to be hostile toward whoever he is calling “the Jews,” but sometimes not.

I feel like I’m reading the record of a family argument. They are saying things about each other that neither would tolerate from the mouth of someone outside of the family.

We are right to be suspicious of the text, of course. But, I think that there is another reason why it still has so much energy for us today. After all, we read the stories of the Exodus without worrying about whether the text is anti-Egyptian, and stories about Roman occupation without worrying about whether text is anti-Italian.

There is another place in John’s passion narrative that also makes many of us wince. It’s the moment, two actually, that Pilate presents Jesus and we all shout, “Crucify him!”

David B. Burrell, a Roman Catholic priest, tells a story about spending Holy Week in Jerusalem. Someone asked an Anglican canon there, “Who killed Jesus, the Romans or the Jews?” The canon answered, “I should have thought that any Christian who tried to attribute Jesus’ death to someone else has missed the point of the gospel?”

Burrell goes on to say, “Yet should we dare turn about to face the crucified sinless one, recognizing that we would have done it had we been able, we will be brought to a self-knowledge that is so rare that we wonder whether there could be any other way of attaining it.”

It might be that what makes us wince is the realization that the problem is not just with the text; it’s also with us.

Perhaps, our response shouldn't be to change the translation, but to acknowledge our past. We do, of course, include margin notes in our bulletins warning against anti-Semitic interpretations. And, we have had classes and sermons on the commonality between Jewish and Christian traditions.

You have made me think of another thing to do – read “the Jews” as a confession.

The good news is that God often speaks to us in the language of repentance.

Your affectionate uncle,
Ames

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