

Donnybrook

15 September 2021

Welcome

We are rightly sensitive these days about how our prayer, liturgy and sacred texts refer to the Jewish people. This is especially the case with the Fourth Gospel, which is sharply negative towards what it consistently calls "the Jews."

Topic

Perhaps unexpectedly, the Gospel I just read is very helpful in this regard.

Steps

The Gospel according to John can be read literally and often has been. It has also been read at a different level, a symbolic one.

In a symbolic reading, the unnamed Beloved Disciple represents the Christian faith, the eventual offspring of Judaism. From the Last Supper onwards, the Beloved Disciple (only in the Fourth Gospel) is a kind of idealised figure, a faithful witness to the events of salvation, the one with penetrating spiritual insight. In the same symbolic reading, the mother of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel, also not named, represents the mother religion of Judaism, the daughter of Sion, just as she did at the wedding feast of Cana.

Taken at this symbolic level, the words "woman, this is your son" are really an appeal to the mother religion to recognise Christianity as the offspring of Judaism, the next generation or evolution. Contrariwise, the words "this is your mother" are an appeal to the Christians not to forget the womb from which we come, the mother religion of Judaism.

Personally, I find it profoundly helpful that at the climactic moment of the whole Gospel, the evangelist takes care to portray the mutual recognition and eventual reconciliation of Judaism and Christianity. Such a scene compensates, even if not completely, for the negativity towards the Jews in this Gospel.

Conclusion

In a word, our roots are firmly in the Jewish faith, our mother religion. So much is this the case that Chief Rabbi of Odessa is reputed once to have said, Christianity is Judaism for non-Jews. Not inaccurate, when you think about it.