

Views from the Pews – O come O come Emmanuel

And ransom captive Israel. We are familiar with this hymn, just as we are familiar with scripture, and with much other religious discourse, on the theme of Israel as victim, Israel as captive. And let's be clear, episodes such as the Egyptian exile, the Roman occupation of Jesus' day and the 20th century Holocaust, are historical facts which form a critical backdrop for our understanding of Biblical themes.

But we need to bear in mind that words such as "Jerusalem" and "Israel" may often be figures of speech, metaphors for wider concepts. Jesus uses figures of speech all the time, similes such as; 'The Kingdom of God is like—' So when we encounter words in our discourse such as 'Israel', are we talking about a geographical entity, a specific nation state in the present, or something more general?

This has become critically important over the last 12 months, because – to take one example only – American foreign policy appears heavily swayed by a belief that scriptural references to 'Israel' mean a specific place, and a specific political entity. Hence even the Democratic Presidential Nominee seems to want a dollar each way, lest she alienate parts of the Christian community.

A quick visit to the New Testament provides some alternative ideas. St John at Chapter 3;16 has Jesus explaining his Father's plan as one to save the world, not just a geographical area. The Apostles were tasked with globalizing the new faith.

And better still, St Paul is anxious to establish a world religion, making hazardous sea journeys to nurture a church that extended to his own known horizons. Paul, who was shipwrecked, would have been surprised and delighted to know that an only slightly larger sailing ship would reach New Zealand 1800 years later, bearing the Gospel.

Our reading, both of the Bible and of other works, and our speaking, must be conducted with care, lest words take on unintended meanings, lest the lens through which we view the world becomes cloudy, distorted, fractured.

There are growing claims that Israel and other actors have breached international law. The ethical positions we are being urged to take become more complex by the minute. The lens must be kept clean and unclouded, if we are to navigate these waters. We need to stay free to make informed choices, free from the distortions that words can sometimes cause.

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