

Views from the Pews – Can you be both Jew and Christian?

One of the saddest aspects of the current Middle Eastern conflict has been the pressure to take sides. “If you’re not for us you must be against us”. Thus when Canon Paul Oestreicher wrote to the Listener to criticize current Israeli policy with regards to Gaza, others wrote to accuse him of disloyalty, the implication being that you can’t be a Christian and a Jew simultaneously.

Canon Paul was granted a right of reply, saying pithily that he was just following the greatest Rabbi the world has ever known.

Politics aside, his critics initially seemed to have a point; can you belong to two religions at once? (And to complicate matters further, Oestreicher is a Quaker as well as an Anglican!)

But a visit to Acts 1-5 (for instance) reveals a much more nuanced situation. Not only had Christ’s ministry on earth as revealed in the Gospels been concerned almost exclusively with the Jewish people, their society and their religion, but the early Acts story appears as a ‘by Jews for Jews’ sort of narrative. Acts 2; 47 for instance refers to the Lord adding to their number “day by day those who were being saved”. This narrative appears to leave the ‘saved’ as still-devout Jews who had nevertheless risked a lot by acknowledging the Messiah for who and what He was, despite His apparent physical destruction by crucifixion. It seems that this group were simultaneously Jewish, and belonging to that group we now call Christian.

And all this had been foretold by Simeon, who clearly identified the Christ-child as not only a light to lighten the Gentiles but also the glory of Israel. This the final line of what we know as the Nunc Dimittis appears to emphasise that Christ’s light will illuminate Israeli and Gentile alike.

So, we need to be careful of calling people names, of stereotyping those who may appear different on the surface.

And Oestreicher is not just another pacifist to be stereotyped as disloyal; he was smuggled out of Nazi Germany as a child. Next time we stereotype ‘refugees’ or ‘immigrants’ we should pause to think of those few who made it to our shores all those years ago, even those who say inconvenient things to us today.

Richard Swarbrick