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SERMON FOR THE CMJ BICENTENARY
SERVICE AT CHRIST CHURCH SPITALFIELDS

9TH MAY 2009

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Welcome to the Olive Press Research Paper – the replacement for the Olive Press Quarterly. This features articles that cover a wide spectrum of issues which relate to the ministry of CMJ.

Articles are contributed by CMJ staff (past and present), also by Trustees, Representatives, CMJ supporters or by interested parties.

Articles do not necessarily portray CMJ's standpoint on a particular issue but may be published on the premise that they allow a pertinent understanding to be added to any particular debate.

Bishop John writes...

My links with CMJ extend back into my time spent in Israel, as the attached sermon indicates, when I was a young scholar doing research at the Hebrew University. I had already spent five years at Cambridge, reading first Classics, then theology for my degree, and that was followed by a further two years doing advanced work in Hebrew and the Old Testament while living at Tyndale House, the Biblical research library in Cambridge. Then came the unavoidable two years of National Service, which I spent in the Royal Air Force as an education officer from 1952-54. Towards the end of that time it was suggested to me that, rather than proceeding directly to a theological college for ordination training, I might well apply for a postgraduate award being offered by the Friends of the Hebrew University in London. The proposal was that I could make use of my knowledge of both Greek and Hebrew to engage in study of the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures dating back to the second century BC. The aim was that by a close comparison of the two texts it might be possible to discern if there was any theological bias on the part of the Greek translator.

I was the only non-Jewish applicant and to my great surprise the trustees gave me the award, so the summer of 1954 saw me taking the train across France to Marseilles and boarding a little Israeli ship bound for Haifa. In those days, air travel was only for the wealthy and all I had was my basic fare plus £500 to last me for board and lodging and all my living expenses for the next academic year. I did not see myself in any sense as a missionary, rather as a visiting scholar and a guest of a nation that was only six years old.

At that time, the English-speaking churches in Jerusalem were represented by the Church of Scotland (Saint Andrew's), the American Christian Missionary Alliance and the Church of England, which borrowed the old CMS church of St Paul's for a weekly Sunday evening service. Canon Hugh Jones, the senior CMJ representative, lived in West (Jewish) Jerusalem, but had access every Sunday morning to cross the frontier at the Mandelbaum Gate to conduct worship at Christ Church in the Old City. Though this was, and now is again, the centre of CMJ work, it then had no Jewish people at all to minister to, only a handful of Christian Arabs, British expatriates and a few tourists.

The congregation at St Paul's was very small, consisting of three missionary ladies of CMJ, a few Hebrew Christians still around from Mandate days, and a

tiny number of Jewish folk who were chiefly intent on making use of the church to try to emigrate from an Israel they no longer wanted to live in. It did not make for a cohesive group at all. Mission to Jewish people was far from being an easy or a rewarding task. I came to admire the sheer fortitude and tenacity of those who stuck it out under the most difficult circumstances.

On my return, Linda (by now my fiancée) and I attended the CMJ house-party at High Leigh and got to know the wider family of CMJ. We have been addicted to CMJ ever since! We made the arrangements for the CMJ Palestine Exhibition to visit the parish of Morden in Surrey, where I was a curate, and then the whole deanery of Sutton, and later the two country parishes in Essex where I served my first incumbency. I preached at a CMJ Valedictory in the early 1960s and maintained my links throughout my spell of teaching Hebrew and Old Testament at Oak Hill College between 1964 and 1972. I even threw my hat into the ring when CMJ was looking for a new General Secretary, but fortunately the job was given to Walter Barker, who was much more fitted to the task.

Alongside all this were the occasional visits to Israel to lead parties of pilgrims for whom the old adage came abundantly true that “a fortnight in the Holy Land is worth at least a full term in any Bible College”. More recently I have benefited from the Shoresh study tours which have taught those in my parties more about the Jewish roots of the Christian faith. It has been a rewarding experience to see people’s eyes being opened to new understandings of Jesus and the Scriptures as a result. To have been invited by the Society to be its Honorary President since 1996 has been a privilege that I have valued highly and for which I am truly grateful.

The attached sermon, which was given at Christ Church Spitalfields on the occasion of the Society’s Bicentenary, reflects my love for CMJ and some thoughts on the Christian’s approach to the Jew today. I believe it is important that CMJ continues to be a broadly-based society. It will inevitably include a wide range of opinions, none of which should predominate. It will attract some who would describe themselves as “Christian Zionists” (whatever that may mean). Some will have strong views on the significance of the restoration of the Jews to their homeland in Israel and will debate whether and how this might have been the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy. It will include converted Jews anxious to work and pray for the conversion of their fellow-Jews, as well as Gentile Christians

responding to the Lord's mandate to go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature "to the Jew first and also to the Greek". There will be differing views regarding the state of Israel, ranging from its uncritical supporters to those who are sharply critical of the policies of the current Israeli government. There is only one banner under which we all march, and that is that we share the apostle Paul's "heart's desire and longing for Israel (the Jewish people) is that they may be saved". They are Jesus' blood-brothers and we long that they may accept Him as their Messiah and Saviour.

That is my prayer as well.

Sermon for the CMJ Bicentenary service at Christ Church Spitalfields 9th May 2009

Reading: Romans 1: 1-17

Text: Romans 1.8 *“I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you”*

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It will not have escaped your notice that today is the Sabbath. So our worship on the Sabbath began with the blowing of the shofar and the singing of the Shema, and now it reaches its high point in the reading of the scriptures and the exposition of God’s Word, set in the context of prayer. We have listened to the first chapter of Romans being read and now it is my task, as preacher, to “give the sense”, as the Levites were expected to do following Ezra’s reading of the Law in Jerusalem.

The “sense” of Romans 1 is to affirm that here is one of the classic passages in the New Testament about the missionary work of the Church. It was addressed to a brave but beleaguered group of disciples of Jesus, some Jewish and some Gentile, who had the misfortune (some would say, the privilege) to live in the unfriendly city of Rome. There, they came face to face with the harsh morality that presented itself to the world as *Lex Romana*; they lived under the much-vaunted imperial authority that could throw up the bizarre cruelties of Caligula, Nero and Domitian; and they were imprisoned in a state religion that was only a short remove from what we would describe today as arrant paganism. It was not easy to be a Christian in the Rome of the first century AD. But thank God that they were there.

These young followers of Jesus Christ could be forgiven for wanting to hide their light under a bushel, so as not to court either conflict or unpopularity which might not do their cause any good. Paul makes no such concessions. “You are frontier Christians”, he said to them. “You live at the cutting edge of the gospel; and for that reason I thank my God for every one of you and will remember you daily in my prayers.” You need prayer, you deserve prayer and I will see to it that you have prayer. What an example to those of us who do what little we can to support those who work for CMJ.

If daily prayer is the first essential of good missionary work, the second must be gospel enthusiasm. Paul exemplified this in verse 15 “I am so eager to

preach the gospel among you at Rome” To him, preaching the gospel was almost addictive - his eagerness was such that it carried more timid colleagues along with him wherever he went. Antioch, Ephesus, Athens, Corinth, Thessalonica, Rome, wherever. He just could not stop himself. Wherever he went, wherever an opportunity presented itself, he would go: he was a man driven by the gospel and led by the Spirit. And today it is right that we thank God for the commitment to the gospel that 200 years of CMJ ministry proudly records and that we here celebrate in the place where it all began. Daily prayer, gospel enthusiasm, and the third missionary essential is trust in the power of the gospel.

So Paul affirms, and you can almost hear him sticking his jaw out as he says it, “I am not ashamed of the gospel because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes”. He had confidence in the message because he believed that it was true and saw that it worked. It had the power to change lives, to attract people in from the cold, to bring faith to birth, to turn people’s hearts towards God to find salvation in Him through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is not that he was a powerful preacher (I am always suspicious of powerful preachers and “power evangelism”.) The power was in the message, a message about a Messiah whose life was marked by totally unexpected features: humble service, radical teaching, unobtrusive acts of healing, the kind of humiliating death that you would not wish on your worst enemy, and a miraculous resurrection seen only by a select company of women and men. Yet a message that changed the world and still does - massively and beyond belief. Such is the power of the Cross and the Empty Tomb.

And for two thousand years we have been trying to persuade the Jewish people that this is their Messiah. We have dressed Jesus up in the robes of a western gentile Church or in the liberal tones of an intellectual Protestantism, and we wonder why they have not recognised their Christ for who He is. We have tarred Judaism with the brush of being “Christ-killers”, we have tried forced conversions, persecutions, crusades, pogroms and ultimately the holocaust, and still we wonder why they will not see us as followers of the Good Shepherd who lays down His life for the sheep. Since the days of Justin Martyr we have wrestled with what we have called the Jewish problem and we can hardly say that we have yet come up with a solution. My fellow-Christians, we carry a heavy burden of guilt over our history of ill-treatment of Jewish people which we are only slowly

beginning to acknowledge. Maybe the problem is not the Jewish problem but the Christian problem.

Two hundred years ago, when the Society for the Promotion of Christianity among the Jews was established in this part of London, there were many voices in the Church that questioned the need for another missionary society. The answer of Charles Simeon for one was quite unequivocal: because the Jewish people are especially loved by God. The children of Abraham are God's covenant people. For them He raised up prophets who might well need to censure them but in the same breath would give them hope. He sent His only Son to save and redeem the whole of mankind and He commanded His disciples that they were to go to the Jew first and also to the Greek - to those who had received His revelation as well as to those who had no revelation but the natural order to live by.

So CMJ's existence bears witness to the belief that God still loves the Jew and always will. Everything that CMJ does must be guided by that. Sometimes it means that we shall stand up for the Jews when the entire world is against them. Sometimes we shall need to stand by Israel and its right to defend itself against its detractors. Often we shall need to remind the Church of its obligations to the people of the covenant. And in all the missionary outreach of the Church to the entire world, we shall need to say to our own people "What about God's own people? Don't they deserve to be told and loved and wooed? Do we not owe it to Jesus to keep His compatriots in our prayers and our affections?"

I still recall the sense of shock that I felt when, as a 25 year-old student, I first set foot on the land of Israel in 1954. I had been awarded a scholarship to do research at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, where I was welcomed with open arms and great generosity but not a little curiosity. Who, they thought, would want to leave Cambridge behind them and travel out to a struggling university in a yet-to-be-developed new country, surrounded by enemies committed to driving them off the face of the Middle East? Everywhere I saw on the bare arms of Israelis the tell-tale tattoo marks of the concentration camps. And I soon discovered that Israelis are not known for their reticence. They kept on telling me, "Of course you do realise that it was you Christians who sent us to the gas-chambers". They said it without animus, but what could I say but splutter an apology? No subtle explanation about the difference between nominal Christians and real Christians would do. The Germans were baptised, they were Christians: your people did it to

us. End of message. To my tender ears it was a shocking discovery. If I was to be a Christian in Israel, I knew that I had to be a penitent Christian, a deeply penitent one.

But I also saw what CMJ was doing in Israel in the person of three godly, wise and gracious clergy and their wives, Hugh and Ursula Jones, Roger and Gwen Allison and Ronald and Laura Adeney, and three devoted and heroic spinster missionaries, Ruth Clark, Olive Wilson and Kit Provart. To me they were an inspiration and a family. I owe them so much. And to be the honorary President of this honourable society is my way of repaying something of the debt I owe them. And to the Jewish people who showed me such kindness in those far-off days.

Since then much has changed both in Judaism and in Israel. Judaism has concentrated its efforts on working towards a theology of the holocaust, that apparent contradiction of the doctrine of election. Israel has concentrated on security as a political goal and stumbles its way towards it in an increasingly secular way. The near-messianic fervour which marked the early days of the birth of Israel as their national home has almost disappeared and with it the God of their fathers. Today's Israelite (though it is all too easy to generalise - and usually wrong) is on a pilgrimage to a this-worldly goal where the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob does not quite fit. Having lost their past they are exploring anything that is New Age or somehow different, and it is there that we now have to meet them. Thank God for those who do this today. Where, one wonders, will their search end? Will their scriptures bring them back to faith in God, their God, the God whom we worship as the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ? We do not know, but we have a deep longing that it may be so..

But as people of the New as well as the Old Testament, we do believe that God still has a purpose for Israel - a loving purpose, a redemptive purpose, a purpose that will one day reach its culmination when, to quote the apostle Paul, "all Israel will be saved" - however you interpret that much-debated text. And that is the conviction that spurs on those who work for CMJ and devote their time and energies to befriending Jewish people. We do not share the belief of some that God has cut them off irrevocably. How could we? Nor do we believe that the faith that many of them have is sufficient of itself, praiseworthy as it is. Nor can we believe that the way of the Cross can be bypassed or that the crucified and risen Messiah can be ignored, by either Jew or Gentile. He died for all and He calls on all to

come to Him and to receive Him.

So how shall we behave as a Society committed to ministry to the Jewish people? In what spirit shall we approach the Jew and in what spirit shall we encourage the Church to do the same? I offer you five guidelines as I draw this sermon to a close.

First, we approach them **with respect**, if not admiration. The Jewish people have survived against all the odds, small thanks to us. They have faithfully borne witness to the one true God and the importance of His commandments. They have preserved for us their sacred Scriptures which we cherish in the Old Testament. They are people of the Word. They cultivate many biblical values, of atonement for sin, of forgiveness, righteousness and holiness. They demonstrate high standards of morality, laudable family values, courage under persecution. There is an attractiveness about their sense of belonging to a community held together by their genealogies and their long history. I respect them deeply.

Secondly, **with penitence** - as I have already made clear. They may have been magnanimous towards me, but I feel within myself when I meet them that I stand before them as a representative of a persecuting church. It is not a comfortable feeling, and I need to repent rather than to justify myself. I need to lower my head.

Thirdly, **with understanding** of their situation. A religious community that sets so much store by parentage can only live and flourish on its birth-rate. With little prospect of conversions from other religions, the fear is always of assimilation and membership losses. And as with the Christian church we are all being invaded by the tide of secularism which sweeps many away, so that our religion is reduced to the level of mere traditions without any accompanying beliefs. So I understand their sensitivities and why they were so fearful twenty years ago of the Church's decade of evangelism. And yet we are people who believe that evangelism is a Christian obligation! We must understand how they feel.

Fourthly, **with a clear apologetic**. I suspect that our understanding of the Christian gospel is very different from how our Jewish friends understand it. I fear that all too often there is a massive communication breakdown. What we say and what they hear are often poles apart. I can accept, though with sadness, that some to whom we speak will reject the gospel as of no meaning or relevance to them and their lives and needs, but I do want to ensure as far as lies within me, that what

they have heard is the pure gospel expressed in simple, clear terms. It could be that I have not told it straight and I have contributed to their response by my clumsy words. I must speak of a gospel stripped of all its accretions, its gentile churchiness, its western identity, its theological jargon, and, if I am truly to be understood, I must present them with a Jesus who is truly Jewish and who fits into a Jewish background. The Church needs to hear this message as much as do our Jewish listeners.

Fifthly, I approach them **with undisguised affection**. CMJ was founded on the belief that God still loves His covenant people. The whole of the Bible bears witness to a Son of God, who loves us and gave Himself for us - all of us. The Christian Church can only be true to its calling when it goes out, to the Jew first and also to the Greek, in a spirit of unrestricted love, a love which knows no limits and has no boundaries. That is the challenge of our future.

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