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Anti-Semitism is not a thing of the past

by Thomas Reese

Faith and Justice

The recent attacks at a Jewish community center and a nearby retirement community near Kansas City, Mo., remind us of the need to be constantly vigilant against the plague of anti-Semitism. Three people were killed, and a former Ku Klux Klan leader was arrested and charged with the crimes.

Those killed included a teenager and his grandfather and a woman visiting her mother in a Jewish retirement home. That the victims were in fact Methodist and Catholic does not distract from the suspected motivation of the killings. These appear to be hate crimes, pure and simple.

The attacks took place near Kansas City, the home of the *National Catholic Reporter*, so we take these attacks personally. But any attack aimed at the brothers and sisters of Jesus and Mary must be taken seriously by Christians.

These heinous crimes should shock us out of any complacency in thinking that anti-Semitism is a thing of the past. Alas, it is still all too prevalent today.

Anti-Semitism is one of the greatest sins of the Christian era. That it found fertile ground in Christian hearts is a scandal and a tragedy. Pope John Paul II wisely acknowledged that it was a sin Christians needed to confess prior to the celebration of the second millennium of Christianity.

That these attacks occurred near Passover and Holy Week is also noteworthy. Holy Week, with its focus on the arrest, trial and execution of Jesus, has been a traditional time for attacks on Jews. That is why it is important for preachers not only to be careful in what they say but also to explain Scripture passages that appear to pit "the Jews" against Jesus.

For example, on the Fourth Sunday of Lent in the A cycle, we read from John's Gospel about the man

born blind whom Jesus cured. John says, "The Jews refused to believe that [the man] had really been born blind." John tells us that the parents of the blind man "were afraid of the Jews, who had already agreed among themselves that anyone who acknowledged Jesus as the messiah would be put out of the synagogue." Ultimately, they do throw the man out of the synagogue.

In other places in John's Gospel, the bad guys, the opponents of Jesus, are referred to as "the Jews." Through the centuries, these passages have been used as excuses for attacking Jews, putting them in ghettos, and even killing them.

The first obvious point to remember is that John himself was a Jew. All of the apostles, all the first followers of Jesus, were Jews. If John were anti-Semitic, he would be rejecting himself and all the early followers of Jesus.

Second, Jesus is the son of Mary, a Jew, and therefore, Jesus himself is a Jew. To be an anti-Semite, John would have to reject Mary and Jesus, yet they are obviously the heroes of his story.

In order to understand John's Gospel, and especially the story of the man born blind, we must remember that John is writing from the experience of Christian Jews who had been expelled from the synagogue.

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After the death and resurrection of Jesus, the early followers of Jesus did not leave their synagogues and build churches. Those living in Jerusalem continued to pray in the temple. Those living outside Jerusalem continued to go to the synagogue on Saturday to hear the Scriptures and pray. On Sunday, they would meet to break bread, to celebrate the Eucharist.

In other words, they had their Liturgy of the Word in the synagogue on Saturday and their Eucharist on Sunday.

While the Jewish Christians were in the synagogues, they talked about Jesus with their Jewish brothers and sisters. Most of their Jewish colleagues did not accept that Jesus was the Messiah. This resulted in a lot of arguments until finally, the Jewish Christians were excommunicated and put out of the synagogue.

This was not a fight between Christian Gentiles and Jews. This was a family dispute between Christian Jews and Jews who did not accept Jesus, and family fights can be bitter. We gentiles should have the sense to stay out of this fight. Regrettably, John simply refers to the opponents of Jesus as "the Jews," but to quote John out of context to support anti-Semitism is a criminal misreading of the text.

Holy Week is a time for Christians to celebrate our Jewish roots, not to emphasize our differences. We mourn with those Jews and Gentiles who suffer persecution and prejudice, but we celebrate the hope that love can triumph over hate.

[Jesuit Fr. Thomas Reese is a senior analyst for *NCR* and author of *Inside the Vatican: The Politics and Organization of the Catholic Church*. His email address is reesesj@ncronline.org. Follow him on Twitter: @ThomasReeseSJ.]

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