

# Understanding Jewishness of Jesus causes Christian theologians to grapple with questions

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The founder of Christianity 2,000 years ago was not a Christian. "It's very difficult for us who are Christians to understand that Jesus was a Jew."

Speaking these words in the latest program of the Mobile Area Jewish-Christian Dialogue at St. Paul's Lutheran Church was the Rev. Stephen J. Duffy, chairman of the department of religious studies at Loyola University in New Orleans.

**THE CATHOLIC** priest said that taking the Jewishness of Jesus seriously helps modern Christians "to get rid of those false dichotomies between law and grace which seem to run through the teachings of so many Christians.

"The characterization of Judaism as a religion of law and works and Christianity as a religion of grace and love is, I think, a false dichotomy."

**DUFFY FURTHER** said that understanding the Jewishness of Jesus helps Christians today understand that Jesus was not the masiah, the Hebrew word for anointed one as political leader, expected by Jews. He was the Christos, the Greek word for Christ, of the Gentiles. "Through him the Gentiles came to know the one true God, and through him they became part of the one people Israel."

**FINALLY, DUFFY** said understanding Jesus' Jewishness means that modern Christians must read the Gospels "Jewishly.... We Christians must also study the history and the present reality of our relationships with the Jews, co-religionists of Jesus.... When Christians hate Jews they hate what Jesus was.... We are his followers and members of his people."

**ELABORATING ON** the points he had made, the speaker first talked about law and grace.

He said, "I think it's safe to say Jesus was a Torah-true Jew," or one who observed Jewish law. Jesus himself described as his aim the implementing of the law.

Duffy said Jesus "summed up his understanding of religion in the twofold comment — love of God and love of neighbor — and yet this really was nothing new.

"Jesus was quoting the Torah in summarizing the law in love of God and love of neighbor. What we read in the Torah is love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all of your strength, and love your neighbor as yourself."

Thus, said Duffy, Judaism should not be viewed by Christians as "defective in love."

Jesus "stressed Torah and love. In doing that, it seems to me, he was merely stressing the Jewish tradition."

Moreover, Jesus "called for a faith that translates into action." Those who are his followers "are those who do the corporeal works of mercy, the works of piety, those who feed the hungry, clothe the naked, house the homeless and care for the sick."



(Mobile Press Register photo by J.P. Schaffn

**Stephen J. Duffy**

# Jewishness

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Said Duffy, "Notice it is not a question of either/or, either faith or works. It's a matter of both/and, both faith and works" for Jews and Christians.

Jesus' teaching that the Torah, or Jewish law, should be observed by his followers came to present a problem, according to the Loyola theologian.

"Could the Gentiles become followers of the way, as Christianity was first called? Could they be followers of the way without following the Torah?"

Jesus sent his disciples among the people of Israel and not to the Gentiles. "At least this seems to be the case during his ministry in Galilee.

"On the other hand, we notice that when the Gentiles came to him, he did respond to them." For example, he healed the child of a Roman centurion and others.

Reflecting on the words and actions of Jesus, Duffy said Jesus "does not seem to address directly the problems that his followers were going to face at a later time."

At a later time, Jesus' followers decided to "simply apply the spirit of the teaching and the life" of Jesus to the problem of what to do about Gentile converts.

Thus those who were born Jews and became followers of Jesus were expected to observe the Torah.

"Those who are not born Jews should accept Jewish teaching, Scripture, ethics and cultic customs as they are refracted to the life of Jesus. But there is no need for them to be circumcised, and there is not full obligation of the Torah, especially with regard to ceremonial customs.

"This approach to the law seems to me to be grounded in their recollection of the way that Jesus behaved," Duffy said.

**ELABORATING ON** a second point he had made about Jesus as the Christ of the Gentiles, Duffy said some persons, including intimates of Jesus, "began to see him as masiah, the anointed one, perhaps to be a political leader who would overthrow Roman power, perhaps to be a king."

These hopes "were crushed on Calvary, but it did not end there. Three days after Calvary, after that dark Friday, came the resurrection event."

Christian Scriptures "describe the risen one as not less real" than the historical Jesus. "It's the same rabbi now living on another level."

In focusing on the resurrection, Duffy said, "Christians have to content themselves with saying that something extraordinary occurred, and whatever it was, it called forth a proportionate ... conversion. It created a turning-around in the disciples."

After the resurrection, the followers reflected on Jesus' life, and he "was retrospectively given various titles — Lord, Savior, Savior of man, Son of God and so forth."

Christians came to view Jesus, not as the messiah expected by Jews "who would liberate Israel and bring universal peace. He certainly did neither of those things.

"Rather, he is the Christ, a meeting point of the human and the divine.... He became the door through whom the Gentiles came to know with head and heart individually and collectively the

one God, the creator, the judge, the savior.

"They not only came to know this God, but they came to know how to live according to God's design, God's Torah, and because many Gentiles came to the living God through ... the Christ, they called themselves Christians."

Duffy said the Second Vatican Council 20 years ago echoed words of the Apostle Paul by taking the position that "all Christians as believers in the one God are Abraham's children according to the faith and that the Christian church draws sustenance from the root of that good olive tree, the Jewish people, onto which they have been grafted as wild branches."

Said the speaker, "It is difficult therefore to conceive of Christians as the new Israel." The term "new Israel" is not used by New Testament writers.

"Rather, I think Christians are a part of the one people Israel, albeit a wild shoot, as Paul has it," said Duffy.

He asked, "Do the Jews acknowledge this claim of Christians? I don't know. At any rate, it seems to me that this is not primarily a Christian concern but a Jewish concern or problem."

**ELABORATING ON** a final point he had made about reading of Gospels "Jewishly," Duffy said that "all statements can only be understood in relationship to the persons who made the statements, in relationship to the context in which they made them, in relationship to the patterns of thought and speech and action which they were using.

"This is standard fare in Western scholarship today, but it was not so in the past, and therein lies the rub."

Because the principle of viewing Jesus in the context in which he lived "was not always followed in the past, there can be ground, I think, today for rethinking some of our very basic Christian thinking," said Duffy.

He said Christology, the focus on Christ which is central to Christianity, is being rethought.

According to "some of the best scholarship" today, Jesus never made the claim for himself that some of his followers did, namely that "he was masiah, in some cases with all of its political implications."

Even if Jesus made such a claim, "it was in a very transformed, spiritual sense. In any case, Jesus never thought of the masiah, the Christ, "as being divine in an ontological sense."

Between the second and fourth centuries A.D., "Gentile Christians poured abstract, ontological meanings into the non-ontological, functional, Jewish language" of Jesus and his followers, according to Duffy.

He said even as early as the late 30s A.D. "there was already this movement toward some kind of divinization of Jesus, but is this a misperception of a literary genre of the Gospel message to pour these ontological meanings into these Jewish terms?"

"Is this symbolic, poetic, religious language read in the early church as though it were a simple, straightforward, historical, indeed a philosophical record? Are Jewish categories too naively translated into Greek philosophical categories?"

These questions are being grappled with today by theologians, said Duffy, who added, "I think that we'll be hearing those questions more and more often in the future."