

19th Sunday of Year A

In today's second reading Paul speaks from the heart about his affection for the Jewish people and the extent to which he would personally put his salvation in jeopardy, if he could thereby bring his beloved people to faith in the Saviour.

However, the story of the way in which non-Jewish people in subsequent centuries related to the Jews, is not a happy one. The supreme example of the animosity shown towards the Chosen People was of course the Holocaust in which six million of the people of Israel perished. Jews were very much second class citizens in medieval times. Even in Rome itself, where they were treated better than in many other places, they had to wear distinctive garb and their access was limited to only one section of the city.

It is good to live in an age where anti-semitism is frowned on. It is even better if one can recall from one's own family story, instances where relations between Jews and Christians have blossomed.

My father as a young law graduate, being too inexperienced to set up in practice by himself, was in the employment of a Jewish lawyer, Phineas Levi. My father lacked confidence about appearing in court as an advocate. But on Fridays, a phone call would often come to the office. "O'Leary, I can't be in court on Monday. You will have to appear in my place." To my father's response, "But, Mr. Levi, I could not handle it properly", the simple answer would be, "You'll have to. I won't be there". So my father got catapulted into court room work. In fact he acquired in time not just a simple ability to appear in court but a marked competence about functioning as an advocate. At one period he had a run of seven years during which it is said he did not lose a single jury case. In later life he would speak with gratitude of the spur to succeed in court work that Phineas Levi had given him.

The story does not end there. Levi did not have that ability to accumulate money traditionally attributed to the Jews. In old age, he was in fact in difficult financial circumstances. My father, by this time a prominent legal figure in our city, organised an appeal among his fellow legal practitioners, putting together a sum to assist his one-time mentor. It was something he was glad to do for an elderly man whose helpfulness to him at an earlier time he deeply appreciated.

Many of you can think of similar happenings. What can one make of stories like that?

In terms of principles of faith and of theology we differ markedly from Jewish folk, even more so from those of Islamic faith and still more from those adhering to Eastern religions. But most certainly we can promote good human relations with those who differ from us in religion. At times our efforts will be rebuffed. But many times we will be surprised by the acceptance our approaches receive. Let us see that as far as it depends on us, differences in religion do not result in difficulties in relationships.

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