

CCJWA Seminar on *Light Eternal*

CCJWA's second event for 2012, a discussion of the Uniting Church's DVD *Light Eternal*, was held on Thursday 9th August at St Peter's and Emmaus Church. Executive member Rev Marie Wilson welcomed invited speakers Rabbi Fred Morgan from Temple Beth Israel St Kilda, Victoria, and Rev Dr Geoffrey Lilburne, Director of Lay and Continuing Education, Perth Theological Hall. Initially, CCJWA members and guests were shown clips from *Light Eternal*, which features Rabbi Morgan, and explores 'Judaism at the Time of Jesus', 'Judaism: a Living Faith', 'Torah and Gospel', 'Anti-Semitism, Anti Judaism and the Shoah', 'The Christian-Jewish Relationship', and 'Encouraging Future Relationship'.

In the DVD, Rabbi Morgan explains that contemporary Judaism is complete, comprehensive, has its own integrity, and doesn't await fulfilment through any other religion. Yet many Christians, by viewing Judaism as a phenomenon from the past, have failed to appreciate that like Christianity, Judaism has developed, so that today's Jewish practice has little to do with how it was lived in Jesus' time. In his era, unleavened bread was eaten in the temple in Jerusalem; an animal was brought to the temple to be sacrificed, then cooked and eaten upon returning home. Now the matzo and meat are eaten at home in a feast called Pesach, with participants reciting the Haggadah, expressing table fellowship and memorializing the past. There are other home festivals, alongside the synagogue festivals Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, and uniquely Jewish rites of passage. All focus on the Torah, which guides engagement with the world, in business, social, and ecological dimensions.

Most threatening to contemporary Judaism is the Christian concept of 'replacement theology' (supersessionism) which holds that all has been fulfilled via prophecies — meaning that Jews, because they rejected Jesus as the 'Messiah', have 'missed the boat' and are now no longer in covenant. This implies that what Jews do now has no meaning. Yet the covenantal relationship (*berit*) with God/Torah, no longer mediated by the priesthood, for Jews is 'now' and living; Jews experience God as a God of grace as much as do Christians. In the New Testament, Gentiles joined themselves to the covenant. While there is no problem here, talk of a 'New' Covenant, combined with failure to acknowledge that the Jewish faith has evolved, and equating the covenant under the law (the Torah) with 'legalism', becomes destructive.

Christian Scriptures, which draw heavily from the Hebrew Scriptures, should alert us to a developing understanding of God in Scriptures, from an oft violent God to a more compassionate one. Through the thought of Hillel, prevalent in his time, Jesus reinterprets the Torah for his contemporary Jewish followers. Christians should ask "Why are there Christians here?" and "Why are there still Jews here?" We are both carriers of values derived from Torah, from God — justice based on life as holding value and dignity.

Rabbi Morgan recalled the project's origins. Rev Dr Lorraine Patterson from the Uniting Church Assembly and CCJ (Vic) sought to inform Christians that Jesus was a typical Jew working from a framework that all Jewish people were working from two thousand years ago. Such education hopefully leads to the question: "What happened that led to Christians allowing the Shoah?" In terms of dialogue, an immediate Jewish response might be "We can't trust Christians". A more productive response is: "We must tell the Christians how we see life, what this means to us, who we are. The Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition and the expulsions, sit in our 'memory', but no-one ever asked us about it. Now, here someone (Lorraine Parkinson) came and asked us about how we feel about this, and about ourselves." Turning to his community, Rabbi Morgan asked what they would like him to say.

They responded: "Jews and Christians live side by side — often without speaking to each other. We are divided by the same scripture; we fail to understand each other because we read it in entirely different ways. How can we overcome this? As Jews, engaging with Scripture means enquiry, grappling with it. What do Christians do with Scripture?"

Taking up this question, Rev Dr Lilburne first observed a typology in Christian–Jewish dialogue: disputation, diplomacy, and beyond, to dialogue — enquiring about the hopes and fears of the other. Aiming for this third stage, the prize of human community, the *Light Eternal* material might serve as a resource toward achieving this, even beyond the Uniting Church. He then answered "What do Christians *do* with Scripture?" with Christology. Starting with the 'historical Jesus', he suggested that Christians feel driven to understand the Jewishness of Jesus, to find that he was not against Jews, nor trying to be 'other' than his culture. Hopefully, *Light Eternal* would encourage Christians to become informed, respectful, and enquiring over matters of justice. For example, in another arena requiring justice ('same gender marriage'), dialogue in the Uniting Assembly led to the realization that even denominational groups are not homogenous — Australian and New Zealand indigenous view the issue from different perspectives. Their different aims also deserve our respect. Adding to how we use Scripture differently, Rabbi Morgan argued that all groups interpret scripture: 'fundamentalists' are not mere literalists, but interpret toward a particular end. Because of its broad content, the Bible can be used for anything. (Opposing factions in history, e.g. concerning slavery in America, mounted their opposite perspectives on biblical texts.)

At the conclusion of the presentations, the floor was opened to questions. One member questioned the future of Christian–Jewish dialogue. "Given that our aim is not seeking to remove difference in religion but to resolve it to the extent where harm is removed or ameliorated; given that the shock of the Shoah led to changed attitudes (Australians express relaxed attitudes over religion), why do we now face a resurgence of anti-Semitism in non-religious Europe? Is current anti-Semitism comprised of suppressing Jewish self-determination rather than issuing religious difference? If we

are confronted by the force of 'irrational' opposition — is dialogue relevant? If opposition defies analysis, it would seem that dialogue simply takes time away from being Jewish.”

Rabbi Morgan replied that preventing anti-Judaism involves getting people to understand what “really bothers us,” by talking. With this, he questioned the final point in the Uniting Assembly’s list of aims: peace between Israelis and Palestinians. Did this belong to an agenda about Christian–Jewish understanding?

Dr Lilburne viewed it as an extension of the notion that social justice was to be sought for all those who are oppressed. Rabbi Morgan agreed to justice for all, but “did the issue of a two-state solution belong to religious difference? Further, is it appropriate for criticism to come from non-Jewish quarters?” A Jewish member responded that to speak up and, if need be, criticize the policies of Israel is *precisely* the role of Jewish persons. CCJWA secretary Dr Mary Marshall noted that attempts to resolve insensitivities and the frictions they lead to (such as the matter of criticism of Israel) are published in ICCJ publications, such as *The Twelve Points of Berlin*, and expressed how productive the educational guide developed from this document might be in our WA schools. This discussion represented an inroad into dialogue via the free expression which *Light Eternal* hopes to inspire.

Judith Schneider
Committee Member, CCJWA