

Lecture: “Jesus — the Observant Jew” by Rabbi David Freilich OAM

Over a hundred people gathered at Wesley Church on the evening of Tuesday 9 March 2021 to hear Rabbi Freilich’s free public lecture on the historical Jesus. The MC, Revd Marie Wilson, CCJWA Chairperson, introduced the Rabbi, who explained that he had wanted to speak on the topic for many years, and also that he was offering the lecture in memory of Margaret Storey, mother of his former administrative assistant Nikki Ross. Margaret, who had served in the administration of the Catholic Church in Zimbabwe over many years, had passed away about a month previously. Sadly, as a result of COVID restrictions, Nikki had not been able to attend Margaret’s funeral, and it was therefore Rabbi Freilich’s wish to pay honour to her mother. He quipped that as Nikki too “is of the Catholic faith ... it made my office a real Council of Christians and Jews on a daily basis.” He recalled that if someone did not behave well, he would state that: “This person needs a good dose of Jesus.”

The Rabbi acknowledged that he is not an expert on the New Testament, that he is always learning more, and that he was not there to criticise or diminish Christian beliefs. He intimated that the impetus for the lecture was that he had learned via the CCJWA of a virtual tour of Israel in mid-2020, in which a guide had given the impression that Jesus had introduced prayer to the Jewish people. When the Council expressed their serious concern, he agreed that the matter must be addressed, and offered to give a lecture to set the record straight. He explained the historical background: that after the destruction of the temple, when Jews were in exile in Babylon, and sacrifices could not be offered, they established a prayer service as a substitute, singing psalms, playing the lute, saying the Shema, etc. When they returned and built the second temple, they continued to worship in the same way, so Jesus certainly did not teach the Jewish people how to pray.

Rabbi Freilich then went on to the major topic of the evening, arguing that Jesus scrupulously followed Jewish Law, and appears to have been a Pharisaic rabbi. Citing multiple texts from both the Old and New Testaments he showed that Jesus’ supposed violation of the Law has no force. Particular emphasis was given to Jesus’ statement that he had come “not to abolish the law or the prophets but to fulfil” (Matthew 5:17). In contrast, he mentioned that the saying “You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy” (Matthew 5:43) is not found in the Torah, joking that he was “still looking for it!” He referred instead to the stipulation “You shall not hate your brother (Leviticus 19:17), and to the admonition in Proverbs 25:21 about appropriate treatment of enemies. He spoke of Jewish ethical laws, and that “speaking with kindness is fundamental.”

In his closing remarks, Rabbi Freilich pointed out that “Christianity has sadly been responsible for a great deal of suffering of Jews,” and quoted the Archbishop of York as saying that “the name of Jesus has caused a lot of harm” and that “we [Christians] should ask forgiveness.” He stressed that the issue is not about Jesus’ teachings, which are in sync with Judaism.

A vigorous Q & A session followed the lecture. The MC then invited Archbishop Timothy Costelloe to give an expression of thanks. The Archbishop warmly acknowledged Margaret Storey’s faithful work for the church, and also Nikki’s role toward the harmonious interfaith workplace relationships of which the Rabbi had spoken. He then thanked Rabbi Freilich for his fine lecture, and presented a potted plant as a token of appreciation. Nikki Ross too, was given a flowering plant as a memento of the evening. Discussion on the evening’s topic continued over refreshments.

Mary J. Marshall
Honorary Secretary, CCJWA