



## THE THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER

May 4, 2003

Acts 3:12–19

1 John 3:1–7

Luke 24:36b–48

To put it succinctly and bluntly, this morning's first reading from Acts gives me the creeps. It gives me the creeps. Peter addresses the people, saying, "You Israelites, you rejected the Holy and Righteous One and asked to have a murderer given to you, and you killed the Author of life. You Israelites, you killed Jesus." It gives me the creeps.

It is this passage and others like it that we in the Christian Church have misheard, misinterpreted, and misapprehended in order to defame and ultimately to kill the Jews. It is this passage and others like it that have been used as a warrant to call the Jewish people Christ-killers and to foster the first, the most enduring, and most heinous heresy of the Church—anti-Semitism.

It has only been in my lifetime, after 19 centuries of nearly unspeakable crimes against the Jews, that the Church of Rome, the Lutheran World Federation, and other church bodies have finally confessed the sin of anti-Jewish teachings and actions. It is only in the past several decades that Christian biblical scholars have confessed that the church has, at times unwittingly, at times deliberately, misinterpreted scriptures such as we hear from Acts this morning.

Peter's speech to the people that we heard in the first reading is part of an intra-family struggle. Peter and all the disciples of Jesus were Jews and these early followers of Jesus were not intent on founding any sort of new religion. Rather, Peter and the Apostles were leading a movement within the Judaism of their day—they were leading a *reform* movement *within* Judaism.

Now, Jesus, his disciples, and his followers were from Galilee and other outlying territories. They were part of centuries' old struggle between the religious elite of Judea and the poor, disenfranchised Jews of Galilee and Samaria. Often, the god proclaimed by the haughty power elite of the Temple was an angry god who required costly sacrifice for the remission of sin. The god proclaimed in the outlying regions of Palestine and largely by the prophets was, by contrast, a gracious god who desired justice, mercy, love, and a humble walk with God. The Hebrew scriptures are filled with vivid testimony to this long-enduring turmoil within the Hebrew tradition. In Jesus' time the tensions between the outlying, territorial synagogues and the Jerusalem Temple had grown especially heated due in no small part to the cozy relationship between the temple elite and the Roman government.

The harsh words in this morning's first reading must be heard in the context of this conflict *within* the Jewish family—between the Galilean Jews of the Jesus movement and the Judean Jews of the temple. None other than the apostle Paul warns the early church against getting too uppity with those Jews who weren't a part of the Jesus movement. In Romans 11, St. Paul says, "So that you may not claim to be wiser than you are, brothers and sisters, I want you to understand this mystery . . . all Israel will be saved . . . they are beloved for the sake of their ancestors; for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable!" Though the church will never be able to atone for its sin of anti-Semitism, may we keep these words along with the searing images of the holocaust ever before our eyes—and may we teach them to our children and to our children's children, so that neither the Jews, nor any other people ever suffer at the hands of a self-righteous church that would demonize any who are outside its fellowship.

Peter, in our reading from Acts, addresses a religious elite who stood upon the heights and hurled down self-righteous condemnations upon those below. Peter stands below with the rural riff-raff of Galilee, part of a ridiculed, persecuted, minority religious group hanging between life and death.

But in an ironic and tragic twist of history this ridiculed, persecuted minority religious movement became the power elite of the world and turned the cross of Christ into a murderous sword. The church that had once stood beneath the cross took its place upon the heights and tortured and killed those who challenged it, just as the temple elite tortured and killed Jesus of Nazareth who challenged the religious power elite of his day.

The temple elite lost their power, but they were replaced even in our own era by the established churches of Europe whose teachings gave power to the Nazi project to wipe the Jews from the face of the earth.

And though Caiaphas and the high priests who called for Jesus' death are gone, now in their place are Jerry Falwell, Franklin Graham, and Focus on the Family, all hurling judgement from on high against any who do not fit their brand of American Protestant religiosity. But then none of us is any better when we stand above and issue judgement against those below; none of us is any better when we stand in any place other than beneath the cross. We too pound the nails into Jesus' hands and feet, we too drive the spear into Jesus' side when we do anything other than stand beside the powerless, the ignored, the persecuted, and the marginalized.

We are now in the midst of the week of weeks—the seven week season of Easter in which we celebrate the paschal feast, the Christian Passover. This is the season of resurrection and new life—both Christ's and our own. And so especially in this season but also in every season of our lives, we remember that in our Holy Baptism we have died to the ways of privilege and power. And now we have risen from the dead and *today* we are a new creation in Christ. And now we no longer stand upon the heights, hurling down judgement – rather we take our place below, reborn as down-to-earth creatures, made new by God to care for the earth, to love and care for all people and together with all peoples of the earth to enjoy the very good creation. Christ is risen and we are risen with Christ. Alleluia!