

Our second reading last Sunday began a section of Paul's *Letter to the Romans* on the theme of God's faithfulness to Israel, to the Jewish people. It was a theme Paul appropriately raised because earlier in his letter he had recognised the unique role of Israel in God's plan and then there was the fact that the majority of the Jewish people had failed to recognise Jesus as its Messiah.

In last Sunday's reading Paul acknowledged Israel's election, calling and the gifts bestowed on it by God: "To them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs," and he dramatically concluded "from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah." In today's reading Paul affirms God's enduring faithfulness to Israel, "God never takes back his gifts or revokes his choice."

Vatican II drew on these texts to seek to repair the bonds between Jews and Catholics. It also turned to another text of Paul found in this section of his letter, to acknowledge the continuity between the Jewish people and the Catholic Church, his horticultural image of grafting a branch of a wild olive vine, the Gentile converts to Christianity, onto a cultivated olive vine, the Jewish people. Thus the Council spoke of the "sustenance [we Christians have received] from the root of that well-cultivated olive tree [the Jewish people] onto which have been grafted the wild shoots, the Gentiles."

Paul appealed to this image to describe Israel's future, explaining that God had permitted Israel's failure to recognise its Messiah so as to draw from it the good of the Gentiles coming to believe in Jesus, their being grafted onto the cultivated olive vine. Concerning the future of the Jewish people, Paul states "I want you to understand this mystery: a hardening has come upon part of Israel, until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved." Paul speaks of Israel being grafted back onto the olive vine.

There remains discontinuity between the Jewish people and the Church. As one theologian, himself a convert from Judaism, has said, "The Church is entirely Christocentric, and thus it immensely exceeds the horizons of ancient Israel." Our acknowledging God's enduring faithfulness to Israel is of the greatest importance not only for Catholic and Jewish on-going dialogue but also because the view that the Jewish people has been abandoned by God is linked to, and has driven, anti-semitism.

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