

I often think that the internet is like the old stereotype of the “Wild West”: you have to be really careful where you go or you’ll find yourself in the middle of a heated argument or even a metaphorical gun-fight; you’ll be inundated with outrageous “snake-oil” claims or get-rich-quick schemes,. Somewhere, in the midst of the to-and-fro, the truth goes missing, presumed dead.

Just the other day I came across a thread on a Facebook page where a political claim was made – in this case that gas prices have climbed more under the current administration than under that of President Carter. What followed – seemingly alternating to a set pattern – were posts that respectively denied the claim outright; accepted it but blamed the rise on the economic policies of the previous administration, piled on the current administration, or blamed the rise on a nefarious oil cartel conspiracy to hide a formula to convert water into gasoline!

Welcome to politics 21st Century style!

Nothing like that could ever happen in the 1st Century, could it?!! Well, yes!

Today’s first reading is a prime example of politics at work – the spinning of a more likely truth to suit the circumstances of part of the early Christian community.

What religion was Peter? He was Jewish. What had he been doing just before this part of the story, as the Acts of the Apostles tells it? He’d been at worship in the Temple with his friends, who were fellow Jews and also followers of one Jesus of Nazareth, who was – what? A Jew. After worship, Acts tells us (5:42) Peter and his friends gathered to read the Jewish scriptures and to preach about a great Jewish prophet – Jesus.

So here’s Peter – an insider, a Jew – talking to other insiders – other Jews. I wonder why he might begin speaking to the Jews who were listening to him by saying “You Israelites....”? At least, that’s how the translators of the NRSV translate “andres Israelitae”. It makes it sound as if Peter’s not Jewish, doesn’t it? As if he were a religious outsider speaking to the followers of a foreign god

Other biblical translations translate this Greek phrase differently: “Fellow Israelites”, which would be more in keeping with the reality I’ve just described – a Jew talking with other Jews.

So where do the politics enter in? They enter in through the words of the author of the Acts of the Apostles. It may be that the translators of the New Revised Standard Version – which we use in worship – got the translation wrong, but the intent of the author – Luke – right.

Luke wrote after three significant events in the history of early Christianity. The first was the destruction of the nascent Christian community in Rome by Nero after the “Magnum Incendium Romae”, the Great Fire of Rome, in 64 AD. Nero needed someone to blame, and the small defenseless Christian community was an easy scapegoat. The second was the destruction of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 A.D.

Luke thus knew what the Romans could do to Christians, and he knew that Judaism was – to say

the least! – out of favor with Rome.

And the third significant event? The crucifixion of Jesus! Who crucified Jesus? Was it the Jewish Sanhedrin? Was it the Temple authorities. No Jew or Jewish body had any authority to execute anyone. And even if they had, it would have been by stoning. On the other hand, crucifixion was at the time a uniquely Roman tool.

So in Luke – and, incidentally, in other gospel writers too – you have someone who is aware that your community could come under unwelcome Roman “attention” – maybe even severe persecution – and yet your proclamation of your founder’s story includes the fact that the Romans killed him! Sounds like a recipe for disaster.

When there is blame to be laid, politics – and political “spin” – come into play, and the gospels are no exception. Who is the handy scapegoat now who can be blamed for Jesus’ death, rather than it being blamed on the real culprits, the Romans? Which community has so upset the Romans that their capital city and their Temple has been leveled? Which community continued to resist so forcefully that 65 years later that city was raised again, it’s inhabitants forbidden from reentering it, and it was renamed Aelia Capitolina”? The Jews!

There’s deep irony here. Jesus was not only Jewish but he could well have been a member of, or a friend of, the Pharisees, just as Paul was. Paul – who was likely one of the victims of Nero’s purge – didn’t have any pressing need to explain away Roman culpability, and in his letter to the Jewish Christians in Rome he did the opposite of what Luke would later do – he embraced his Jewish roots and the people of Israel and proclaimed that they, too, were part of the new community ushered in with Jesus’ resurrection.

The gospel writers shouldn’t be blamed for their failure to foresee the consequences of their spin, which have included 2000 years of oppression of Jews, leading up to the holocaust. They were addressing contemporary political realities. I believe they would be horrified if they knew where their words would lead evil men.

But we now know better. Not only do we better understand the politics of the 1st century, we also live in a multi-cultural, multi-religious age. The current generations moving to maturity have little tolerance with any sort of religious imperialism or inter-religious warfare. Claiming some innate superiority, or using other religious communities as scapegoats, are acts of suicidal shortsightedness.

So what about our future? What about our inter-religious future? Firstly, it is undeniably true that when it comes to Christianity and Judaism – and Islam – there is more that unites us than divides us: a vision of life under God marked by compassion and love for the least and lost, a struggle for justice and peace: these things lie at the heart of the great religions, no matter how individual adherents subvert and pervert them.

We can only be blessed by learning about our Jewish ancestors in faith, and about our fellow religionists whose faith comes from those same roots, and from us but who call God “Allah”

What would the Jesus of the Emmaus Road do if he were in our shoes. He would be meeting with Jews, and Muslims, celebrating the greatness of God, challenging them to find community and compassion and love in their hearts for those who are not like them – just as he does with us.