

History Defines Identity

Thought for the Day

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Yesterday I had the pleasure and privilege of taking part in a truly unprecedented event, when the Queen's representative to the Kirk's General Assembly, the Lord High Commissioner, visited the synagogue in Edinburgh.

This wasn't just historically unique, but a welcome public gesture of reconciliation after some rocky times recently in the relationship between our communities, and also a reminder of our common heritage in the Hebrew Bible. I remember as a child, supposedly withdrawn from religious education in my supposedly non-denominational school, but actually sitting at the back taking in the Protestant theology and recognising that these were the same stories with a different interpretation – their Old Testament was my Bible; it wasn't *my* "Old Testament", because for me there was no "*New* Testament" to supersede it.

That's a key word, and you can see this graphically in many old churches: stained glass windows paired to show parallels between "Old" and "New" bible stories, but also statues of the Church triumphant and the Synagogue downcast. That's the so called "replacement theology" that the Second Vatican Council rejected 50 years ago this year, embracing Judaism instead as the "older brother" of Christianity.

I was reminded of this, listening to the news of Palmyra being overrun by ISIS extremists who want to destroy history, not acknowledge it. Yes, I find it repugnant that we seem more concerned about Roman ruins than Syrian people – hundreds of thousands killed and millions homeless – but history does matter too, because it defines our identity.

It is part of *me* that the Temple in Jerusalem that Jesus may have visited was already destroyed 200 years before most of Palmyra was built, that the First Temple was built almost a thousand years earlier; and the rituals there dated back another 500 years to the Exodus. So it really was fitting, on the eve of Shavuot, one of the biblical festivals celebrated there, that we welcomed our younger Christian relations into the synagogue.

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