

Chanukah – Daring to be Different

Thought for the Day

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If I asked you to name a festival that falls on the 25th day of the mid-winter month, I think I know what most people would say! But for me the answer is Chanukah, which begins this weekend, on the 25th of the Hebrew month of Kislev.

It is the newest festival in the traditional Jewish calendar, commemorating events that took place only 160 years before that better-known mid-winter festival, but in the same part of the world. In fact it is so new that it is hardly mentioned in the Mishnah, the code of law that forms the skeleton of the Talmud, although there is a passing reference to this winter festival in the New Testament.

It forms the setting of the parting of the ways between Christianity and Judaism, and in some ways what Chanukah celebrates is what Christianity and Judaism have in common. Much of the New Testament story takes place in and around the Temple in the holy city of Jerusalem, against the backdrop of Jewish religious customs and ceremonies.

But there would have been no Temple for Jesus to visit if the events of that first Chanukah had not taken place. What Chanukah is about is the survival of Judaism in the face of the dominant Greek culture of Alexander the Great's empire. Although the story is about military victory against the odds, delivering "the strong into the hands of the weak, the many into the hands of few", as the festival prayer puts it, the real miracle was the survival of the religion itself.

It's not about the eradication of the Greek way of thinking, but the survival of ours. When we celebrate by lighting candles – one on the first day to eight on the last – it is not just a festival of light but of enlightenment, of openness. Perhaps that is why the tradition is to put the lamps in the window or even outside – to "publicise the miracle" in the traditional phrase, but also to dare to be different.