

SUNDAY 2 BEFORE ADVENT (NATIONAL INTERFAITH WEEK)

17th November 2013

6.30pm Evensong

St James the Greater

*May I speak in the Name of the Living God, the God of a Thousand Names,
Cosmic Redeemer and personal Saviour.*

Readings: Dan 6: Daniel in the Lions' Den; Matt 13: 1-9 The Parable of the Sower.

I have heard from my spies in the congregation that some of you who listen to my sermons wait for the moment when I introduce some reference to people of other faiths - Muslims or Hindus or Sikhs or Buddhists. Well, no waiting today! For today is the beginning of International Interfaith Week. In this church you have heard several sermons on the virtues of Interfaith dialogue, and pleas for developing an understanding of other people's religions. Of course, there is immediately a problem: do I not have enough difficulty understanding my own faith, without trying to tackle another? The accompanying problem is this: we have no choice in our present society, if we are to be good citizens, relating well to our neighbours of different faiths. So let us make an attempt.

On Thursday our daughter's father-in-law, and therefore my co-grandfather to her children, told us a story from his time working in Riyadh in Saudi Arabia. He had to appear before a Religious Court to secure permission for some activity. At the end of the proceedings, the Judge said to him, "You speak Arabic. Why are you not a Muslim?" He replied, "Because I am a Protestant Christian." That seemed to be acceptable to the Judge, because he, like all Muslims, accepts that Christians, like Jews, are The People of the Book. As a learned Muslim, he would have also remembered the authoritative text from the Qur'an: 'Let there be no compulsion in religion.' (2:256). Even so, Saudi Arabia remains a place where the Religious Police are a tiresome and restrictive presence.

We know that there are many Muslims, especially in Pakistan and Afghanistan, who are not following this precept of the prophet: at least in this country they are not recognised as true Muslims. There are several references to 'The People of the Book' in the Qur'an, and this must be a recognition from the time of Muhammad that there is some common ground between the Jews, the Christians and the Muslims based on their scriptures, which have common references, despite many differences.

We belong to the same family: the Family of Abraham. We share a belief on the One God, Maker of all that is: we believe that God has revealed himself to human kind through the prophets and patriarchs. A very important document was issued in 2007 called 'A Common Word', signed by 138 eminent Muslim scholars, and now with an additional 267 signatories. This 'Common Word' makes a powerful appeal for the Love of God and the Love of neighbour. It is essentially an appeal to the 55% of the world's population who are Christian and Muslim. It concludes, 'So let our differences not cause hatred and strife between us. Let us vie with each other only in righteousness and good works. Let us respect each other, be fair, just and kind to (one) another and live in sincere peace, harmony and mutual goodwill.' This document has generated a huge response from Christians and Jews and Muslims throughout the world, and must be one of the most useful interfaith initiatives so far. (You can check it out on Google.) We need to look at the implications of this change of atmosphere between these three great world religions.

As Interfaith understanding grows, what happens to the original impulses of the Christian Gospel? Has there been a change of stance on the part of the Churches? Why, for example, have we apparently lost our original desire to obey Jesus' command, when he said, as reported by Matthew: 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commended you.' We are told now, in the name of Interfaith Dialogue, that

to seek to convert Jews is not the right thing to do, and some years ago a previous Archbishop of Canterbury withdrew from being Patron of the Church's Mission to Jews. We may also infer – apparently – that to seek to convert Muslims may not be the best policy. I know what distress was caused to old friends of mine whose twin sons converted to a particularly intolerant form of Islam in another part of the country. The whole issue of Conversion is a bit of a minefield, because we know that religious conversion has the power to divide families. In gatherings of people of different faiths, at least in this country, Christians should have no sense of being like Daniel in the Lions' den, but there are many Christians who draw back from that sort of encounter, perhaps because they feel ill-equipped to engage in any meaningful conversation. The answer to that is Get equipped! There are many courses of study at many different levels. But don't forget: more important than all the study courses is our ability simply to relate as human beings to the people of all races and creeds who come our way.

But let us recognise that conversion is the work of the Holy Spirit. Whatever type of conversion is experienced, if it is drawing people closer to God, and closer to one's neighbour, it must be respected, whether it be conversion to Islam, to Christianity, to Buddhism, to Sikhism, to Hinduism. We used to allow ourselves in the CofE to be upset if a person converted to Roman Catholicism, but now (for the most part) we accept that as part of a Christian's development. May I suggest the same understanding be applied to those who convert to other religions? But none of this should stand in the way of our Christian obedience to Jesus to encourage people to be disciples and to bring people to baptism. We still stand for religious freedom. Part of the glorious freedom of the sons and daughters of God will be the freedom to follow Christ in Christ's church, in whichever branch he calls us to serve.

We have been praying for years for my mother-in-law Anne Hayter. My wife and I are grateful for your prayers for her in her frailty of mind and body. Her god-daughter, now converted to the Muslim faith, visits her, bringing one or two of her children. They are amongst the gentlest, kindest and most loving of her visitors, we and the Carers notice the serenity they bring with them.

Karen Armstrong, who calls herself an 'unaffiliated Christian', is a scholar of religions and a very fine writer. She has gained world-wide renown for her appreciative understanding of Judaism, Islam, Buddhism as well as Christianity. The Muslims gave her a standing ovation for the way she honoured the Islamic Faith at a recent conference. If you do want to study, she has written several books. (I have left some at the back of church: Battle for God, A History of God, The story of the Buddha etc.)

Interfaith Week offers many opportunities as the little booklet available at the back shows, especially the exhibition of children's art on at the Cathedral this week and the Interfaith concert on Saturday at St Philip's Church. Also I'd like to recommend the Interfaith Calendar which Christians Aware has produced, so that we may be aware when the festivals of other faiths happen.

Earlier this evening we heard the story of Jesus telling the parable of the Sower and the Seed, as he spoke from a boat on the Sea of Galilee. When I have meditated on this story, I have often privately taken it to refer to the seeds of faith which have been planted in my heart. And I then ask myself, am I able, by God's grace, to keep the seeds of faith growing in my heart, so that I remain faithful to Christ, and grow in the Love of God and neighbour? I hope and pray that the latter comes to pass, and that in all the interfaith dialogues which come my way, those seeds of faith grow in the company of all people who are faithful.

David Clark