

Jesus in a world of faiths: Jesus College, Oxford, 23 January 2011

“Love thy Neighbour” may be a cliché, but it’s a cliché because it’s eternally relevant. Ultimately, that’s the test for everyone in society.” (Baroness Varsi, Sternberg Lecture, University of Leicester, 20 January 2011). That isn’t a quote from the Archbishop of Canterbury but it is taken from Baroness Varsi’s lecture given this week at the University of Leicester. Jesus and his teachings do not and have never narrowly belonged solely to the Christian community. Jesus lived within a multi-faith context. His own Jewish faith whilst being radically particular was moulded by Babylonian, Canaanite and other faiths and codes. The Old Testament lesson today spoke about how the pagan king Cyrus was acclaimed as messiah (the anointed), playing a critical role in the return of the exiles from Babylon. The early church unashamedly engaged in dialogue with many faith and philosophical frameworks directly using those insights to shape creeds, liturgy and ethics - from the temples and street corners of Corinth to the Paris where Aquinas and colleagues shaped medieval Christianity. In modern day communities in Syria, Iran, and Egypt, ancient faiths of Christians, Jews, Muslims, Zoroastrians have lived together, cross fertilising the faith.

I have had to learn to understand Jesus by standing in other’s shoes. My formative years in Northern Ireland gave me a world rent with divisions between Christians. Now life in Leicester provides a complex multi-faith community largely at ease with doing God. I’m sure many of you know the Northern Irish joke about a street in inner-city Belfast where the children regularly played outside their terrace houses. One day a new family from Manchester moved in and the children soon appeared outside with their football. Quickly the other children gathered round. Are you a protestant or a catholic? The little lad and his brother didn’t understand the question? We’re Sikhs, we go to the Gurdwara. But are you Catholic Sikhs or Protestant Sikhs?

Our experience very much pre-conditions the questions we ask about Jesus? Anyone studying Christian theology since the 1950’s cannot avoid the questions raised by the Holocaust and the Jewishness of Jesus. This has greatly occupied scholars. But your average Christian still remains unaware. Very few people on an educational visit to my cathedral choose the Jewish image of Jesus as the one to which they relate. I too had studied Islam at University but it wasn’t until I was a curate in Birmingham in the early 1990’s that I became aware of how my own categories about Jesus shaped my perceptions. It was Good Friday morning and I was setting up church by myself when the door opened and a Muslim boy came in wanting to ask a question. He said he had heard that God was dead and he was very worried and could not understand how that could be so.

In the last census only 44% identified themselves as Christians in Leicester City compared to 70% in England and Wales. The statistics show that we are becoming the first plural city where no single faith group is in the majority. So the celebration of Christmas for many in our city is also the celebration of the birth of prophet Isa born of the Virgin Mary- not the incarnate Son of God but Jesus the prophet and miracle worker taken up into the heavens by Allah. Similarly, many Hindu’s will speak of their love for Jesus. The Sai Baba devotees in the temple in my previous Wimbledon parish cherish their statue of Mary and Jesus, with many taking him as their own avatars – seen as an incarnation of Vishnu. In Leicester the Shree Jalaram Prathna Mandal included Jesus with Buddha, Guru Nanak, Krishna and Ram as one of the holy ones in the roundel at the centre of their beautiful temple. Hindus cannot exclusively follow Jesus but they respond to him warmly. Sikhs connect with the Johannine idea of the logos, the word of God - Guru Nanak said ‘One word and the universe throbbed into being’. Much fruitful common ground is found between a Buddhist and a Christian and a Sikh seeking ways of enlightenment and non-violence with the death of the innocent victim Jesus becoming inspirational given the history of each of these faiths.

So the briefest of surveys illustrates all too clearly that Christians do not have a monopoly on Jesus. He already is part of a multi-faith discourse and this is often the first step that Christians need to take in journeying out of the safety of their own world. Loving neighbours means trying to stand in their shoes. Unfortunately that doesn’t always happen. The neo-orthodox theologian Karl Barth was asked by the Sri Lankan scholar DT Niles whether a good Hindu can be saved. Barth

replied 'Certainly not'. Have you ever met any Hindus? 'No but it is ruled out a priori' .(see Celebrating Difference, Staying Faithful: how to live in a multi-faith world? Andrew Wingate DLT 2005 p64). It is easy to keep a priori categories in tact without encounter.

Every time I encounter Jesus in the practice of another faith, I am forced to think rather more clearly and concisely about my own faith and the one whom I profess to be the incarnate Son of God – the one who decisively reveals the divine. This is not all easy but relationships of trust and respect are able to carry profound divisions and disagreements. This matters theologically and spiritually but it also matters ethically and communally – it was such relationships which kept community cohesion in South West London in our local response following the 7:7 bombings or when I worked in central London when on the Sunday after 9:11 a rabbi, a priest and an imam spoke and prayed together live on Radio 4, gathered around words attributed to Jesus in His sermon on the mount.

These encounters make it clear that we read these texts differently across faiths but actually that we also read them differently within faiths. Broadly Christians are exclusivists, inclusivists or pluralists. Exclusivists regard the work and person of Jesus as the only way to salvation. Inclusivists claim Jesus as the saviour but recognise that revelations of him in other faiths may too be salvific. Pluralists, emphasise God rather than Jesus, stressing the one divinity which has many different pathways. In reality, in community all three merge from one to another by degree and as they begin to address the work and person of Jesus in scripture, tradition and practice. And so we learn humility is needed to apprehend Jesus.

I deliberately chose John 14 as our New Testament reading as one of the most contested in understanding Jesus within a world of faiths. Verse 6 'I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except by me'. This is surely an exclusive statement. Many for centuries have understood it thus. Or is it that Jesus offers a particular way of relating to the divine- the way of the Lord's Prayer which invites a personal relationship depicted in the word 'abba'. So this is not a treaty on salvation in general and certainly not a statement about other faiths? Here in the farewell discourses of John's Gospel, the way to which this verse speaks relates to the previous story where Jesus washes feet. It relates to the unfolding story of the way which leads to a Cross. Peter's experience will demonstrate how difficult this way will be for any to follow - leading us all to repentance rather than leading to judgment of others. So this is an inclusive statement. But equally a pluralist sees another dimension of Jesus too. Despite the initial narrowness of John 14, the divine is also shown to have a sense of space and generosity – the many mansions of the KJV or the many dwelling places of contemporary translations of John 14:2 This is the most immediate context for verse 6 yet that is very often forgotten.

And then all this must connect with the great doctrines of Christology, Trinity and Ecclesiology. Those who come to the Father come by me – the 'me' of the historical person of Jesus of Nazareth, the 'me' of the Jesus of faith made manifest in the history of the church, the 'me' of the God in relationship who empties himself of all power, the 'me' of the divine Word without whom nothing has been made and yet seen most clearly in the signs of healing, forgiveness, sacrifice, and the building of justice – the marks of Jesus. All richly complex!

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks tells a good Jewish story.... Once there were two men who spent their lives transporting stones. One carried rocks, the other diamonds. Then one day they were given emeralds to carry. The man who had spent his days carrying rocks just saw the emeralds as more heavy stones. The one who carried diamonds recognised the emeralds as another precious stone but with distinctive beauty. If our faith in Jesus remains ordinary, a burden then we will not value it in others. But if we learn to cherish our own faith, we'll see others are precious too. This is the good news we can tell from Leicester and the real gift of journeying with Jesus in a world of faiths.

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