

## 36. World Faiths

In tonight's first lesson, Jeremiah the prophet denounced the worship of physical idols (10:1-16). Jeremiah argues that God can never be represented by physical idols, for he is always greater than our images of him. It is true that any images we have of God, whether physical or mental, are inadequate. Christians would say 'Amen' to that. However, religion is always more complex than one might at first think. In Judaism, though images of God are forbidden, Jews use many physical means by which to serve and worship him – the biblical scrolls, the sacred meals, the repeated bowings during prayers. For Christians, the coming of Jesus in the flesh has given us a physical representation of the Word of God, yet through belief in God the Trinity, the beyondness, the inscrutable aspect of God is also preserved. Hindus highly value physical representations of the gods. I remember a television programme about Hinduism that focussed on an Indian village which annually saw the making of a statue of a divine figure. It was carried through the streets to a shrine. Candles were lit before it, food was offered to it. After a set period, it was removed from its shrine, carried through the streets on a cart, then ceremonially dumped into a pond, and people trampled on it. Was this saying that images are essential, but in the end quite inadequate? Over the centuries, religious people, including some Christians, have taken a dismissive attitude to other faiths. How should we regard other faiths? This is what I want to open up tonight.

In recent years before Christmas, here in the cathedral we have organised a gathering with Muslims from the Wickham mosque to celebrate the birth of Jesus. One year we walked together round the cathedral looking at various objects. When a Muslim and I came to the lectern I stopped and pointed out the Bible. I explained that the Christian Bible also included the Jewish scriptures and that we used parts of the Jewish scriptures at services every day. She was astonished. 'I had no idea,' she said. We are so used to the fact that our Bible contains the

Jewish as well as the Christian scriptures that we have forgotten that it is unique. The Bible is the only holy book in the world which contains the scriptures of two different religions. The earliest Christians were Jews and this meant that they had to interpret their Christian faith in the light of their Jewish faith. Jesus himself was a Jew and found his mission and identity through the Jewish scriptures which he often quoted, but he also claimed the right and authority to correct them. 'You have heard that it was said to men of old "You shall not murder". But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister you will be liable to judgement . . .' (Matthew 5:21-2). Jesus was grateful to be fed by the Jewish scriptures, but was also prepared to correct them. He was prepared even to stand against Moses on issues such as divorce. On the one hand, early Christians wanted to point out that the Christian faith was new; on the other hand they wanted to stress its continuity with the Jewish faith. How could they account for all that was good and holy in the faith that had nurtured them? They believed that God had been continuously at work and revealing himself ever since the creation.

At the beginning of St John's Gospel we don't immediately hear about a nativity. Instead we hear about God's Word, God's message which had been at work from the creation onwards. This divine Word enlightens everyone, says John, not just Christians, not just Jews, but everyone: it was this divine Word, this divine reason who was made flesh in Jesus. Christianity is thus literally almost as old as the hills. It is not just a faith which sprang into being with Jesus. St Paul in 1 Corinthians 10 meditates on the way God led his people through the wilderness and then makes the startling comment, 'they drank from the spiritual rock which followed them, and that rock was Christ' (10:4).

It is astonishing that not only does the Bible contain the faith of two religions but that the Bible contains elements of other religions too. The basic themes in the two creation stories in Genesis 1 and 2 come from Babylonian religion. Many of the psalms were originally sung to Baal the Canaanite God and have been reworked for Jewish use. Much of the book of Proverbs is similar to collections of proverbs in other countries of the Middle East. Abraham's son Isaac had an Egyptian mother and wife. King David was the product of a mixed-race marriage. The Bible, and hence our faith, is fed by other religious streams. Therefore Christians are in an excellent position to respond to a multi-faith society and world because they have a Bible and faith fed from several religious sources.

I once lived near St Albans Cathedral. Looking at the building casually you might imagine it was all built at the same time. In fact, some of the bricks were taken from buildings in the old Roman town, so they are

nearly two thousand years old. ‘Old stone to new building,’ as T.S. Eliot says in the ‘Four Quartets.’ So it is with the Bible: there are many layers of many different dates from many different sources. At one time I taught world religions for the Open University. I was convinced that Christians are able to hold fast to Christ as God’s Word made flesh while gratefully acknowledging the work of God in other faiths.

When a Muslim was appointed as head of religious broadcasting at the BBC, there were some eyebrows raised. But a Sheffield vicar welcomed the appointment. He spoke of how there had been a large comprehensive school in his parish. Its headmaster was Muslim. This Muslim head wrote to the local vicar and said that the school included students of a dozen different religions, all of whom knew what their faith was. The only children who had no religious knowledge or allegiance were the whites. The Muslim head asked the vicar to come in regularly to take Christian assemblies and to teach them about Christianity. This is but one of many examples where Muslims put Christians to shame because they take their faith more seriously. Contrast the rigours of Ramadan with the easygoing way most Christians keep Lent. Mosques are full of men. The majority of worshippers in Christian churches are women. Perhaps God has sent Muslims to this country to teach Christians what faith is and what it costs.

George Appleton was for many years a missionary in Burma, and later Archbishop in Jerusalem. He wrote in *On the Eightfold Path* that when he sailed to Burma in 1930, as he stepped down the gangplank he thought that he was taking Christ with him to the people of Burma. ‘Now,’ he said, ‘I would step down that gangplank with a very different attitude: I would spend the first year trying to discover how Christ was already at work in Burma unseen and anonymously.’ Max Warren, another great missionary and head of the Church Missionary Society, was quoted in Peter Schneider’s *Sweeter Than Honey* (12) as saying: ‘Our first task in approaching another people, another culture, another religion, is to take off our shoes, for the place we are approaching is holy. Else we may find ourselves treading on men’s dreams. More serious still, we may forget that God was here before our arrival.’

In the first niche behind St Thomas’ altar we have the figure of the first Archbishop of Canterbury, Augustine, who arrived in Kent in 597. Pope Gregory the Great, who sent him, told him not to destroy all the pagan religious sites and customs but to build on them. Sprinkle the temples with holy water, he said, and use them for Christian worship. Today we know how at Christmas we have sprinkled holy water (as it were) on such pagan customs as holly and mistletoe – indeed, Christmas

itself was originally a pagan festival which Christians took over. Most religions have much in common, but there are still significant differences between them. The Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sachs pointed out that in the Bible we are commanded to love our neighbour on only one occasion, but we are commanded to love the stranger by thirty-seven different texts. It is not too difficult to love the neighbour when he or she is like us. Loving the stranger is much more difficult when he or she is *not* like us – different religion, different customs, different colour. But we must look for the image of God in that person who is so different. Our society could become an example to the world of how differences can enrich us rather than cause enmity. We should pray that the appointment of the first Muslim head of religious broadcasting at the BBC will be an example of this.

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