

‘In my Father’s House, there are many dwelling places’

John 14:2

*Edited version of a sermon preached by The Reverend Canon Ian
Michael at All Saint’s Episcopal Church, St Andrews, on Sunday 18th
May 2014 at the 10am Eucharist*

Saturday 15th February 2003, saw demonstrations in various places against the invasion of Iraq, an event which was so obviously on the way. On that day I responded to a call from the then-Bishop of Birmingham, Bishop John Sentamu, to participate in prayers for peace in Birmingham Cathedral, prayers led by representatives of the various faiths in that city of many faiths. When it came to the turn of Dr Mohammad Naseem, the highly respected chairman of Birmingham Central Mosque, who has died recently at the age of 90, he paused on his way to the lectern to reverence the altar with a bow; a simple gesture showing a generosity of spirit which is characteristic of religion at its best. That generosity is rooted in the generosity of God. In the words of a hymn we often sing in this church (New English Hymnal 461):

‘There’s a wideness in God’s mercy
Like the wideness of the sea.’

I draw attention to the best side of religion because we live in times when the worst side is all too apparent. We still need the warning in our later verse of Hymn 461:

‘But we make his love too narrow
By false limits of our own
And we magnify his strictness
With a zeal he will not own.’

Two recent sets of events have set alarm bells ringing in my mind’s ear. Firstly, a string of recent atrocities, some unusually horrific, have led to our hearing frequently the words ‘Islamic extremism’. Say or hear those words often enough and we can find ourselves pushed towards the assumption that the words ‘Islamic’ and ‘extremist’ are synonymous. That is dangerous. Every faith has its dark side, its extremists. Christianity most certainly has, not only in former centuries but in our own times as well. Dwelling on that can be depressing, so how important to keep being held by the assurance of the Easter Gospel that evil and violence, real as they are, do not have the last word.

The second set of alarm bells were set off by the recent debate on the question, ‘Is Britain a Christian country?’ I understand what the words ‘Christian country’ mean in constitutional terms and in recognising the immeasurable influence of Christianity in shaping our society and its institutions, but when the words carry the unspoken suggestion that, unless you’re a Christian you’re not fully British, that is indefensible. We live in a country of many faiths, in a world of many faiths; and how the followers of those faiths relate to one another is a matter of life and death.

So interfaith dialogue matters, and I include among the faiths open-minded secular humanism. It is important to remember that entering into genuine dialogue means being open to the possibility of being won over to the other’s point of view. In practice, we are more likely to find a deepening of our understanding of the faith in which we stand.

So if you get the chance to visit a mosque, or a synagogue, or another place of worship, take it. You may well find your stereotypes challenged.

I applaud the work of those who are promoting interfaith dialogue within the community of the University of St Andrews. It was heartening too to hear the other day that Pope Francis, on his forthcoming visit to the Holy Land, will have among his companions' two friends who are respectively a rabbi and an imam. Nearer home, the warm relationships between the congregation of St John's Episcopal Church in Aberdeen and the community of the mosque next door gave a model for others to follow.

But some are bound to ask about those words attributed to Jesus in St John's Gospel which we heard this morning, 'No one comes to the Father except through me' (*John 14:6*). There is much to be said. For now I say only that I believe those words to be an expression of the Christian understanding of God as being the way Christ shows God to be. This takes us well beyond the bounds of the Christian Church.

So how does the Christian understanding of God relate to other understandings of God? There is no neat answer to that question. Commitment to interfaith dialogue involves being prepared to live with loose ends and with questions which may well be unanswerable in human terms.

But that does not mean that anything goes. For followers of Christ committed to interfaith dialogue, that commitment is rooted in their understanding of the Gospel. That Gospel remains challenging and disturbing as well as liberating. That challenge is brought into sharp focus by the account of the death of Stephen, the first Christian martyr which we heard in our first reading (*Acts 7:55-end*). Is the Gospel as we have received it a Gospel for which, like Stephen, we are prepared to die? And, like him, die loving those who persecute us?