

Inter-Faith Relationships

INTRODUCTION

The Faith and Order Committee began to reflect on the issue of Inter-Faith relations in 2005. The backdrop to this study is that in the last ten to fifteen years huge numbers of people from many cultures and religions have arrived to live in both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. Some who have come already profess to be members of the Christian faith and have, in many situations, joined their local Methodist churches. However many have come from Muslim, Hindu and other religious traditions, and their presence amongst us raises in a new and immediate way the question of how, as Christians, we relate to those of other faiths.

This set of bible studies is designed to resource local congregations in midweek meetings or bible study groups to reflect upon their experiences of meeting people from other religious and cultural backgrounds in the context of reading and studying the bible. The study is not designed to provide the answers to all the questions we might have about our relationship with those from other faith backgrounds, in fact it may well provoke more questions in participant's minds. There are many other useful resources readily available to those interested in this subject, for example:

'The Faiths of Ireland', by Rev Stephen Skuce

'Faith meeting Faith', available from the Methodist Church in Britain, via www.methodistchurch.org.uk

'The life we share', available from the Methodist Church in Britain, via www.methodistchurch.org.uk

In many contexts Christians in Ireland have to interact on a daily basis with those from other faith backgrounds, through, for example, third level education chaplaincy, hospital chaplaincy, and local community development work both statutory and voluntary. Many who have come from other backgrounds are working in service, hospitality industries and agriculture and we interact with them on a daily basis.

For one local Methodist church an opportunity presented itself to meet some members of a local Bangladeshi community. It started with a chance conversation between a woman from the congregation and an employee of a voluntary organisation working with the women from the Bangladeshi community in a local community centre. The church women were invited to meet the Bangladeshi women and share some of their interests and their culture.

The group decided they would like to learn patchwork and they started out to make a wall hanging. It soon became evident that many of them were delighted with the sewing and they progressed way beyond the basic skills and made beautiful colorful bed quilts both double and king size. That first year these went on display at a local Multicultural Day where many ethnic minority groups met for food and art of all kinds.

The church group befriended the Bangladeshi women in the group and on several occasions went to a private swimming pool where they acted as lifeguards for insurance purposes. The local elder of the Bangladeshi community had made a ruling, in keeping with their culture, that the make up of the group was to be women only and so this arrangement worked really well. The local Council has since permitted a designated day and time when the women from the Bangladeshi community can use the local swimming pool by themselves.

The purpose in the early days was to help new residents settle into the local community. They were not in need financially but in need socially and educationally. Relationships grew, and instead of being fearful of going out of their homes into the town they began to feel secure and when in the town they would meet people from the church group and could stop and chat. One of the church members has been to two of the Bangladeshi ladies homes and had tea with them.

As the relationship has developed members of other churches have come along too and taught crochet and knitting and there is an 'English as a foreign language' hour for those who want to develop their language skills. There is a very good crèche facility in the community centre and the leaders of one of the voluntary organisations are very child-orientated and work with the children, helping to prepare them for first school experience.

Sometimes faith stories have been shared as they sew together; much has been learnt about each other's cultures and beliefs. The Bangladeshi women have given the church members an insight into Ramadam and they have celebrated the Eid feast with them. The Hijab, or headscarf, has been discussed with the women and their sense of a deepened spirituality or obedience through the wearing of it. The Christian women have been able to share the story of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. They have been able to show and share God's love in a natural manner.

In another provincial town in the Republic of Ireland some church members, along with friends from another denomination, set up a friendship club that was meant for asylum seekers who had been brought to the town by the relevant government body to reside in special hostels. The club was envisaged as a special place where asylum seekers could meet with each other away from the hostels. Here they could share their stories, talk about their concerns, bring their children to play with other children and also meet the Irish founders and helpers who were prepared to listen to them, offer advice, and help them in any other ways possible.

At the very start it was decided that the club was going to be open to all - Muslim, Christian, Buddhist, atheist. Those who served in The Club were just to live out their beliefs/faith in the way they related to the asylum seekers. It is impossible to quantify the positive impact of the service this club has given to literally hundreds of asylum seekers, most of whom are now new Irish residents.

On one occasion a group from the club was invited into a home of a Muslim family. It was the end of a Muslim prayer and fasting period and this family wanted their Christian friends to participate in the celebration - not just by being present with them but also by offering Christian prayers in their home. The local minister was asked to lead in the reading of the Christian scriptures and in praying. The minister reflected 'I remember wondering whether or not to wear my clerical garb, mention the name of Jesus, and what passage of scripture to read. In the end I realized, wrongly or rightly, how what was important for me to focus on was not what I wore or read or said but to acknowledge what God in Christ was already doing in the lives of the people in that family because a few Christians had chosen to love them in the way they best knew and were able.

While in the home on that occasion, each of us were left in no doubt that the family chose to invite us and the Good News of Christ into their home for their special Muslim ritual because they had experienced the love of Allah in a concrete way through a few Christians who had chosen to care for the strangers in their midst.'

On the death of one of the founders of the club (a local Methodist) so many people in the town, from different parts of the world and different religious persuasions, attended the funeral service that the police had to control traffic outside the church as the overflow of mourners outside crowded the whole area. During the service people testified with tears and loud weeping to the goodness of this man and his wife, so much so that the service took nearly two hours. One man who testified at that service was an African Muslim Imam who spoke movingly about this Christian man and his goodness. As he finished, he asked to pray for him and his family in the only way he knew how to pray, offering a prayer in Arabic. Again the minister reflected 'Was it right for him to do this in the church of Christ, and from the pulpit? I don't know. But this I know: this man's death had brought Muslims and Christians together in the one place around the same issue in sincere love and support of each other at a very difficult moment in their lives. This was made possible because someone had borne faithful Christian witness in his community not just with words but also with loving and often sacrificial action that impacted on both Christians and non-Christians in profound positive ways.'

We need a 'theology of otherness'. That is, in order for us to understand more deeply who God is and what God can do in our lives, we need to see how God has worked in the lives of others. Such a journey begins in being secure in our

identity as followers of Jesus. Common responses to encounters with those from other faith backgrounds have usually been either a misplaced politeness that fails to acknowledge our Christian faith commitment or a fundamentalism that renders understanding and learning impossible.

However, the God we read about in scripture and encounter in the person of Jesus, calls us to welcome the stranger, to go to the marginalised, the poor and the lonely, to promote justice and mercy. It is hoped that these studies will enable local churches and individuals to begin a journey of understanding in how we as Christians relate to those of other faiths, and enable opportunities to be taken in relation to sharing in God's mission, through Jesus, to those on the edges of our community.

STUDY 1: THINKING THROUGH THE OLD TESTAMENT PART 1

Introduction

This study is to provide a biblical basis for reflection and discussion on matters of inter-faith relationships. It will consider inter-faith relationships in the context of the faith of Israel and relationships with those encountered belonging to the Great Nations (and faiths). The following texts describe the situation of Israel and other peoples and their faith/s.

**Exodus 12.19,48; Leviticus 16.29, 17.10,13; 18.26; 20.2; 24.16,22;
Deuteronomy 10.19; 14.21; 24.19-21; Numbers 35.15; Lev 25.45-46;
Psalm 94.6, 146.9; Jeremiah 7.6; 22.3; Ezekiel 22.7,29; 47.22-23;
Zechariah 7.10; Malachi 3.5**

Setting the Context: Responding to the Stranger - Learning from the Faith of Israel

The faith of Israel, called by God into a special relationship with him, was expressed mainly through laws, commandments and codes. These reflected a holy God desiring the people he has called to himself to be holy too - in life, worship, service and community. The fulfillment of these covenant requirements was for the good of all humanity and not just Israel in her special relationship with God. The extent of Israel's duties towards God and her neighbours can be seen particularly in the 10 commandments (Ex 20.1-17) and the Covenant Code (Ex 20.22-23.33), a mixture of cultic requirements and ethical obligations.

Leviticus 19.1-26.46 [The Holiness Code] represents a blending of cultic requirements and ethical obligations. The God who brought Israel out of Egypt has separated a people with a special relationship to him (Lev 18. 1-5; 20.26; 22.31-33). Now Israel's holiness and ethical moral requirements are derived from being related to a holy God. All previous ethical requirements come to a climax in this law: this is a community ruled in God's name and there are severe penalties for violating it's code (Lev 20.1-27).

Within this code (as well as in the Prophets, Wisdom Literature and Psalms) are found humanitarian laws. These represent Israel's clear obligations towards the 'stranger'/'sojourner'/'refugee'/'foreigner'. These were people driven out of their own land by famine, war, political upheaval or some personal disaster and who were vulnerable without any rights of citizenship and no family for support and protection. Often the stranger represented the faith, belief system or worldview of the other nations in the Fertile Crescent surrounding Israel.

Within this context of humanitarian relationships with the 'stranger' for Israel there may be a framework for us to reflect and discuss, first some of the aspects of how we understand and relate to the 'stranger', and then how we might think about relating to the faith of the stranger which may be different from ours.

Using the biblical texts suggested consider the following questions for reflection and discussion:

Share your personal experiences of meeting people from other cultural, religious or ethnic backgrounds.

What experience would Israel have had of being a stranger/foreigner/refugee?

How might life, worship and service to God be linked to the stranger and their faith in our midst?

How does our understanding of the character of God affect our understanding of and relationship with other people and their faiths?

How does the biblical account of Israel's responsibility to the stranger affect our relationship with people of other faiths?

STUDY 2: THINKING THROUGH THE OLD TESTAMENT PART 2

Introduction

This second study builds on the idea that God's law required the Israelites to respect the stranger in their midst that we explored partially in the first study. This study will explore in more detail Israel's experience of being in exile and what it feels like to be a stranger. For some Christians in Ireland today, living in a multi-racial, and a multi-faith community is almost like living as a 'stranger in exile' – a minority grouping coping with a culture and worldview which often feels alien.

The exile, or Babylonian captivity, took place probably between 604 and 539BCE, when a significant proportion of the population of Judah (Southern Kingdom of Israel) was deported in two groups (2 Kings 24.14-16; 25.11] under the orders of the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar. According to Ezekiel 1-2 they were permitted to return after the Persian ruler, Cyrus, had captured Babylon around 539BCE. The following texts describe the situation:

2 Kings 17.7-20; 24.1-25.21; Jeremiah 7.16-20; Jeremiah 27.1-28.1; 29.1-32; 32.1-44; Ezekiel 7.1-27; 8.1-10.22; 33.1-39.29; Isaiah 40-55; Daniel 1.1-6.28; Psalm 51, 120, 130, 137.

Setting the Context: Living as the Stranger in Exile - Learning from the Faith of Israel

The calamity the Prophets had predicted for God's chosen people for so long had finally come. Jerusalem had capitulated, the Temple had been destroyed and the

people had been led away into shameful captivity known as the Exile. This was to be the most severe test for the chosen people in their long and eventful history. The reaction of those transported into captivity provides an insight as to how the 'stranger' belonging to God might respond to living in what could be described as a culture and a prevailing spirit alien to what the people of Israel had known.

Life in exile was a disorientating experience that led the people to question all aspects of their lives including their social, economic, political and religious life. Reflecting on Israel's experiences challenges us in this way: how we live and relate to our understanding of God will determine how we live and relate to our understanding of other peoples - and their faiths.

Using the biblical texts suggested consider the following questions for reflection and discussion:

The Prophets of Israel often spoke out against false notions of the religion of Israel. What were these false notions? How did they impact their relationships with other people? What is this saying to us today?

What opportunities and threats did the exile pose to Israel?

What opportunities and threats do the sense of 'living as strangers and aliens' pose to us in the church today?

In what way was Israel's sense of universal mission helped by the exile? Would the church's universal mission be helped or hindered by inter-faith dialogue and engagement?

STUDY 3: LEARNING FROM JESUS

THE CENTURION'S SERVANT: MATTHEW 8:5-13

Introduction

In the gospels we read many accounts of the people Jesus met and ministered to, most of them Jews. This story of the centurion shows us how Jesus related to one man who was not of the Jewish faith. This study will encourage us to learn from Jesus.

Context

The account of Jesus healing the centurion's servant is told by Matthew as one of three miracles that Jesus performs for people who were marginalised in Jewish society. In verses 1-4 he heals a **leper**, in this passage (5-13) he answers the request of a **Gentile**, and in verses 14-15 he restores the health of a **woman**. Those who witnessed the conversation between Jesus and the centurion would have been waiting to see if he would minister to a Gentile.

Read the passage

- Share what you know about the Jews' attitude to Gentiles in the time of Jesus. How do the centurion's words to Jesus show his understanding of Jewish practices? What barriers did Jesus cross in ministering to his need?
- Read Luke 7:1-5. How did the local Jews view this centurion?
- What impresses Jesus about the centurion? Why is the centurion's reply in verses 8-9 a good illustration of faith?
- What would have surprised or shocked the Jews about Jesus' teaching on the Kingdom (verses 10-12)?

- What does this passage teach us about the basis of entry into the Kingdom of God?
- In our church's ministry, who are there people we exclude because of their religious, cultural or ethnic background?
- In what ways does this story challenge/encourage us in our own lives and ministry?

Notes

v. 5 Capernaum: in Jesus' day Capernaum was an important garrison town. The troops were non-Jews, probably from Lebanon or Syria. For a Gentile to approach a Jewish preacher was unusual.

centurion: the Roman centurion was in charge of 100 soldiers. They were often wealthy and influential in local affairs. Centurions were Pagans, and were obliged to offer sacrifices to the Emperor.

appealing to him: in Luke's version (Luke 7:1-10) the centurion speaks to Jesus through a delegation of Jewish leaders.

v. 6 servant: probably a personal attendant. Luke mentions that he was 'dear' to the centurion.

v. 7 'I will come and cure him.' A better translation might be, 'Am I to come and cure him?' This question then draws out from the centurion a response which shows his faith in Jesus.

v. 8-9 The centurion's reply shows that he does not see his race as a barrier to Jesus' mercy, but his personal unworthiness and his faith in Jesus' power to heal even at a distance make it unnecessary for Jesus to enter his house.

v. 11-12 Jesus is referring to the Messianic banquet found in OT passages such as Isaiah 25:6-9 and 56:3-8. Jesus says that many will come from the east and the west and sit at the banquet with the patriarchs.

v. 11 sit at table: recline. To recline at table with a Gentile or even a Jew who did not keep the law was to contract ritual defilement; yet Jesus envisages even the patriarchs eating with them.

v. 12 subjects of the kingdom (NIV): 'heirs of the kingdom' (NRSV), those who expect to inherit the kingdom because of their birth. The only way to enter the kingdom is through faith.

STUDY 4: JESUS' FINAL COMMAND – Matthew 28:18-20

Read: Matthew 28:18-20

Introduction

These final words of the risen Jesus to his disciples in Matthew's gospel are commonly known as 'the Great Commission'. For many years the church understood this command to apply only to the 11 apostles. It was William Carey, the Baptist Missionary, who in 1792 first used this text as a central text of Christian mission. He believed that the mission Jesus assigns to the 11 should be understood to apply to all believers.

Context:

The risen Jesus speaks these words to the eleven disciples in Galilee. Earlier in the Gospel we read how Jesus instructed the 12 to go to 'the lost house of Israel' (10:5-6). He now includes 'all nations' in their mission.

- Note the number of times Jesus uses the words 'all' or 'everything'.
- *'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.'* What are the implications of this statement (a) for the disciples and (b) for us today?
- Jesus' central command is to *'make disciples of all nations.'* Reflect on how Jesus made disciples. What should 'making disciples' involve in our context?
- Jesus had earlier instructed the 12 to go to *'the lost house of Israel'* (10:5-6). He now includes 'all nations'. In the context of the early church, this involved evangelising people with different religious beliefs. How do you feel about offering the gospel message to someone of another faith?

- Jesus commanded his disciples to *'go'* and make disciples. How did the early Christians fulfil this command to *'go'*? What are the different ways in which Christians today can obey Christ's command to *'go'*?
- *'Baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit'*. What, do you think, is the significance of Christian baptism for someone from another faith?
- *'Teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.'* How would you sum up the teaching of Jesus in a few sentences?
- *'I am with you always.'* How do we react to these words of Jesus?
- Do you think that this text applies directly to the church's mission today? If so, to what extent is it being fulfilled?

STUDY 5 - THE UNIQUE ACTIVITY OF GOD IN CHRIST

Introduction:

This series of studies has been thinking through how we, as Christians, can best relate to people of other faiths. Here in Ireland we are only beginning to learn how much this matters. For Christians in other parts of the world, particularly Africa and Asia, living alongside those of other faiths has always been their experience.

As we seek respectfully to listen to those of other faiths, to relate to them lovingly and to appreciate their spirituality, an unsettling question naturally arises. Are all these various faiths simply human constructs, or are they different ways of receiving Divine revelation? If there are different routes to God, does it really matter what you believe so long as you are sincere? Or is allegiance to and trust in Christ uniquely true to God's activity?

The writers of the New Testament, who came from the world of Judaism but lived in a world of many faiths, were convinced that in Jesus of Nazareth, whom some had lived with and many had met, God was indeed uniquely at work. God's unique initiatives in Jesus can be seen under three headings:

1. Incarnation:

Read John 1:1-14; Hebrews 1: 1-4, 1 John 1: 1-4

These three passages, written for different situations, share a common theme. They introduce documents intended for Christians who were under pressure for

their faith. They each set the scene by saying, in effect, 'God has come among us, as one of us'.

Year on year we hear the Christmas message that 'the Word became flesh', to the extent that it no longer surprises us. It certainly shocked those who first dared to express it. Their understanding of God's ways up until now might include the thought of God caring for his people and even speaking to them, but certainly not becoming one with them. For God to become human was incomprehensible.

Yet the first disciples' experience of Jesus of Nazareth led them to this startling conclusion. At times they struggled to find the words and ideas that could express such a paradox. It would have been easier for them either to suggest that Jesus, though specially blessed, was not really divine, or that he wasn't fully and truly human. But neither compromise was true to the one whom they had encountered.

Questions:

How would you respond to someone who suggested that Christians who claim that Jesus was/is unique are being arrogant?

Christians have always found it difficult to hold together the belief that Jesus was fully and truly human and fully and truly divine. When you think of Jesus are you more inclined to the human or divine? How does this affect your picture of him?

What do you think are the features of Jesus which make him particularly attractive to those who do not profess Christian faith?

2. Crucifixion:

Read Mark 15; 1 Corinthians 1: 18-25

There is great power in telling the story of the Passion of Christ. Whether on the cinema screen, or acted out on the streets of a city such as Manchester or London in recent years, or in simply reading through the story in a Sunday service, we are gripped again. Scholars over the years have noted how much space in the Gospels is taken up with Jesus' final visit to Jerusalem, his arrest, trial and crucifixion.

On the face of it, however, the story of the Crucifixion was not a story that early Christian disciples would have been proud to tell. They lived in a culture where honour and respect were given to those who could maintain their dignity. For Jesus, their teacher and master, to have been arrested, tried and humiliated was bad enough. Crucifixion was a particularly painful and shameful form of execution, devised by the Roman authorities as a warning to any who thought they could challenge or undermine imperial power.

Yet Paul insists to his Corinthian readers that this is the very message that needs to be proclaimed, and, surprisingly, that it is good news. The reason Paul is so firm about this is that he has become convinced that, far from being a shameful disaster, the crucifixion is God's initiative for repairing the relationship with humanity which had been broken.

Many pictures and theories have been used over the years to help us envisage how God's initiative works. None fully explains the mystery. But Christian conviction is that the cross is proof of God's loving action, in history, for the humanity which is the desire of God's heart, and Christian experience bears witness that it works.

Questions

On the face of it the Crucifixion appears to be nothing more than another example of human cruelty. What helps you to understand it as 'Love so amazing, so divine'?

3. Resurrection:

Read John 20: 1-29; Acts 17: 22-34; Colossians 1: 15-20

Christianity is all about Easter. Christians are Easter people and Hallelujah is their characteristic song. It would be false to suggest that belief in the resurrection of Jesus comes easily. Our generation is just as likely to be quickly dismissive of the thought of God raising Jesus as were Paul's listeners in Athens (Acts 17:32). But the writers of the New Testament are convinced of two truths – first that God did indeed raise Jesus and second that the Resurrection is the key to human hope and history from now on.

The accounts of the Resurrection which we find in the four Gospels differ from each other in detail but are unanimous in their central affirmation of God's

activity, and striking in the simple way in which they affirm it. Attempts over the centuries to rationalise the Resurrection accounts (eg the disciples were mistaken, or stole the body, or Jesus was resuscitated, or it was a subjective spiritual experience) have not persuaded. The New Testament offers us a wide selection of witnesses to this event and in the end we have to decide whether we trust their witness.

Those who witnessed and believed in Resurrection didn't just see it as a happy ending to a sad story. They saw it as a key moment in God's plan for the whole of creation – for Resurrection opens the way for a whole newly created order. All human activity for the sake of the Kingdom of God is caught up into God's own plans and purposes. Those purposes are well expressed in Paul's phrase (Colossians 1:20) of 'reconciling all things, in heaven and on earth, to himself.'

Questions:

What difference does the Resurrection make to your life, and the life of the world?

This study has suggested that three convictions about God's activity in Christ make Christian faith and commitment unique. Do you agree? If so, how does this affect our relationship with those of other faiths?