

Interfaith Harmony

The United Nations marks the first seven days of February as World Interfaith Harmony Week. In 2010 the General Assembly adopted a resolution that mutual understanding and interreligious dialogue constitute important dimensions of a culture of peace and it established World Interfaith Harmony Week as a way to promote harmony between all people regardless of their faith.

It has to be acknowledged that many if not most past and present conflicts have a religious dimension, either between or within different faiths. We think of Syria and Iraq where the conflict is largely between different strands of Islam, though Christians and those of other faiths are also targeted. We think of conflicts between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria, and before that in Bosnia. We think of the suffering of the Muslims in largely Buddhist Myanmar/Burma, and Hindu nationalism in India.

Of course there is also a political dimension to these conflicts. Yet the role of religion is still strong, even though the ideological motivation of the leading forces may well bear little relation to the mainstream of that faith. For violence, cruelty and terror are contrary to the teachings of all the major faiths. Yet it is ordinary people who suffer. It is the ordinary people who long for peace.

There have been moments in history where people of different faiths have been able to live together in peace and mutual freedom and respect. In both Cordoba in Spain and Sicily in the Middle Ages Christianity, Judaism and Islam were able to live in peaceable co-existence. Yet in both cases that situation did not last and indeed it was hard-line Christians who destroyed that harmony.

We may not think of York as a particularly multi-faith city and yet there are members of many different faiths here. A Jewish community now meets regularly for worship, and there is a mosque in one of our own parishes. I was not able to attend their open day this last Sunday but I was at the last one in the summer. What struck me was how much the Islamic community wanted to be part of and contribute to the wider community. For them hospitality is so important.

The different faiths will never agree on matters of belief, and we have to respect that. For Christians Jesus is the way and the truth and the life. That is what is distinctive and unnegotiable about Christianity. And yet there is still much that we have in common.

It is not easy to find a suitable Bible passage about interfaith harmony but I would suggest that our Lord's summary of the law of love (Matthew 22.34-40) – love of God and love of our neighbour – is something that can unite people of all faiths. It comes of course from the Jewish tradition and is part of Islam too. That is surely the way forward: to respect, serve and help another as a sign of our love of God.

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