

## ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 10 MAY 2009

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John 15: 1-8

### “Just how Inclusive can the Gospel be?”

The writer of John has produced a powerful allegory of the religious community. Jesus is the vine, we are the branches who bear fruit, and God is the gardener.

The fruit breaks out in clusters of goodness – but only if the branch is healthy. The healthier the branch, the more fruit is produced. William Loader suggests that the pruning is likened to purifying. What purifies is the word (John 15:2-3), so care for the branches means teaching and nurturing them. The word is the word of love, the word of life which Jesus brings.<sup>1</sup> Jesus, the vine, is firmly rooted in God's garden and draws its nourishment up from the source below. The nourishment that courses through the plant is the sap of life and different commentators have called it love or grace. To remain connected to the vine is to be aware of, and in touch with, the source of all that is.

The Gospel writer was primarily concerned about the health of the growing communities and how they could define themselves. What does this have to say to us in our globalized world where we have such ready access to different nations, cultures, and languages? We have a global economy, global transport systems and a communication network that can reach instantaneously into every corner of the globe for those who can afford the access. Globalization itself raises major problems with respect to justice, particularly among the poorer nations. But there are also important questions for religions in our ever-shrinking world:

1. **How should one religion view another in a multi-cultural, multi-religious world?**
2. **Is it possible to respect the integrity of other religions and yet retain one's own integrity?**
3. **Does respecting the integrity of other religions mean that evangelism is no longer possible?**

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### 1. How should one religion view another in a multi-cultural, multi-religious world?

We cannot examine this question without looking at different cultural attitudes. While we have extraordinary access to information about other places and peoples, we must not forget that there are many cultures which do not enjoy the same privilege. And this again raises not only issues of justice but important differences in perception. It is comparatively easy to use secondary sources to explore other cultures. But this is insignificant when compared with an actual extended engagement with the people of other cultures. The point is that some cultures are very different from others and what is acceptable in one culture may not be acceptable in another. There may even be different views of what is right and what is wrong.

Robert Mesle, one of the main proponents of 'Process Theology', talks about *committed relativism* which enables people to make “legitimate value judgments across and between cultures, lifestyles and religions without claiming that there is only one absolute right and wrong, only one absolutely best action, lifestyle, culture or religion.” He goes on to say:

*Committed relativism is challenging in that it requires us to be open-minded without being empty-minded. It requires us to listen to others and learn from others, but not simply approve of what they say. There are no absolute guidelines by which I can say that one culture is right and another wrong, but I don't have to approve of Nazism or the KKK..."<sup>2</sup>*

This doesn't mean merely disagreeing with Nazi culture. It still allows for strong opposition if it becomes necessary. When it comes to living our lives, there is no one perfect way. There are many different ways to live and to help others live rich, meaningful lives. It is impossible to think of a religion that would hold that this is not preferable to the many different ways of living lives in ways that diminish both others and ourselves.

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## **2. Is it possible to respect the integrity of other religions and yet retain one's own integrity?**

If these differences apply to the different cultures in our world, they also apply to religion and this is becoming increasingly important. Many recent think tanks have acknowledged this.

Religious pluralism must be squarely faced and the important question is obvious: How should we, as Christians, view other faiths? Our history is certainly not always something we can be proud of. In many cases this has been the result of human failings relating to imperialistic conquest based on greed of resources or land; or the ignorant and intolerant fear of those who are different.

There are times when religion has been used to justify political aims by claiming that it is the 'will of God' or 'that God is on our side' or other blasphemous statements. At the personal level, politics and religion can be 'compartmentalised' to enable people to convince themselves that their political views can override their fundamental morality. Here is an example from *The Austrian Times* of 29 April 2009:

*A priest has shocked parishioners by welcoming them to church wearing a swastika armband.*

*Fascist Father Angelo Idi, 51 - who once saw off a charity box thief with a truncheon at his church in Vigevano, Italy - confessed: "I am proud of my right wing beliefs. But people shouldn't care about my politics; they should care about how good a priest I am."*

There have been religious wars (e.g. the Crusades) and religious persecutions (e.g. the ways in which Jews have been treated at various times throughout history) which have been horrendous. Violent persecution between one group and another group in the same religion over their different beliefs has happened. It really is not surprising that the strident 'atheist movement' today lays the charge that there has been so much violence caused by religion that the world would be better off without it. (I would suggest that that it is nothing like the amount of violence caused in the name of nationalism.) Still, it is hard to disagree with this view in some instances. But it shouldn't be that way.

Arthur Hertzberg, in an article entitled *Religion is not the answer*, says this:

*Many years ago, I was invited by the Harvard Divinity School to take part in a discussion of what the role of religion should be in solving the Jewish-Arab conflict. I shocked my hosts with a very short speech in which I asserted that the greatest contribution that religions – all the biblical religions – could make to peace in the Middle East would be to disappear from the debate.*

*This assertion ran counter, and still runs counter, to the cliché that if only the combatants “got religion”, the wars would disappear...*

*Religions... need to reform themselves so that they become more peaceful. In each of the biblical traditions, there are elements enjoining kindness to the stranger, understanding for his needs and his traditions, and an awareness that the one God is the God of all humanity and that He wants all His children to make peace with each other.*<sup>3</sup>

The committed relativism discussed earlier makes it possible to accept that various different religious and cultural beliefs are just as valid for other groups as our own is for us, without necessarily agreeing with their way of expressing their beliefs. People's beliefs influence how they behave and the abiding test will always be peace, kindness and justice. All the religions that have lasted have this at their centre.

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### **3. Does respecting the integrity of other religions mean that evangelism is no longer possible?**

In a world where there is more religious diversity “we can learn to celebrate the very existence and values of other world religions as a gift from God... Committed relativism... allows people to affirm the value of their own tradition while positively affirming that other traditions can also offer creative values.” (Mesle, 1993, p.102) In essence, this allows a person of one religion to respect a person from another religion and to engage in mutual discussion without the self-imposed need to convert the other.

William Loader puts it nicely when he says:

*Until I am persuaded otherwise I make Jesus the “criterion” for assessing what goes on both in Christianity and in other religions. What I mean by “Jesus” ... includes values related to love which affirm all people as of worth and that this love is at the heart of God, and Jesus embodied it. I may see the light I recognise in Jesus in other parts of Christianity, in other religions and beyond them, labelled or not. Light does not wear labels! Negatively, it means that I recognise injustice, violence, abuse, etc. as not light. If John 14:6 [and I would also say this of the allegory of the vine] meant: only through faith in Jesus do we have the way to God, I would say: only the way of Jesus, labelled as such or not, is the way to God or the manifestation of God in the world. So I can be honest about my Christian claims, but generous about where else the spirit might move.*<sup>4</sup>

When it comes down to it, we can only make this kind of statement if we accept that there are many ways to express the sacred. If God is the God of creation, the God of all humanity, then we cannot constrain God to any one religion. The call of God is made known through many different peoples and cultures.

It must be said that evangelism should be ‘dialogical’. i.e. sharing one's beliefs with integrity and yet engaging respectfully with the other. William Loader again:

*As Christians I think our role is to lay our table as richly and accessibly as possible, to tell the Jesus story. It is not to overturn the tables of others. My ignorance about others requires my constant openness while I own the riches I know in Christ. It helps me recognise salvation i.e. transformed people/communities living goodness and love; not individuals ticketed for heaven wherever “good news” happens.*<sup>5</sup>

God works through all people, wherever they are, in whatever culture or religion, to express love for one another; to build a better world where all may share in the blessings of life in communities of care.

And this brings us back to the allegory of the vine.

If we would want to be bearers of the fruits of love, we need to stay attached to the vine and to be sustained by the source of life. To do otherwise is to risk withering on the vine and to miss too many opportunities for self-transformation and for transforming the lives of others.

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NOTES:

1. Loader, W, *First thoughts on Easter 5*,  
<http://www.staff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/BEpEaster5a.htm>
2. Mesle, CR, *Process Theology*, 1993, ChalicePress, p.93
3. Hertzberg, A, *Religion is not the answer*, <http://www.beliefnet.com>
4. Loader, W, *Other Faiths: A New Testament Perspective*,  
<http://www.staff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/OtherFaiths.htm>
5. Ibid.