

Interfaith and Reconciliation: DIFA Conference Keynot Address

I first learned about both interfaith relations and reconciliation whilst living with the Tuareg nomads in the Sahara desert. My husband and I were Christians, and newly qualified anthropologists, who found ourselves immersed in a nomadic, Muslim, tribal community in the north of Mali - near Timbuktu in fact! It is a region now overwhelmed by Islamic extremists, but at the time, the form of Islam was peaceful, and Sufi by orientation. It was the first time I had lived and worked in an entirely Muslim community, and I have to say, all the stereotypes I had been fed growing up were shattered. Conversations around the campfire, night after night, stretched our limited understanding of Islam to the limits, and beyond. We fell in love with these prayerful people whose lives were utterly devoted to serving God, and through them, we genuinely encountered the deepest kind of Christian-Muslim dialogue and action. I often refer to genuine dialogue of this kind as "hearth" to "hearth" - because we each draw on the deeply formed traditions of our homelands - the places of safety and worship in which we were raised. We act as guests to those who invite us in, and in turn we invite them to our hearths - host becomes guest, and vice versa. We do not set out to persuade, or undermine or challenge one another but rather out of genuine curiosity, and a desire to know one another. We seek to understand one another's differences more profoundly. And in the process, we became more fully Christian, and they more fully Muslim. That has shaped my subsequent approach to both reconciliation and interfaith relations.

In fact we were drawn in to our first reconciliation process that year - between these desert nomads, and the Malian Government that wanted to settle them. The Government had good reason - it is hard to tax those who are constantly on the move. The nomadic lifestyle also threatened the settled farmers, whose hard grown crops are regularly enjoyed by the nomad's herds. However, nomadic people move for a reason! They live in the desert, and their livestock needs grass and water to survive. So they move from one fragile area to another, in doing so, allowing the fragility of that environment to recover and re-grow. A way of life that is deeply symbiotic with the constraints of a desert landscape. The nomads needed a voice that understood both Government and themselves. As anthropologists, John and I had shown our devotion to their way of life, and were able to advise them how best to present their case to the Government - in voices that would be heard, not trampled on. The result was indeed a reconciliation - the details of which I won't bore you with here. But suffice to say, it was based on acknowledgement from both sides, of the needs of the other.

In order to build genuine relationships across chasms of understanding, relationships that build bridges, rather than walls, I first turn back to the beginning of humanity. In Genesis

1:26, God says, "Let us make humans (that's Adam - or human) in our image, according to our likeness.....We go on to read, in, v27, that "God did indeed create man in His own image, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them. And God blessed them.....

We understand from this several things:

1. Human beings are God's unique creation - we are all children of the one God – even though we often reduce this familial language to fellow Christians (as do those in other religious traditions).
2. Humanity was created in diversity right from the start - male and female. And these first humans TOGETHER constitute the image of God, and are blessed by God. From the very beginning we are created to live a life of relationship – one born not of sameness, but of DIVERSITY. Note, here, that Unity is not the same as UNIFORMITY. We do not need to be alike, in order to be united. In fact, it is arguably through those least like ourselves, that we come to understand ourselves more fully. More on that in a moment!

According to Christian understanding, relationship is also part of the very nature of God. In God's own essence, Father, Son and Holy Spirit are in dynamic interrelationship, a unity of three in one.

Community is itself a divine gift, embracing diversity, which we are called to make real in our own human lives. Unity, not uniformity. This is a principle amply echoed in the Bible, but also in the Qur'an, the Hebrew Bible and other sacred texts.

We recognize, however, that though we are given this gift of community, we often act in ways that break or undermine it. We compete with one another, and de-face those we do not understand. We become separated not only from one another, but from God, and from his creation. We take the gift of diversity and turn it into a cause of disunity, antagonism and hatred—often because we see ourselves as somehow blessed, favoured, or just "right".

Look at the ease with which Adam accuses Eve at the start of humanity: When God questions his actions, he shifts the blame - "The woman you gave me for a companion, she gave me the fruit" (Genesis 3:12). Within just one generation, Cain eradicated his brother, and then challenged God with the question, "Am I my brother's keeper?" (Gen. 4:9).

The Bible is consistent in emphasising our responsibility not only to brothers and sisters, but also to the stranger. The Israelites are called to treat the outsider as part of their own community. The Old Testament, or Hebrew Scripture, celebrates the stories of Melchizedek, Jethro, Rahab and Ruth, and the Hittites offer hospitality to Abraham. Jesus tells us the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), and in the letter to the Hebrews, we read "Do not

neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing so, some have entertained angels without knowing it." This of course alludes to the visit of three strangers to Abraham and Sarah in the desert – who turn out to not to be strangers after all! Having lived with the Tuareg, I know first hand what it's like to see strangers in the desert - they are the only bearers of news from the outside world (we were there before the mobile phone!). And they are always welcome - although with some trepidation initially, in case they are foe, not friend. By eating with one's hosts, you make a statement of friendship - so the role of the first meal is crucial.

This story of Abraham and Sarah's welcome - found in Gen 18 - is a model of hospitality. When he notices the three strangers on the horizon in the heat of the day, he RUNS to greet them and welcome them in – despite having recently circumcised himself and his son. He orders the fattest calf to be slaughtered, Sarah bakes cakes, and together they prepare a feast for their guests. Abraham stands by to serve them. And what happens during this period of feasting and conversation? Abraham and Sarah discover they are not the hosts after all. It is their guests who came to deliver a gift – the message of a long awaited son. The hosts, are now guests – the tables are turned. And this is a model for our own hospitality to strangers today – again in a moment!

In the churches' long history with people of other faiths, it is clear we have acted both faithfully and unfaithfully. While Christians have suffered persecution at the hands of those of other faiths and from one another, Christians have also persecuted Jews, and crusaded against Muslims. We have enslaved others, and have participated in subordinating indigenous peoples and erasing their religious traditions. Many Christians have accepted or perpetuated the use of their religion to impose Western culture and economic domination. Anti-Semitic, anti-Muslim, racist and ethnic biases have flourished among us. We have much to repent of.

On a more positive note, Christians led the anti-slavery movement, and continue to work for human and communal rights of those on the margins of our societies. Christians speak and act against oppressive economic and social regimes, and have sacrificially resisted injustice. Christians work hard to transform destructive cycles of living that violate and undermine the humanity of others. And in many of these efforts, no doubt including you yourselves, Christians are working closely with people of other faiths.

So whilst I want to affirm our actions that contribute to the flourishing of ALL in our community, I also want to call out or transform those actions that deny the image of God in others. But recognising the image of God in others does not mean becoming the same as all others in our community. Nor even agreeing with their views or behaviour. Rather, it means we respect their dignity as fellow human beings. We learn how to disagree constructively, rather

than in ways that undermine those with whom we disagree. In other words, we try to disagree well.

I genuinely believe we can discover new and deeper understanding of ourselves and our faith through dialogue and action with people of other religions and none. Such interaction can be an opportunity for mutual witness, as long as it occurs in a context of mutual respect.

Jesus Christ and Reconciliation

Which brings us on to the theme of reconciliation – the Greek being *katallage* – meaning bringing together, or healing, what has been broken. We live in a world that seems increasingly intent on building walls rather than bridges. On division rather than unity. Yet, as Christians, we have hope of a time when all will be united once again. God promises a restoration of human community in Christ.

In 2 Corinthians 5:19 we read that in Christ God was reconciling the world to Himself. I believe that Jesus Christ makes real God's desire for a life of loving community a) with God, b) with the whole human family and c) with all creation. Incarnating both the fullness of God and the fullness of humanity, Jesus Christ initiates a new creation, a world unified in relationship as God originally intended. Through Jesus Christ, God offers reconciliation to all, and for all.

This highlights the cross-shaped reconciliation. It is only because we are reconciled with God, through Christ, that we are equipped to serve as reconcilers between people, and with all His creation, including the land. During his sermon on the mount, (eg Matthew 5:1 and 7:28) Jesus taught that any who offer our gift at God's altar, must first be reconciled to our human brothers and sisters (Matthew 5:24). And furthermore, Christ's reconciliation leads us to live in proper relationship to all of God's creation. Romans 8:21 says "creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the Children of God" (Romans 8:21).

We do not always agree, however, on how best to love our neighbours. For some of us it means a shared commitment to justice and mutual respect. And the love expressed through acts of service to those in need. The practice of Christian love, in this view, is the most powerful witness to the truth of the Gospel. Others, while not denying the witness of faithful action, believe that love also demands the verbal proclamation of the Gospel and an open invitation to all people to be reconciled to God in Christ.

When Jesus was asked by a Jewish lawyer, "What shall I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus points to his own Jewish tradition, asking, "What is written in the Law? How do YOU read it?"

The man, an expert in the law of course, replies, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself" (Luke 10:25-27). Jesus responds, "You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live". And in answer to the question of who is his neighbour, Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan, pointing clearly to neighbour as the one unloveable, the stranger, the enemy even. He could not be clearer in his message. We are called to demonstrate, in acts of service, the love of God for ALL, not just our own.

As the church, the Body of Christ, we are a sign of the restored community God promises at the end of time. At least that is the hope - too often outsiders see us as a divided people who cannot agree. For many years I have run a Cambridge Summer School for faith leaders from conflict zones. Our friends from Oman, who work in the Govt Ministry of Religious Affairs, ask every year why the churches are always splitting in their country. They fall out, and then ask for extra visas for the new leader of the breakaway congregation. What kind of message does this give about the body of Christ? Certainly not one of unity! Reconciliation is needed within our own community just as much, if not more so, than with those outside the church.

But when all around us we see families and communities broken by division, we might well lose hope that there is anything we can do to make a difference. I take encouragement that it is God who reconciles, not we ourselves. We are his hands and feet, his ambassadors, or ministers of reconciliation. The ways in which we witness and act to bring about reconciliation in our torn world may not be straightforward. We can, however, pray for the inspiration of the Holy Spirit that through our life with every neighbour, and every stranger, of every religion, race, language, and class, we will be instruments of God in building that time when "steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other" (Psalm 85:10).

What are some of the practical marks of this encounter?

1. All relationships begin with encounter. The model for our meeting others is the way in which Jesus' met with those within and beyond his own tradition. It can be deeply painful and difficult to engage with those whose people have caused our own community pain and suffering. But we are called to build bridges of understanding and cooperation, not more walls.
2. Relationship involves risk. Our welcome to others may not be met with reciprocal acts of kindness. When we encounter those with wildly different ideologies or behaviour to ourselves, we may have to hold back the desire to change them first. But the rewards of

their “otherness” can be untold insights in to, and delight in, our own identity.

Prompted by their questions, we may turn back to Scripture, and be more attentive to the Holy Spirit in ways that deepen our own understanding. Our knowledge and love of God can be deeply enriched by the presence and questions of those unlike ourselves.

3. Relationship respects the other's identity. This starts with DEEP LISTENING! Easier for some of us than others! We need to be willing to meet others as they are, in their particular hopes, ideas, struggles and joys, all of which are articulated through their own traditions, practices and world-views. We can be open to the possibility of encountering the image of God in the particularity of another person's life. Not in looking for a mirror image of ourselves.
4. Relationship is based on integrity. If we meet others as they are, then we must accept their right to define their own identity. And in turn, we should remain faithful to who we are, as Christians (and multiple other identities). We need not ask others to betray their religious commitments, nor should we betray our commitment to the gospel of Jesus Christ.
5. Relationship is rooted in humility, and mutual accountability. We approach others in humility, not arrogance. But we can also challenge each other's unjust behavior. This can only be done from an attitude of mutual respect - one that ultimately serves the wellbeing of our shared community, not of ourselves alone.
6. Relationship offers an opportunity to serve. Jesus comes among us as a servant. We too are given the opportunity to serve others, in response to God's love for us. In so doing, we join with those of other religious traditions to serve the whole of God's creation. Our Jewish friends have a notion of tikkun olam – healing the world, by responding to the realities of a world in need. Our joining with others, shoulder to shoulder, in healing community is, I believe, at the heart of reconciliation.

Prophet Amos challenges us: "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream" (Amos 5:23-24). Our actions must be based on genuine respect for all men and women. In James 3:16-17 we read "The wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy" And beyond respect, we are called to love all people so that, by the working of the Holy Spirit, we may "above all, clothe [our]selves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony" (Colossians 3:14).