

**Sermon to be preached at Communion for Guildford at St Mary's
on Sunday 18 August 2019 at 10.30 am**

Genesis 21 v.8-19

Luke 12 v.49-56

May I speak in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

'I came to bring fire to the earth!' So, that's the end of Mr Nice Guy. This is not going to be easy. Jesus challenges us 'Why do you not know how to interpret the present time?' Perhaps the crowds *did* know how to interpret the present time, in one sense. They understood the politics of the day, the risky rising nationalism opposing Imperial Rome. The same as we understand, sort of, the politics of our day, especially the risky rising nationalism and racism. What neither generation is devoting much time and energy to, is listening to Christ's message of the coming of the Kingdom and his gift of personal salvation.

Jesus also says he has come to bring division. Why? This has overtones of the day of judgement, when the righteous are separated from the wicked, but then Jesus domesticates the scene and gives us family disputes. Now for centuries, family disputes are used as metaphors for the division of peoples. One of the most famous is when Abraham, conceding to Sarah's demands, expels Hagar and her son Ishmael. But God intervenes and saves them, and out of this family division promises to make a great people from the descendants of Ishmael.

Is Christ similarly intending to create good out of conflict, through his sacrificial death and resurrection, his 'baptism with which to be baptised'?

But, even so, would it not be right, now, for us, if we were to conciliate conflict, and seek to understand the 'other'?

How *do* we understand another world? Another world of faith, another world of language, another world of ethnicity and culture?

As an example, the world of Ishmael's descendants, the world of Islam, has all these differences.

Not having the time and the skill to embark upon an academic study, most of us will never make that journey of exploration and understanding unless and until we actually meet Muslims. And at the risk of stating the blindingly obvious, Muslims don't stand much of a chance of understanding the majority culture of the United Kingdom except through personal contact.

Do we have the will and the desire to make such a pilgrimage of trust?

There are some aspects of our life that make it difficult. Guildford, like many English towns, does not have a significantly large Muslim community. But if we've ever lived in Woking or London, or if we go to work in London then opportunities to mingle with Muslims abound. Every one of the London villages has its corner shop, defying the power of the supermarkets by being there, present in the community, open all hours, staffed by a workaholic Muslim family serving the community. The London office is a world-wide community where argument and competition and cooperation will all flourish, and where differences of faith and ethnicity and culture are in the main set aside, even forgotten. Which is a pity, because those differences are potentially enriching and fascinating.

You need to form friendships before you can embark upon a journey of exploration with men and women of a different culture, ethnicity, faith. You need the trust born of friendship to step upon the bridge that helps us cross the chasm of unknowing. And sometimes that happens and another world is open to you and you are quietly invited in.

When that happens you can be put to shame. Let me tell you about my aunt Elsie. My aunt Elsie was born in Jamaica Road in Bermondsey, but at the age of two she moved with her parents and her baby sister Florence to the then leafy suburb of Balham on the southern outskirts of London. I am talking of 1902 when Balham was the leafy edge of London.

Over the next ninety years Balham and the street where she lived became more diverse. London cockneys were joined by Catholic Irish and Presbyterian Scots, then refugees from invaded Poland, both Jewish and Roman Catholic, Afro-Caribbean's from the West Indies who were enthusiastically devout Pentecostal Christians, sombre Nigerians with very strict family structures based on bible teaching, and finally Muslim families emigrating from Pakistan.

Mr and Mrs Quereshi, and their three children and Mr Quereshi's mother came to live in the house next to my aunts. The two families got on well, and then at the age of ninety my aunt Florence died, leaving my aunt Elsie alone in the house. For the next three years Mrs Quereshi kept an eye on Aunt Elsie. Their young son Farouk for a long time went in every night to make her Ovaltine and fill her hot water bottle. But none of the Quereshi family could understand why Elsie's family had not taken her to live with them. They thought we were cold and uncharitable and lacking in respect and love for the elderly. All of which was against the tenets of their faith and their culture. Trust was further weakened by the attitude of society in general when young Farouk was advised by his friends not to go into Elsie's home in the evening because if anything bad happened to her he would be blamed by her Christian family because he was a Muslim. All of this was a lost opportunity, for we did love and care for Aunt Elsie, we did respect and value the friendship of the Quereshi family, and they did love and care for Elsie, and sincerely mourned her passing. Our faiths were not at variance in this matter, we could have built a stronger bridge of trust, but we failed, both the Christian and the Muslim families failed. A difference in culture was seen as a difference in faith, and that inhibited trust.

Now of course there are differences in faith which are harder to overcome. The three Abrahamic faiths all regard themselves as believing in one God, but Islam regards the Christian belief in a Trinitarian God as a scandal, an affront to the one true God. For how can God be three persons in one Godhead? Clearly a blasphemous nonsense.

Whilst Christians for their part are suspicious at the elevation of the prophet Mohammed to such close intimacy with God, and believe that Muslims and Jews are wilfully blind to the revelation of God in the incarnation of Jesus. We fear that Muslims and Jews have turned away from the fullness of God, and are starving themselves of his saving grace through Christ. We also distrust their conservative unreformed fundamentalism, even more than we distrust conservative Christian fundamentalism emanating from the United States.

Now I know that some Christians believe that we should confront these divisions head on, but in this I think we should follow the precepts of St Francis. Francis instructed his monks not to preach until they had demonstrated the gospel of love, peace and reconciliation for a long time, 'Wherever you go,' Saint Francis said, 'share the gospel, sometimes with words.'

At the present time, British society is particularly challenged in sharing the gospel of peace when there are sections of the Muslim world that are intent on attacking if not destroying the West. I would like to make two responses to this problem. First, in my lifetime as a Londoner I have suffered the terror of Palestinian bombs, Roman Catholic Christian IRA bombs, and British Muslim bombs. They have a terrible equality. And with anger and shame I recall the bombs that we rained down on Muslim Baghdad.

My second response is to urge that we rebuild our sense of a cohesive community in our country as a bulwark against this evil of violence. And I don't mean a coherence of the Britain of 1940. I mean a sense of community of a Britain filled with its present peoples, with all their diversity of faith, culture and ethnicity. This includes reaching out to the neighbouring Muslim peoples. There is much we have in common in our faith, and there is even more that is different but which we can admire and respect as the way millions of people approach God. As we engage with the Muslims of Britain then the greater the likelihood will be of strengthening the Muslim community's sense of acceptance and common ownership of a British identity.

Indeed, we as Christians and Muslims can surely find a common cause as we address the mainstream secular culture and seek to preserve and strengthen the place of faith in God in our national and community life.

Am I claiming too much of a brotherhood with Islam? I think not, for Isaac, the patriarch of Judaism and Christianity, and Ishmael, the patriarch of Islam, were brothers, sons of Abraham. They both buried Abraham, even though they had been separated as children. Though Sarah caused Abraham to cast out Hagar and her son Ishmael into the wilderness, God heard the voice of the boy, and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, 'do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him.' Then God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water. She went, and filled the skin with water, and gave the boy a drink.'

The question we need ponder is 'Where God ordains, who are we to turn wilfully away?'

Amen.