

Jewish-Muslim Social Experiment

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 24 April 2016

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Easter 5C

**Blessing by The Buddha; The Rainbow Seder by Rabbi Arthur Waskow;
Sayings of the Prophet Muhammad; Acts 11: 1-18** (See pages 4-5)

Hear the You Tube version as you read – follow the link on the Sunday Reflections page at <http://www.pittstreetuniting.org.au/>

The reflection was preceded by a short video clip – see You Tube as above

The impetus to make others comply with our own understandings of faith is alive and well in our time as much as it was in Peter's. We all know horrific stories of forced conversions.

Europeans colonisers converted people with swords and then with guns. Today ISIS threatens beheading of Christians and other religious minorities who will not adopt their twisted version of Islam.

Resistance to religious diversity continues in less violent forms in Australia today. I recently heard a story about a woman who joined a mainstream church in Sydney. She contributed to the music and became deeply involved the life of the congregation.

During this time, she became friends with a Muslim woman whom she met through her child's school.

The minister of her church became aware of the friendship and asked to meet with her. He wanted to know what they talked about, when they hung out together. She replied that they talked about their children, their family, their work – and how they both cared about being a part of a vibrant and diverse community.

The minister asked the woman if she had shared her Christian faith or invited her friend to church. She had not, explaining the blindingly obvious, that her friend was Muslim and attended the Mosque.

The minister then presented her with a choice, either actively seek to bring her friend into the Christian church or give up the friendship. And the consequence of not obeying this edict would be loss of her leadership role in music in the congregation. Unsurprisingly, she no longer attends church.

The minister valued purity over compassion. So apparently did the Jewish Christians in the early church.

Peter, however, allowed his encounter with the sacred to totally revolutionise his world view. Like any Jewish person of his time, Peter's whole identity was invested in his Jewishness, which was all about separation and distinction from every other culture and community.

Yet, his experience of Jesus had been so life changing that he allowed it to change his sense of identity and his world-view, and so to change the early Christian movement, so that compassion, connection and relation trumped purity.

The effect of the purity system was to create a world with sharp social boundaries: between pure and impure, righteous and sinner, whole and not whole, male and female, rich and poor, Jew and Gentile.

In the teaching and actions of Jesus, though, we see an alternative social vision: a community shaped not by the ethos and politics of purity, but by the ethos and politics of compassion.

According to Jesus, compassion, not holiness, is the dominant quality of God, and so this must be the ethos of the community that mirrors God.

The same struggle between purity and compassion goes on in the church today. I can only think that the minister in that story I told held the belief that religious difference is impure, and that to encounter difference risks people being tainted and made less pure.

And so unless the other can be made to conform, distance must be maintained. Holiness and purity are held to mark the Christian way of life, and sharp social boundaries are drawn between the righteous and the sinner.

It is a sad irony that Christians who hold this view end up emphasizing parts of Scripture that Jesus himself rejected.

So, what led Jesus, and later Peter, to understand God as compassionate? The most persuasive answer, I believe, points to their mystical experiences of God – the sacred. **There is an intrinsic connection between the boundary-shattering experience of Spirit and the boundary-shattering ethos of compassion.**

For Jesus this led to his reputation of sharing meals with unacceptable table companions and therefore making himself unclean.

In the reading from Acts, Peter is given a dream by God in which all sorts of animals are observed on a giant sheet, falling out of the sky. These are animals that would have been unclean for him to eat in Judaism.

So, when a voice loudly demands, "*Get up, Peter! Kill and eat,*" Peter is plainly shocked and piously proclaims something along the lines of: "*You have got to be kidding, God! I would never eat anything unclean.*" Peter gave the answer that his tradition called him to give.

But the voice challenged him again and again. "*Things that God has cleansed, stop making common!*" In effect, the voice tells Peter: *how dare you take a thing God has created and turn it into something that you refuse to touch or eat or love?*

After the vision, Peter is summoned from Joppa to Caesarea to visit Cornelius. Here Peter wraps up his defence of the inclusion of the Gentiles in the faith community. If God has given the Gentiles the same gift of the Holy Spirit as was given to the Jewish believers, who was Peter to limit God?

This is the issue of Acts 11: How can meals be holy, yet be shared with people we have been taught are unclean? And the answer is clear: The people you have thought to be unclean are not unclean. It's as simple as that. So God says.

Why can the church today not hear this amazing story? Why does it not inform our relationships with other faiths, with Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, with all the other people who are not like us?

As a gay Christian this story, like no other, has given me strength to stay in the church, to believe that being different is no barrier to the welcome and hospitality of God. But it also extends and pushes me to examine the boundaries that I put in place for others, by acts of commission or omission.

Today's reading tells us that Christian life shaped by Jesus has two focal points: a relationship to the Spirit of God, and an embodiment of personal and political compassion in everyday life.

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In September last year, Australia agreed to take 12,000 additional refugees in response to the ongoing crisis in Syria, but as of March, just 26 Syrian refugees arrived in Australia.

In the six months, since Australia agreed to take the refugees, Canada has accepted more than 28,000, just over 26,000 of whom have already been settled in Canada.

Fear of religious difference is clearly one of the major reasons that Australia's security checks of people living in hellish conditions, who have escaped indescribable devastation of their cities and towns, is taking so long.

I think about those two guys in the rather dorky video clip and I ask myself what I am doing to encourage acceptance of religious diversity in Sydney.

So today, a little thing. In our readings we heard not just from our own tradition in the readings, but also from the wisdom of Buddhists, Jews and Muslims. (See next page)

The Muslim mystic Rumi wrote in the 13th century: "*Christian, Jew, Muslim, shaman, Zoroastrian, stone, ground, mountain, river, each has a secret way of being with the mystery, unique and not to be judged.*"

Thanks be to God who only desires that we break bread together.

Thanks be to God who loves us all.

BUDDHISM *"May every creature abound."* **The Buddha – "Life Prayers"**

May every creature abound in well-being and peace.
May every living being, weak or strong, the long and the small
The short and the medium-sized, the mean and the great.
May every living being, seen or unseen, those dwelling far off,
Those nearby, those already born, those waiting to be born,
May all attain inward peace.
Let no one deceive another,
Let no one despise another in any situation,
Let no one, from antipathy or hatred, wish evil to anyone at all.
Just as a mother, with her own life, protects her only son from hurt,
So within yourself foster a limitless concern for every living creature.
Display a heart of boundless love for all the world, in all its height and depth and broad extent,
Love unrestrained, without hate or enmity.
Then as you stand or walk, sit or lie, until overcome by drowsiness,
Devote your mind entirely to this,
it is known as living here life divine.

PROGRESSIVE JUDAISM *"In the Beginning."* **Rabbi Arthur Waskow: "The Rainbow Seder"**

In the beginning, darkness covered the face of the deep. Then the rushing breath of God hovered over the waters.
Let us breathe together. Let us catch our breaths from slavery, from anxiety, and from the need to do, to make.
Let us be conscious of the Breath of Life, the One who breathes us.

God breathed, "Be Light!" And Light came into being.

We are the generation
That stands between the fires.
Behind us is the flame and smoke
That rose from Auschwitz and from Hiroshima.
Before us is the nightmare of a Flood of Fire:
The scorching of our planet from a flood of greenhouse gases,
Or the blazing of our cities in thermonuclear fires.

It is our task to make from fire
Not an all-consuming blaze
But the light in which we see each other;
Each of us different,
All of us made in the image of God.
We light this fire to see more clearly
That the earth, the human race,
are not for burning.
We light this fire to see more clearly
The rainbow in our many-colored faces.
Blessed are you, Yahweh our God, Breathing Spirit of the Universe, who gives us light that we may become a light
for peace and freedom for all peoples.

ISLAM *"Sayings"* **From the Prophet Muhammad**

You will not enter paradise until you believe,
and you will not believe until you love one another.
Let me guide you to something in the doing of which you will love one another.

Power consists not in being able to strike another,
but in being able to control oneself when anger arises.

The three best things:
to be humble amidst the vicissitudes of fortune;
to pardon when powerful;
and to be generous with no strings attached.

Whoever does not express gratitude to people will never be grateful to God.

Greet those whom you know and those whom you don't know.

Respect the guest and do not inconvenience your neighbors.

God is gentle and loves gentleness.

What actions are most excellent?
To gladden the heart of a human being,
to feed the hungry, to help the afflicted,
to lighten the sorrow of the sorrowful,
and to remove the wrongs of the injured.

CHRISTIAN Acts 11:1-18

Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the Jewish believers criticized him, saying, "Why did you go to the Gentiles and eat with them?"

Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying,

"I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. There was something like a large sheet coming down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners; and it came close to me.

As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air.

I also heard a voice saying to me, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.'

But I replied, 'By no means, O God; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.'

But a second time the voice answered from heaven, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.'

This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven.

At that very moment three couriers, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were.

The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us. These six believers also accompanied me, and we entered Cornelius' house.

He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, 'Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.'

And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning.

And I remembered what Christ had said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.'

If then God gave them the same gift that was given to us when we believed in our Saviour Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?"

When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, "Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life."