



Fifth Sunday of Easter  
Sunday 22 May 2011

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## The way to the Father

A sermon by Revd Richard Carter

### Readings: Acts 7.55-end; John 14.1-14

The words at the centre of our Gospel today are difficult ones; words which we struggle to interpret if we are to remain faithful to a broad inter-faith inclusiveness. The words are these: “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” These words seem clear and unequivocal: belief in Jesus Christ is the only way to God. Yet only a few lines before, Jesus has expressed a vision of breadth and welcome. “In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?”

So what is this Gospel passage saying? Is Jesus Christ the only way to the Father and if so what about our brothers and sisters from other faiths: Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists and many more people of different faiths or none, who may outshine us in holiness, moral discipline and charity?

“No one comes to the Father except through me.” Perhaps Christ in these words is not limiting the human family but broadening it, extending the love of God from an exclusive love for a chosen people to a love which embraces all – is witnessed in all. I remember in my own life arriving in Indonesia, the third largest Muslim country in the world. I rented a small house in the village while still completing my language course at the University in Bahasa, Indonesia. The house was all I needed, a few rooms lit by oil lamps at night, with an outside well and toilet, small garden with a bridge. The old Ibu who owned the house said it would cost me about £25 a month. But that I should arrange for the Imam and invite all the village to come for a Salamatan, the Islamic prayers of welcome, and she would prepare parcels of food for everyone. This would cost me about £100. All my western friends on the language course were highly sceptical. “You don’t need to pay £100 for a Salamatan, she’s ripping you off. You’re not a Muslim anyway. That’s four months rent!” But I liked the Ibu, instinctively trusted her, and asked her to go ahead and arrange the Salamatan for me.

It was the best thing I could have done. All the village came, sat around my house, formally welcomed me and then read from the Koran, chanted prayers driving away the evil spirits, and when they left, each took a beautifully prepared parcel of food wrapped in banana leaves, which the Ibu had prepared and I had paid for. The village people told me that I was “halus” which meant polite, respectful, dignified. It was because I had honoured their faith and culture. It was from these village people that my Indonesian increased leaps and bounds and I began to discover the life and beauty, food, taboos, dangers and real joys of this rich culture and was given a home in the community. Not long after a student at the university asked me if he could move in. His mother had sold her wedding ring to pay his student fees and he had no money at all. “How are you going to manage?” I asked him. “Allah will provide,” he told me. A few months later I said to him “but it is not Allah who is providing, it is me!” “Yes, and it is Allah who provides for you,” he replied, “and when you have nothing Allah will still provide and I will look after you.” He was right of course. Thirty years later we are still like brothers to each other. His son Ken Matahari e-mailed me last Friday. He has trained in human rights law and works for Amnesty International. “My father is always talking about you. I want to visit the church where Amnesty International began its vision.” How brilliant it is that Allah has provided – life links up beyond all expectation from a village in Yogyakarta to Trafalgar Square, from shared rice wrapped in a banana leaf to radical compassion for victims of injustice. I tell you this because it is so evident to me that when Jesus said “I am the way the truth and the life,” he was not laying down rules and regulations to membership of an exclusive

sect which if you did not belong to you would burn. No, quite the opposite, he was incarnating the WAY, THE TRUTH and THE LIFE. And that way, that truth and life is reciprocated. It is given and received. It is the way of our true deepest humanity. It is the way of openness and respect, of reaching out and liberating the humanity in one another. It is letting our world be enlarged by the presence and goodness of God among us.

I have just been listening to the Muslim Shehrbano Taseer on the radio this morning, whose father Salmaan Taseer was the Governor of Punjab in Pakistan and was assassinated for speaking out so incredibly bravely against the blasphemy laws which condemned a Christian woman and many others to death. In his daughter you witness the same wisdom and courage, confronting deception and the power of prejudice with such courage, goodness and dignity – a way, a truth, a life beyond cycles of violence and hatred.

As a Christian I believe that Christ reveals the fullness of God the Father and opens up for us the nature of God's unconditional love, and I would not want to be the follower of another faith because in Christ I realise the breadth, and depth of the way, the truth, and the life which includes us all. The divine image can be both revealed and also put to death in all humanity. The best way of learning how to honour the faith of others more is to value our own Christian faith more. John's Gospel calls us deeper into that mystery. Jesus said, "If you know me, you will know my father also." Philip said to him, "Lord show us the father and we shall be satisfied." Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you all this time Philip and still you do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father."

One book I have always carried with me wherever I have gone is Carlo Carretto's *Letters from the Desert*. Carretto was a little Brother of Jesus, following in the way of the founder of the community Charles de Foucauld, and living in Algeria. Carretto's stories return to my mind like constant parables. I have come to realise that here is a man who has died to the power of the world and recognises in all its naked simplicity the meaning of the love of God. I want to read you a passage from this book, entitled 'Sectarianism'.

'This evening Abdaraman is accompanying me to the hermitage as I return for prayer. Abdaraman is a Moslem boy of perhaps eight years old. The sun has set and the air has freshened. It's good to walk.

This evening he is serious and answers my questions with difficulty and I understand he has something important to say to me.

"What's the matter Abdaraman?"

Silence.

"Are you hungry?"

Silence.

"Did your Daddy spank you?"

Silence.

"Has your bird escaped from its cage?"

Silence.

"Speak to me Abdaraman I am your friend."

Abdaraman bursts into tears. Tears stream down his face and then down his chest and abdomen. Now it's my turn to be silent. I must await the stilling of the storm.

"Well then Abdaraman, what's making you cry?"

"Brother Charles I am crying because you don't become a Moslem."

"Oh," I exclaim. "Why should I become a Moslem Abdaraman? I am a Christian and believe in Jesus. I believe in the God who created heaven and earth just as you do and our prayers go to the same heaven, because there is only one God. It is the same God who created us, who feeds us and loves us. Don't cry anymore."

“No! no!” Abdaraman cries, “if you don’t become a Moslem you’ll go to hell like all Christians.”

“Oh what a thought Abdaraman! Who told you I would go to hell?”

“A man in the village told me all Christians go to hell. And I don’t want you to go to hell.”

I tell him, “No, Abdaraman, God is good and will save both of us. He will save your father too and we shall all go to heaven. Don’t believe that just because I am a Christian I will go to hell, as I don’t believe just because you are a Moslem you will go to hell. God is so good! Cheer up! Go home and say your prayers while I say mine. And before you finish, say this to God “Lord let all people be saved.” And, sadly, I entered the hermitage, this little mud building built by Charles de Foucauld who wanted to be a little brother to all people but was murdered through ignorance and fanaticism. This evening it is difficult to pray. Poor Abdaraman. You too are a victim of fanaticism, the stormy zeal of religious people, the so-called people of God who would send half the human race to hell, just because they are not one of us. How can the thread of love which links me to my brother be broken by an alleged purity of faith, or that religion, instead of being the bridge of union, should become the trench of death, or at least of unconfessed hate? We are best off without it. Best to fumble around in the dark rather than to possess light like that.

‘And a scene from my childhood arose again in my mind,’ Carretto continues. ‘I was eight years old then, the same age as Abdaraman. I lived in a village in the shade of an ancient Christian church tower. The townspeople were not very religious but were excessively narrow minded in their purity of faith. One day a man came to sell Bibles. He was not a Catholic, I was told. An unusual commotion seized the village and the excitement quickly reached the children – the hysterical shouting of one woman from a window. “We don’t need your religion, go away!”

A woman threw one of the Bibles he had given her at him. He bent down to pick it up. A stone from a boy hit him in the back and he fell, he got up and scurried away, quickening his pace. The boys followed behind him carrying stones. That evening our parish priest praised us for defending the parish. At a distance of forty years I remember this unconfessed sin, it was I who threw that stone...’

Jesus said “I am the way the truth and the life. No one comes to the father except through me.” This is not territory, a prejudice or even a doctrine to defend. It is a life to live in communion with one another. It is the life of truth. It is the courage to confront even our own most deeply held prejudices. The Church which gathers for this communion today in buildings throughout the country, and indeed the world, was never meant to be a small enclave where we share in safety with like-minded people. It was called to be the Church which tried to follow the way, the truth and the life. Sent out into every town and place and to live out God’s radical justice, love and compassion among others – a love both given and received. And to do this not as judges or those who condemn, but as witnesses of the Word made flesh. To incarnate Christ’s love and life, and to discover the humanity of Christ in one another, even those who call their God by a different name or give God no name at all.