

**Sermon preached by the Very Rev Finlay Macdonald
St Andrew's Jerusalem - 13 July 2008
Genesis 25: 19-34; Matthew 13: 1-9, 18-23**

It is a great privilege to preach in this beautiful and significant church this morning. I have worshipped here on two previous occasions while on Christian pilgrimage to the Holy Land. This time I am part of a different kind of pilgrimage - what we are calling an interfaith pilgrimage - though I recently found myself having a conversation as to whether multi-faith might be a more appropriate title. My own preference is for interfaith because it suggests more than just a group of people from different religions doing the same things at the same time. Certainly for me the experience of the past week has been more than that - connections have been made, relationships, indeed friendships have been formed. We have not just been many; we have been together.

Our bible readings this morning seemed particularly apt.

The lectionary over these weeks offers a series of readings from the Book of Genesis - stories extending over four generations of the patriarchs - Abraham, whose tomb at Hebron we visited on Tuesday, Isaac, Jacob and the children of Jacob - and if we go back to Abraham then immediately we find Jews, Muslims and Christians on common ground, for do we not talk of these faiths as the Abrahamic faiths? The Baha'i religion also makes connections with Abraham through his wife Ketura.

Three weeks ago I worshipped, as is my practice when I do not have Sunday commitments, in St Giles' Cathedral in Edinburgh where I heard read the moving story from earlier in Genesis - the story of the rejection of Hagar and Ishmael, following the birth of Isaac to Sarah. The surrogate slave girl and her son are sent away, though not without blessing and promise; and in this ancient story people have seen the beginnings of those two races of Jew and Arab -two faiths Judaism and Islam - both descended from Abraham.

In today's reading we heard of the birth of twin boys to Rebekah, Isaac's wife, the first born called Esau, the second born Jacob; but again within the story we see family tensions - Esau is favoured by his father; Jacob by his mother. In the traditional way the line of descent and blessing - the birthright - would have come down through the first born. In this case there wasn't much in it as the second twin came out holding on to his brother's heel. However, the tradition did not apply, Esau, the first born twin, selling his birthright for a bowl of stew. So the Jews trace the line back to Isaac and Abraham though Jacob and Esau is regarded as the forbear of the Edomites.

These ancient stories, set in this part of the world, go back some 3000 and more years from the present day and with the passing generations down the centuries it seems the tensions between the original siblings have multiplied and led to suspicion, mistrust and outright conflict. And we, as people of faith, are challenged by the question - is this really the legacy of faith for our world? Writing about our pilgrimage for a Scottish newspaper before our departure I confessed that I found it deeply ironic that a land called "holy" could be at the centre of so much conflict - and the reality is also that conflicts here have knock-on effects on communities around the world - synagogues, mosques, churches vandalised, individuals vilified and threatened because of their dress, their culture, their beliefs. Is this the legacy of faith to our world?

Of course conflict is not only between different faith and cultures - it also exists within them. In Scotland we have a depressing history of sectarian conflict within Christianity. A couple of years ago it was a big news story when the catholic cardinal and the Church of Scotland moderator went together to watch Rangers play Celtic. What does it say about what we have done to religion that that should be such a big deal? And while it is not for me to elaborate, the fact is that similar tensions exist between different factions within other faith communities.

It is against this background which often associates - sadly all too accurately - religion and conflict, that we decided to make our pilgrimage - to come to Jerusalem, to come to Israel and Palestine, to visit sites holy to three ancient faiths - and to one newer faith - the Baha'i religion with its lovely shrine in Haifa which we visited on Wednesday.. But our pilgrimage is not just a journey to holy places - still less a journey to the past - it is, rather, a journey into ourselves, a journey of self discovery in the company of other people of faith, a journey of discovering something of the values and beliefs of those who do not share our faith but undeniably share our humanity. The fact that such a diverse group representing seven faith traditions can live peacefully and enjoyably together for a week is surely a tiny microcosm of hope for our world.

Just as the Genesis reading seemed very apt for today, so also does the Gospel lesson from St Matthew - the parable of the sower. One of the best known of the parables of Jesus, it is interpreted as an explanation of how the people of his day reacted in different ways to his teaching. The farmer scatters the seed, but it doesn't all take root and grow; so it was with the teaching of Jesus and still today preachers console themselves with this parable when the response to their preaching is less than universal rapture or any discernible difference to the lives of those who hear.

I see what our pilgrim group has been trying to do as rather like the sower sowing the seed. Just as the pilgrimage has been about more than a journey to holy places, so it

has been about more than spending a week together. There is a sense in which the work begins when we return to Scotland tomorrow. I already have invitations to speak and write about this experience and so will others - if not I am sure they will come, for this has been an experience to share within our faith communities as we strive towards that vision Jesus often described as the Kingdom of God, a concept we understand not so much as a place, but as a state of affairs where God's will is done on earth, as in heaven and all God's people come to love their neighbours as themselves. And remember in Jesus' famous parable, the true neighbour was a Samaritan - someone from a different tribe and culture.

Let me just share two delightful moments from this amazing week: Last Tuesday leaders from different faith communities met with us at St Andrews. The evening finished with Rabbi Rubin, one of our group, teaching a song. Across from me stood the Armenian Archbishop and the Depute Mufti of Jerusalem, literally singing from the same song sheet and helping each other follow the English words. The other moment was when the Venerable Rewatha, whose Buddhist mediation Centre is in the Glasgow suburb of Maryhill, showed me the postcard he had bought to send to the congregation of Maryhill Parish Church. Good neighbours indeed!

There is no doubt that interfaith relations pose a challenge to the Church and there are those who are suspicious and fear that basic beliefs are being compromised by even giving credence to other beliefs. In reflecting on that challenge I have found very helpful something which has become known as the San Antonio declaration, taking its name from a World Council of Churches conference held there some years ago. The declaration affirms that, as Christians we can point to no other salvation than Jesus Christ; at the same time we cannot set limits to the saving power of God. And what that suggests to me is that it is when we seek to be most true to our own beliefs that we find the confidence to engage with people of different faiths, treating them with respect and recognising what Jonathan Sacks famously describes as the dignity of difference.

Interfaith is not about creating a wishy-washy, syncretistic mish-mash to which we can all sign up. Rather, it is about affirming our own beliefs, but doing so with grace and in love; respecting the beliefs of others and seeing difference, not as threat, but as source of enrichment.

We began some 3000 years ago with tales of sibling rivalry and family conflict, sadly still realities of today's world though now with the capacity to wreak untold destruction on the world itself. How vital it is then, against such a scenario, that we continue to sow the seeds of humanity, hope and peace and affirm our common heritage as children of God.