



Abraham our Father in Faith **Interfaith Event**

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Tuesday, 13 September 2016

I recently read an article about an Episcopalian bishop from the United States who was working with Pope Francis to try and bring people of different Christian denominations, especially Catholics, Episcopalians and Evangelicals, closer together. Tragically, this priest was recently killed in a motor bike accident.

The purpose of the article was really to reflect on the question of who would now carry on this work and whether or not it would continue with the same enthusiasm and openness which had been this priest's characteristic style.

The comment which really struck me was one which suggested that, rather than work towards unity among the various Christian groups, this priest decided to live and act as if that unity were already a reality. As I read further, I came to understand that what the priest had really decided to do was to celebrate all that the various denominations had in common and, without ignoring or minimising the differences, try to understand them from within the context of the fraternity which comes from, in this case, their belief in Jesus. This was and remains a paradigm shift. Rather than seeing each other as competitors, or rivals, or even antagonists, this priest wanted Christians first and foremost to see themselves as children of the one God, brothers and sisters in their humanity and in their Christian faith, and therefore as people who are mutually responsible for each other.

I don't think it is a great leap for us today to at least wonder if we can apply something of the same approach to all those who belong to what are often called the three great monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Our differences in theology, in spirituality and in culture are very real. It would be foolish of us to pretend otherwise and would I think be a betrayal of things we hold very precious. But notwithstanding those differences, if our first thought and the basis of our actions when we think of those who belong to one of the other monotheistic faiths is, they are my brothers and sisters, children of the one God in whom we all believe, then the attitude of mind which we bring to our encounters with each other changes. And if this changes, then there will be a hope for the world which at present it can be hard to see.

I do want to stress that I am not naively pretending or suggesting that our differences do not matter. Faith is too important in our lives to abandon it or diminish it so easily. We all have a duty to know deeply, from the inside, our own tradition so that we can enter into respectful and informed and truly human dialogue with each other. And as much as we can we must seek to know and understand, albeit from the outside, the other traditions, coming in this way to understand better why we see things so differently but also why those differences do not negate the many fundamental things we share in common.



This is true I think with the most basic question of all: the question of God. We all believe in one God, not many. This is so fundamental and I suspect that we do not reflect on how deeply this belief unites us all together. However, even with this most basic of beliefs we understand what we might call the nature, or the essence of God, very differently. This is particularly true of the Christian understand of God as a Trinity of love, a belief which is inseparably tied to the Christian belief in the divinity of Jesus. Today is not the day for examining this complex issue although we all know how much this qualifies the idea that Jews, Christians and Muslims all believe in only one God. However on the basis of the approach adopted by the Episcopalian Bishop Tony Palmer whom I mentioned earlier, while we can never ignore these challenges, we might choose to focus on a truly remarkable dimension of our faith in one God which we all share. I am speaking of God's mercy.

I hope I am not going to betray my ignorance if I make the following three very short statements:

Judaism will speak of God as "merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation" (Ps 86:5).

Christianity will see in Jesus the embodiment of God's mercy. Pope Francis expresses this when he describes Jesus as "the face of the Father's mercy" and when he says "the name of God is mercy".

Islam will pray to God, to Allah, as the All-merciful, all-compassionate One.

None of this is trivial, none of it is peripheral to our three faiths, and it is an understanding of the one God which we not only share but which can both unite us as brothers and sisters of this one God and challenge us as to how we, in serving this one God, reflect the divine mercy in our world. What does it say to all of us that we all understand ourselves and each other to be children of the merciful, steadfast, compassionate and forgiving God?

This conviction of God as all merciful points directly to another fundamental thing we hold in common: that the God in whom we believe is vitally interested in and involved in our world and in our lives as human beings. God acts in our human story, God guides the destiny of our world, God makes himself known. In our three faiths, again different in so many ways, one thing we hold in common is that a key moment in God's involvement in the world and in human history was God's call of Abraham. This involvement of God in the world and in the history of particular individuals is what one Christian writer has called the Abrahamic principle.

Certainly in Christianity, the key to our understanding of Abraham lies primarily in the idea of faith. Christianity bases its understanding of Abraham in the Old Testament, which differs of course in many respects from the story of Abraham in the Koran. In the Torah Abraham, called by God, responds to God's invitation to "go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. So Abram went as the Lord had told him" (Gen 12:1-4).



Later God will promise Abraham that he will have a son through whom Abraham's descendants would be as many as the stars of heaven. The Torah then tells us that "Abraham believed the Lord and God reckoned this to him as righteousness" (Gen 15:6). Later still God will promise Abraham a son by his wife Sarah. This son, Isaac, will be the one through whom God will establish a covenant with his people. And later again it is this son, Isaac, whom God asks Abraham to sacrifice. While the Koran will identify Ishmael as the son whom Abraham is called upon to sacrifice, and this is clearly a major difference, perhaps even here there is something that unites all three traditions. In what in the Christian tradition has been exalted as an extraordinary act of faith, Abraham prepares to offer his son, even though this would seem to mean the end of any hope that God's promise to Abraham could be fulfilled. God of course intervenes to save Isaac and God then says to him, "Because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore" (Gen 22:16-17).

It is this emphasis on Abraham's readiness to respond to all that God asks him, even to the point of sacrificing his own son, which leads Christians to call Abraham, "our father in faith". It also helps us understand that in Christianity faith, before it is anything else, is about trust. When Saint Paul, whom Christians would regard as the great interpreter of the person and message of Jesus, speaks about this he will identify faith – what I would want to call in fact trusting faith - as the outstanding quality of Abraham. And Paul will go on to say that it is by living this same quality of trusting faith that we show we have Abraham as our father. For Christians certainly, and perhaps for Jews and Muslims as well, the story of Abraham challenges us to ask a most basic question: do I really trust God?

Am I prepared to entrust myself to God? Do I believe that God is the Lord of history – that God guides the destiny of peoples – and that God can work even through the doubt, the confusion, and even the stupidity and blind obstinacy of human beings to bring good out of evil? This idea of trust is captured beautifully in a phrase taken from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah: Can a woman forget her suckling child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. Behold I have carved you on the palms of my hands" (Is 49:15-16).

Obedience, submission and entrustment – these words capture something common to our three faiths: and Abraham embodies them all. He is really our father in faith.