

Dear Friends,

Pilgrims to the Holy Land will most likely visit the Mount of the Beatitudes, the hill overlooking Lake Galilee where, it is believed, Christ delivered his Sermon on the Mount, commemorated by a fine church on the hillside. Nearby is the scene of the miracle retold in this Sunday's Gospel, the Feeding of the 5,000 or Multiplication of the Loaves and Fishes, when Christ used just five loaves and two fish to feed that huge crowd. There is another attractive church on the site with ancient mosaics of the bread and fish, and with a surrounding courtyard. It is cared for by German Benedictine sisters, who have a house there. About five years ago some anti-Christian Jewish extremists daubed graffiti on the church and set fire to part of the buildings. It is all restored now, but the incident leaves a sour taste behind.

I used to attend meetings in Ealing of the Council of Christians and Jews. As is the way of such things, those organising the meetings grew older and had to retire, but there was nobody coming along to take their place. The CCJ continues elsewhere, but has not met in Ealing for a long time. We had many good evenings with talks, socialising and refreshments, and I venture to say that relations between the people of the two faiths were heartily cordial. We knew of course that we had differences in our beliefs, but were united in having faith in the one God, the God of Abraham, Moses, Isaiah and Jesus - and that this mattered more than differences in our ways of thinking.

We were in our way practising what St. Paul commends in the second reading of this Sunday's Mass:

*Bear with one another charitably, in complete selflessness, gentleness and patience.*

*Do all you can to preserve the unity of the Spirit  
by the peace that binds you together.*

It is a sad fact of religious difference that some people are so caught up with the conviction that they are right in their beliefs, that they think this justifies any amount of ill-treatment of those who think otherwise. We know of course that such people are a small minority, like the fanatics who attacked the church at Tabgha, but they can do much harm and give religion a bad name. We know also that our Christian denominations are not exempt from behaving in the same way, certainly often in our history and perhaps even today.

On the recent feast day of St. Thomas More I watched the film *A Man for all*

*Seasons*, in which the actor Paul Scofield gives a wonderfully moving and convincing portrayal of More's decency, uprightness and incorruptibility - his thoroughgoing honesty, which led him to refuse his support of Henry VIII's desire to rid himself of his first wife and thence to More's own execution. He was willing to give his life rather than compromise his convictions. But this is not the whole story or the complete historical picture: **this same Thomas More was perfectly capable of ordering the torture and death of those judged by the standards of the time to be heretics, and the Catholic Church, let us face it, does have a dismal record over the centuries of how it has treated those it judges to be beyond the pale.**

To be a person of conviction, willing to uphold one's beliefs even if they make you unpopular and arouse enmity and hatred in others, is an admirable thing, but there is something devilish in being so convinced you are right that you think this allows you to treat others in dreadful ways, and even justify yourself by claiming you are doing it for their good, to "save their souls." We like to think we have grown out of these old attitudes, but there are plenty of examples in the world today of religious people being misled by their convictions into committing outrages against others.

To safeguard against this danger, it seems to me, we need to remember two things: one is that since God is above all a God of love and compassion who creates all people in love, we who claim to follow his ways should always show love and charity above all things to everyone, especially those with whom we disagree. To fail in charity, believing this is what God wants of us, is perhaps the worst heresy of all.

The other, which may be more difficult to accept, is to keep a degree of *provisionality* in what we are prepared to assert of God. There is no point in believing anything unless you think it is true, but with regard to God we can, I think, acknowledge that what we believe about him may be not so much wrong, but incomplete, imperfect, 'seeing through a glass darkly,' because we do not yet see him face to face. God will always go beyond our limited human understanding: in fact, St. Augustine went so far as to say that if you can understand it, it is not God! If we can accept this, it will be a great help in being able to show charity to those who think differently from ourselves.

I once attended a dialogue between a Christian monk and a Buddhist priest, talking about the same notion from their different perspectives: salvation in the

Christian case, enlightenment or illumination in the Buddhist. To be honest, I could not follow much of what the Buddhist said, as the way of thinking of his religion comes from a tradition rather alien to how we see things in the West. In so far as I did understand it, I would say that I do not agree with Buddhist beliefs. But there was one thing he said which was very clear: 'the whole purpose of our religion is to help people live well.' We would surely say the same, and I think all the great world religions are at one in saying that living well means living in peace and harmony with your neighbour, showing consideration and love to everyone. We and they may not be very good at doing it, but at least we know that this is what God calls all of us to do and to be.

Here above all is where we can see the one true God at work. Those who truly know God know that his Spirit dwells in all people, that, in the golden words of St. Paul,

*There is one God who is Father of all, through all and within all.*

We have come a long way in repairing the breaches in Christendom itself, and now seek to work with people of other churches, rather than hold them at arm's length. But the unity of the Church is but one step towards the unity of all mankind in the love of God. It was there at the beginning, in the paradise of Eden, when the first people knew themselves to be at one with God and the world and everything, but that primal unity was fractured by human sin, by people forgetting they were made in the image of God. To repair that fracture God came among us as the man Jesus, who shows us the way, and in the Eucharist feeds us with his life so that we may once more know ourselves, and everyone else, to be the image of God. I never cease to marvel at this insight of the early Church:

*GOD BECAME HUMAN,  
SO THAT HUMAN BEINGS MAY BECOME GOD.*

Wishing you every blessing, Fr. Robin.