

Rowan Williams at *Hidden Treasure*, Birmingham, 30 April 2017

Come, Holy Spirit, visit the hearts of your faithful people, and kindle in us the fire of your love.
Amen.

If we were to ask what it is that makes us Christian, one way of answering might be this: to be a Christian is to believe that in Jesus Christ the full range of what's possible for human beings becomes real. What it is to be human is set out before us in a unique way, so that we see that to be fully human is to be turned, in trust, to God and to be turned in gift, healing and generosity to God's world. That's what is made possible for us in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus. To believe that is surely basically what it is to be Christian.

It's a conviction not just about the kind of God that God is, but a conviction about the kind of people you and I are. Or perhaps, a bit more accurately, the kind of people you and I just might be – and that's the great "could be" that the life and death and resurrection of Jesus announces to us. Now if that's what it is to be a Christian, if this involves believing that for all human beings there is a Jesus-shaped hope of fulfilment and liberation, you can see why Christians have said that Christianity is a universal religion. It's not just an eccentric point of view, adopted by a dwindling number of people in the northern half of the globe. It's not peculiar to one area, one language, or one culture.

So it's a universal hope - and that's of course where things get a bit difficult; because what about all those people who don't share that conviction, who don't want to pin their hopes on the person of Jesus, who don't see that the hope of all humanity is Jesus-shaped? How do we befriend, stand alongside, understand, listen to all these people? Well, it's a complicated question, but let me just suggest a very small number of things that seem to me to arise from those basic convictions which might help us make sense of how and where we stand with our non-Christian neighbours.

Here's the first one: if God's purpose for humanity is a Jesus-shaped liberty of love and compassion and joy, then wherever we look in the human world we are looking at human beings with whom God is already involved. Try as we might, we shall never be able anywhere to find a human being with whom God is not involved. That's one way of understanding the great doctrine in Hebrew scriptures that all human beings are made in God's image. So don't let's imagine that when we go out and engage with people who aren't Christians, or who aren't religious at all, we are bringing God to them. On the contrary! God is ahead of us, always! As we scramble, panting, up the last stages of our climb up the mountain, waving our triumphant message, sitting at the top is our Maker and Redeemer, surrounded by all his friends, saying: "What took you so long?" We are always relating to people to whom God has begun to relate.

The second thing we might want to reflect on is that, if this is the case, what all those other people are saying and thinking about God, even sometimes without knowing that that's what they're doing, is part of God's involvement with them. Remember that in the New Testament, when St Paul speaks to the Greeks in Athens, he talks about how God prompts and stimulates the search for himself. It's not that God sits back and folds his arms, and lets people make up stories about him as they will. God prompts. God hints. God shows and draws. God begins to disclose. And so, we're looking around the world and seeing people that God is already involved with; and we need to remember that part of that involvement is what they are saying about God, and thinking and singing about God, and growing in relation to him.

So they have something to say about God, which we may not have heard. We think we know it all – all we need to know about God. God forgive us; but we are always being led by God deeper into the mystery of his endless life of love and relation and bliss. Why should we be surprised, or shocked, or even sometimes resentful, if somebody who's not actually part of the family has something to say to us that we need to hear?

Remember, in the Gospels, that wonderful story of the overenthusiastic disciples, who come to Jesus, and John says: “We’ve found somebody who’s casting out devils in your name, but he wasn’t one of us, so we told him to stop” - expecting Jesus to pat them on the back and say ‘Well done’. Instead, they had a very severe telling-off from the Lord: because ‘he was not against us – he’s with us.’

So, as I say, we shouldn’t be surprised if those we encounter will say to us something we didn’t know, will enlarge our world - and to say this is not to give way to a kind of relativism. For what it’s worth, my own experience of dialogue between people of different faiths is constantly something that sends me back to a larger and deeper vision of Jesus Christ. I still believe that the destiny of human beings is brought to its fullness in Jesus Christ and that our hope for humanity is a Jesus-shaped hope; but when we start seeing the shape of Jesus in unexpected places and faces and people, we begin to approach these conversations with a little more humility, a little more expectation, a little more excitement, and a lot more gratitude.

The way I’ve sometimes put it is that when we engage in serious conversation with someone belonging to another faith or tradition, at best what we see is their face turned towards God. We see something of the reflected light of God in that face. Two or three pictures in my own mind relate to that. One is a train journey many, many years ago and, in the same compartment – this was back in the Middle Ages when trains had small compartments – in the same compartment, an elderly Orthodox Jew: beard, sidelocks... opening his lunch box, and quietly saying a blessing in Hebrew. I remember feeling, with immense conviction, that somebody else had just come into this carriage – a sense of my neighbour looking joyfully and gratefully at God, and speaking quietly, deeply to God; a sense of the privilege of seeing someone else’s face turned towards God. And when I think of the annual meetings which I used to be involved in between Christian and Muslim teachers, which would often take place in the Middle East, sometimes in East Asia, once in Rome and once in Canterbury, and twice in the United States - part of what we sought to do in those meetings was to spend time reading our holy texts together. We’d have a period of Bible study, a period of Koranic study, so that we could see one another, and hear one another engaging with the God who spoke to us in these great texts; and the same gift was given: the gift of seeing the face of someone else turn towards God, and the light bouncing off it.

To go back to our gospel reading¹, a lot of this has to do with what Jesus had to say about seeing, and seeing rightly. “The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light...” Then of course, though, turning that round: “Why do you see the splinter in your brother or sister’s eye, and don’t notice the log in your own eye?” “What is it you see,” says Jesus, “when you look at your fellow human being?” Do you see somebody whose life is full of errors and faults: false beginnings, muddled principles, inadequate performance, and so on? But what if you see something of God’s light reflected in that neighbour? Well then, perhaps your eye will be healthy and your whole body full of light. Perhaps if you see your neighbour with that grateful openness, light will flood in, and you will be healed, in that encounter.

So many people who have engaged deeply with the prayer, the daily life, the vision and the imagination of people outside the Christian family, have come away feeling just that – they feel what otherwise they couldn’t have: that light has shone on them; and the last thing they felt inclined to do was to pass judgement.

“Above all else”, says Jesus, “go in search of God’s kingdom and God’s justice”. In other words, go and receive life, promise and healing, where you can find it. Don’t bother too much about getting the theory right straight away. To go in search like that is to be a loyal follower of the one Lord Jesus, for that one Lord Jesus, precisely because he is the one Lord Jesus, is the one who waits for us at the end of every journey, wearing some unfamiliar faces. We shall see him in one of those faces turned towards God of our neighbours in other religions. One of the tragedies of Christian

history (and there are quite a few) is that this exhilarating sense that our destiny is Jesus-shaped, this wonderful conviction that it is Jesus who waits for us at the end of every journey, has been turned into a kind of defensive ideology: “We’re in – you’re out. We’ve got it – you haven’t. We know – you don’t. God loves us, but he’s not too sure about you.” We’ve picked up those luminous words in the Bible: “No one comes to the Father except through me”, and turned them into a kind of checklist. When Jesus says: “No one comes to the Father but by me”, it seems that, in the context in St John’s gospel, what he’s above all saying is: “All human beings will finally come to be sons and daughters of the everlasting Father because of who I am, and what I do.” What Jesus does not say is: “No one comes to the Father unless they sign the right membership form.” We, as Christians, have been given the most extraordinary gift, of seeing the vision of that Jesus-shaped humanity, that is God’s long term purpose for God’s human sons and daughters.

What a gift, what a glory, to see that! And part of the gift we’re given is then the capacity to recognise that, again and again and again, in unfamiliar faces, the faces that are turned to God, in the faces of people God is already involved with. How then could we not be committed to the building of deep friendship with those of other faiths and traditions? How could we not listen to what they have to say – hoping that our own understanding and love would grow from it? So, far from it being some kind of betrayal of Jesus, that’s surely part of how we enter more deeply into the life of the one we believe to be the living, universal Word: God’s face turned towards us. In this multiple, difficult, conflict-ridden world we inhabit, we need above all to have friendship and a profound respect. We need to show to our world that what animates us in our faith in our one Lord is hope, not fear. When Jesus Christ rises from the dead, his identity, his humanity, fills the whole universe. Wherever we turn, there he is - “lovely in eyes, lovely in limbs not his”², as the great poet Hopkins said. In our searching let’s keep looking for that loveliness, expecting a surprise revelation, the face turned towards God, the gift that comes from another human being, with whom God is already involved.

1 Matthew 6:22—7:5

2 *As Kingfishers Catch Fire*, Gerard Manley Hopkins, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poems/detail/44389>