

A Sermon preached by The Reverend Dr. David R. Mason
Sixth Easter. May 9, 2010
St. Paul's Episcopal Church

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be pleasant unto Thee, O Lord, who art the Savior and Redeemer of all the peoples of the earth.

I begin with a string of passages from Scripture – or scriptures – and, in the manner of David Brooks, from what I've been recently reading. If they do not, initially, seem to have much connection or much in common, I hope that I may unpack them in such a way as to eke out some moral imagination that makes for tolerance and goodwill among peoples of the earth, particularly the peoples of the "Abrahamic religions" – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

1. From today's gospel passage: "I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and remind you of all that I have said to you."
2. From the Holy Qur'an; (Surah 61:6) "And remember, Jesus the son of Mary, said, 'O, Children of Israel I am the messenger of Allah sent to you, confirming the Law which came before me, and giving Glad Tidings of a Messenger to come after me, whose name shall be Ahmad (i.e. Mohammad)."

The third and fourth are taken from the King James translation:

3. Isaiah 7:14 "Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel"
4. Matthew 1:21-23 "And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shall call his name, Jesus, for he shall save his people from their sins. Now this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying, "Behold a virgin shall conceive and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us."

Finally, a bit from the penultimate chapter of Robert Wright's The Evolution of God, which chapter is called "The Moral Imagination": "The moral imagination like other parts of the human mind, is designed to steer us through the successful playing of games -to realize the gains of non-zero sum games [those in which both sides win] when those gains are to be had ... the moral imagination is one of the main drivers of (religion as seen in this book); the tendency to find tolerance in one's religion when the people in question are people you can do business

with Our 'understanding' of the motivations of others tends to come with a prepackaged moral judgment. Either we understand their motivation internally, even intimately, relate to them, extend moral imagination to them, and judge their grievances leniently – or we understand their motivations externally and in terms that imply the illegitimacy of their grievances. ... The bulk of westerners and the bulk of Muslims are in a deeply non-zero-sum relationship, yet by and large aren't very good at extending moral imagination to one another.

Now let me return to the first two passages: I confess that I rarely paid attention to this passage – “The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything.” There are other more significant sayings in chapter 14 – “I am the way and the truth and the life ...”, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father, “Those who love me will keep my word and my Father will love them,” and “Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you.” BUT, “the Advocate, the Holy Spirit” ?? This seems like an odd bit of John's theology. There are four places where John has Jesus speak of the Holy Spirit as the “Advocate” or “Counsellor” (14:15; 14:26, 15:26; 16:7), evidently designating some sort of divine legal aid for the disciples. And I learned in seminary that the work used is “Paraclete”, but this did next to nothing for me ... until I came upon the Muslim interpretation of the passage from the Qur'an that I read: “Remember Jesus ... said, “...I am the messenger of Allah sent to you... and giving Glad Tidings of a Messenger to come after me whose name shall be Ahmad.”

Now, the Muslims insist that “Ahmad” is a translation of the Greek work, “paracletos” (Paraclete). Therefore it is obvious to the Qur'an that Jesus had foretold the coming of Mohammad by name, as an Advocate, or helper and teacher!

Perhaps you will understand my initial amusement, but then irritation at hearing his repeated. The practice of blatantly mistranslating and misunderstanding another's scripture in order to make it point ahead to and foretell one's own hero as Prophet is dodgy business; it is playing fast and loose with history and with fact. And to clothe it with irrefutable divine authority—“This is scripture whereof there is no doubt” (Sura 2:2) is to make far greater mischief. It is to exclude the “other” from any claim to finality or truth by asserting authoritatively, “We have it, and you don't.” it is the beginning of a zero-sum argument - my gain is your loss.

But wait! Haven't we heard this sort of thing before? We have, and that is why I selected no's 3 and 4 with this in mind:

#3: “Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel”.

#4: “She shall bring forth a son ... Jesus.... That it might be fulfilled (as) spoken ... by the prophet: “Behold a virgin shall be with child and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel.”

Of course, now all of us know that the Isaiah passage speaking of a “virgin” is a mistranslation of a straightforward statement by Isaiah either about the king’s wife or someone else: “Look, the young woman is with child and will bear a son.” It was not a prediction of something odd seven hundred years hence. But because the Greek “Septuagint” translation of the Hebrew Bible used the word “virgin” here, the Christian writers of the gospels latched onto it in order to lock in a so-called “prophecy” by Isaiah of a virginal conception and a son, Jesus, called Emmanuel.

Now you and I can understand the mistake and grant some leeway to Matthew for his misguided effort to establish the virgin birth on the basis of a “prediction” by Isaiah. We are naturally prone to accepting and dealing gently with the peccadilloes of our own group. But put yourself in the shoes of a Jewish reader of Matthew and I guarantee you that you will experience the same irritation that I felt with the Muslim claim that Jesus predicted the coming of Mohammad!

So what are we to do? Snipe at one another? Find faults in the others’ religions (Jewish, Christian, Muslim – depending on where you’re sniping from)? Or find fault with all religions – “religion poisons everything”? Neither of these options is helpful, although both are championed by extremist minorities either in a particular religion or in the secular world (those who think that to love this world demands hating all religion).

Nor are these “true” to the best in religions or to the trajectory that religion has followed through the ages from tribal religions to world religions with a universal God who care for and redeems all people. Muslims, Jews, and Christians at least are all true monotheists whose God, at best, loves all creatures,. We must grant the best in the other and search for the best in their religion. Of course as we stretch to understand the others we will find reasons to disagree, but perhaps we will expose our own faults and stupidities and so try to rectify these in interrelationship with the others. This is what interreligious dialogue always tries to do. If we employ a “moral imagination” as the greatest religionists have done, we will activate the tendency to be tolerant of the others even as they differ bitterly with us. As Wright suggests, even in deeply troubled times such as the present, we may “understand their motivations internally, even intimately,” and “relate to them” and “extend moral imagination to them, and

judge their grievances leniently” – I am thinking primarily here of Muslims, Jews, and Christians, but I might well be speaking within the Christian camp, of Catholics and Protestants, of liberal and conservative Christians: relate to them, extend moral imagination to them, judge their grievances leniently.

If we continually attempt this we can produce non-zero-sum, or win-win results if we do not the extremists (e.g., Osama bin laden, Anwar al-Awlaki, or Franklin Graham) win and chaos ensues. I know we are better than that.

In the name of God. Amen.

David R. Mason