

# One Lord, Many Faiths

*A sermon preached at St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney on Sunday 12 August 2012, by David Gill. The readings were Ephesians 4:25 – 5:2 and St John 6:35,41-51.*

This man is special. This man is unique. This man is the one for whom the ages wait. Meeting him, we meet ... God!

With different nuances, each of the four gospels attempts to convey that astonishing conviction. The writer of John's gospel is quite explicit about what he's doing. "These things are written," he says towards the end, "so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name".

Take today's gospel reading. We hear Jesus making an extraordinary claim for himself. "I am the bread of life," he says. Not once. Not twice. Three times. Elsewhere in the fourth gospel we meet other well-known "I am" sayings attributed to Jesus: I am the light of the world, the way the truth and the life, the good shepherd, the true vine, the resurrection and the life. You can almost hear the writer shouting: "For God's sake pay attention. This man is special!"

The other gospels – Matthew, Mark and Luke – have a more story-telling style and sometimes draw on other material: the birth narratives we love to recall at Christmas, other clashes with religious figures, other miracle stories. That stuff is not in the gospels because the writers were hooked on wise men and shepherds and allegedly virgin births, because they were particularly interested in the ruffled feathers of scribes and pharisees, or because they had some kind of miracle fixation. It's there because the writers were using their gripping stories to proclaim "This man is special. This man is unique. Meet him and you meet God!"

That conviction remains to this day the central claim of the Church. Half a century ago, when some of us here were young, holding and advocating such a belief seemed relatively straightforward. After all, this was a Christian country, or so we assumed. As for people of other faiths – well, we knew little about them, they lived far away, their beliefs did not impinge much on our consciousness.

But now? Now it's a new ball game. Australia has become a wonderfully mixed grill of races, cultures, languages and religions. The results of last year's census tell the story. We now have more Buddhists than Baptists, more Muslims than Lutherans, four times as many Hindus as members of the Salvation Army. The whole world has taken up residence here – thank God! – bringing a rich variety of the faiths along with it.

All of us – Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, the lot – now have the opportunity to get to know each other properly, to build bridges of interfaith friendship, to cooperate in making this a more tolerant nation.

But how, that's the question. Specifically, for us Christians: how can we at the same time witness to the one whose name we bear while becoming better neighbours to our compatriots of other religions? Most churches are tackling this. Our Uniting Church's National Assembly has a working group on relations with other faiths which is inviting congregations to engage in what it's calling "Interfaith September". You'll find some resources for that on the Assembly website.

In the meantime, let me suggest what life in this multifaith Australia requires of us. Here for your reflection are "David's Ten Commandments for Interfaith Cooperation"!

1. Remember that before we are Jews, Christians, Muslims or anything else we are human beings. We share our mortality, our hopes and dreams, our follies and foibles, our need for mercy, our yearning for grace.
2. Treat other religions the way you would like other people to treat yours. It is too temptingly easy to compare my religion at its best with someone else's at its worst. Better, and fairer, to look at both in terms of what at their best they aspire to be.

3. Remind yourself regularly that none of our religions has captured God. “God, the eternal Presence, does not permit himself to be held,” warned the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber. “Woe to the man so possessed that he thinks he possesses God.” Woe even more to the church or other religious group that makes the same mistake.
4. Recognise the common challenge facing all faith communities, stemming from the shallow secularism of contemporary Australia. Human beings are meaning-seeking animals. How to help people re-engage in the quest for meaning and discover again the treasure we seem to have hidden from their eyes, is a question we all face.
5. Watch for opportunities to offer support, when needed, to people of other faiths. The nation’s religious leaders stood together in the days following 9/11, saying “We are friends, and we will not allow the voices of ignorance and hate to tear us apart”. Subsequently, when mosques, synagogues and churches were under attack, they made it clear that an attack on one house of prayer anywhere is an attack on all houses of prayer everywhere. Whenever hysteria is inflamed by radio shock jocks or divisions are exploited by populist politicians, we must stand ready to celebrate our diversity and say to the mischief-makers “In the name of God, you are wrong!”
6. Some in each of our religious communities carry bad memories, from other times and places, of treatment meted out to them by people of other religions. The scars are real and should be respected. But we must not let those scars limit what we attempt in Australia today. This is a new time, a new context.

7. Prepare yourself for a major shift in the way we think. For centuries our religious communities have defined themselves *over against* each other. We are now asked to think in a new way and define ourselves *in relationship* with each other. Expect some lively debate, not least with our co-religionists who take fright at the prospect.
8. Do not lose sight of any of Australia's faith communities. It's probably right, now, to focus on relationships between Jews, Christians and Muslims, but don't give the impression they are only ones that matter. This country is not in the Middle East or Europe. Asia, with its fascinating religious mix, is the context in which we must find our place.
9. Seize every opportunity to build mutual trust and understanding. More things are wrought by simple friendship than this world dreams of.
10. Keep your sense of humour. Religious people who take themselves too seriously are a danger to traffic. According to Psalm 2, "He who sits in heaven laughs". If God can afford a giggle at humanity's expense, we should be able to manage it too – focusing, of course, on our own follies and foibles before those of others.

We have a wonderful opportunity in this country. The Australian author Tim Winton, in his novel *The Riders*, has his lead character, an expatriate Australian, looking out over the countryside of Ireland. "It was a small, tooled, and cross-hatched country," he muses. "Every field had a name, every path a style. Everything imaginable had been done or tried out there." But his homeland, he remembered, felt different. "In Australia you looked out and saw the possible, the spaces, the maybes".

Those dramatic possibilities, those spaces, those maybes, make this an extraordinarily exciting nation to be part of right now. Especially for members of its rich assortment of religious communities, and particularly for the largest of those communities, our own.

Other countries have long histories behind them. Modern Australia's has barely begun. The national identities of others may be set in concrete. Ours continues to evolve. Interfaith relationships elsewhere bear the fingerprints – the sometimes bloody fingerprints – of ancient conflicts. Here we can start afresh.

May those of us who claim the name of Christ love more generously those who bear other names. May we become more understanding neighbours, more energetic bridge builders. And, in the process, may we bear more faithful witness to what we have glimpsed of the divine Love in the man, that very special man, we dare to call Lord.

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