

Man of Sorrows, King of Glory David Picken

A priest needs to know his town and after four years I hope I am in a place to say that of myself. Wycombe's history owes much significance to its river. No doubt when Wulfstan established a church in the 1060's there was a thriving community to evangelise. In the Civil War, Wycombe was strategically placed on the London-Oxford road and was a parliamentarian base. More recently, Wycombe's industry relied on paper production and furniture. Though this has now dwindled, several national organisations are based in Wycombe. It means that the local population is quite transient.

A number of people moved here from the Commonwealth in the 1950's and '60's. In particular, the town's population has a significant minority who look to the Caribbean island of St. Vincent and the Pakistan Kashmir as their original or parental home by heritage. Their arrival would have been notable but is part of the transience already mentioned. For this reason in reflecting upon what it is to be incumbent of a place with a significant Muslim minority I wanted to establish the cosmopolitan feel because like no other Buckinghamshire town, High Wycombe has a 'feel' of being on the edge of London life.

What follows is part of an article I wrote for local consumption before Easter. I hope it conveys some of the issues we face.

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

The Pope makes his '*Urbi et Orbi*' address from the balcony of Saint Peter's on Easter Day. It translates, 'To the Church and the World' and is a reflection on the significance of Easter not just for the Christian tradition but for the wider world. What might we say given our chance?

In February I was invited to join a school trip from our church school to the Neasden Temple, a Hindu Mandir (which means 'place of worship'.) The Temple is a very grand building which has been lovingly paid for by private subscription. When we arrived I was taken away for a private tour and was treated very respectfully and as an honoured guest. This always makes us feel good, but I was struck by the openness to guests not driven by converting zeal. Visitors are given access to what inspires Hindu faith and make their own conclusions. Interestingly, several families were uncomfortable with such a trip and asked to withdraw their children. These were people who felt that such an encounter might compromise their understanding of the Christian faith and thought, I believe, that it might expose young minds and souls to potentially harmful spiritual differences.

On 9 March I returned slightly early from leading the Parish Retreat to attend an event to honour the Birthday of the Prophet Muhammad. This event has been taking place for over twenty years and involves a walk through the High Street to the Jubilee Road mosque for prayer and feasting. I understand this was the first time that a member of another faith had been invited not just to join the event but to address the gathering. This was quite an honour and an opportunity and I am thankful for it. Again, I was treated with great respect and given pride of place at the head of the procession with the attending imams.

You may now be wondering how all this links? I wrote a letter prior to the mandir visit to all parents involved to say that 'nothing that compromises the uniqueness of Christ will be part of the visit'. I am told this phrase persuaded some parents to let their children attend, in addition to the fact that I attended. What did I mean? Easter is

not a comfortable festival for the wider ecumenism (a phrase once coined for relations between the major world faiths). The Cross is given to the Man of Sorrows who, in some way caught up in the mysteries of faith, takes it and thus restores something within creation and particularly in human relations with God. Then, within three days the King of Glory is miraculously raised. This is our Faith. It is not an easy ecumenical starting point, neither is the subsequent activity of the Holy Spirit, about which even Christians have radically different interpretations. So, how do we hold this together and yet have fellowship with neighbours from other faith traditions? Well, I think quite simply by following the example of Christ. See Christ in others, honour your own tradition and respect the goodwill and cooperation that can make our community a better place. So, I can celebrate with the Muslim community without having total agreement with them on matters of theology, for example. I can visit a mandir and even listen to prayers without worrying about whether some spiritual 'taint' might take place.

Yet, in all the above, I wish to honour what I said in my letter to parents. Christ is unique and this season celebrates that. A world changing event took place which is not matched elsewhere. Yet to be an inclusive church in the best Anglican tradition is to hold our beliefs sacred while not wishing to 'turn away the stranger'. This is our joyous time when we are thankful for what God has done but we know it was achieved through pain and grief. May we hold our good news for the world while carrying ourselves with grace in respecting other traditions? Most of all, be prepared to see Christ not just in those who look like us, but importantly, in those who may not.

I would, in conclusion, like to talk of recent community successes. The arrest of men on suspicion of terrorism in the town two years ago was a shock, especially so for Muslim leaders. So we Christians did what seemed natural. We asked them round for a cuppa and a chat and listened to how it felt for them, as the men professed an Islamic motivation. Relations between the faiths at this stage were quite distant, though a 'Sharing of Faiths' group is long-established. We knew that local mosques were, essentially, moderate in approach. However, what emerged was a resolution to talk more and relations became much closer as we agreed the community was better served if local faith groups were seen to cooperate where possible. The tangible outcome of this has been the establishment of a Council for Christian-Muslim Relations, a body which I am privileged to serve as Vice-Chair. We have set our parameters clearly. We are working together for community cohesion. We are not another interfaith dialogue group. Things are not perfect but we are moving forward and sharing in discussion and action.

Five years ago, I could have had little idea that I would be a senior Christian leader in a town with a significant Muslim presence. I had studied something of Islamic theology but my ministry to that point had been in 'white' suburbia. I can say that I am stimulated by this calling and am humbled by what God has made possible. I continue to learn each day what it is to believe in the uniqueness of Jesus while giving due regard to those of other faiths. It is not always a comfortable place to be but I would not, at this stage in my ministry, wish to be anywhere else. **f**