

26 November 2007

"Truth and Tolerance"

Reading: John 14:1-10

Several years ago I attended a consultation of religious leaders on social reconstruction in South Africa. There I met a Hindu scholar by the name of Dr Thillayvel Naidoo. We had an interesting conversation. Since we lived in different cities, I did not expect that our paths would cross again.

But about two years later I received a phone call. Dr Naidoo was attending a conference in Johannesburg and asked if he could pay me a visit. I wondered why. Soon he explained the reason for his visit. Every morning at 6:00 am there was a brief three and a half minute religious broadcast on the SABC (the equivalent of the CBC) and I had the privilege of presenting some of these daily devotions. (You see, in those days miracles still occurred; it was possible for me to condense a talk down to about 200 seconds). In one of those talks I had mentioned that Jesus was much more than a teacher or a prophet or an avatar. Dr Naidoo objected to that statement. Politely, but forthrightly, he told me that it was inappropriate for me to speak disparagingly about other religions, especially not on the national broadcaster. (By the way, the word avatar means *descent* in Sanskrit. In Hindu philosophy, it refers to a descent of a higher being, even the Supreme Being, onto planet earth in bodily form).

We had a friendly and a mutually beneficial conversation. I explained to him that I'd had no intention of commenting on his religion. I was speaking about *my* religion, not his. In the course of the conversation he told me that he did not regard Jesus as one of the top six avatars. He looked surprised when I told him that I didn't either. That was just the point - I did not see him as an avatar at all. When he left my office, we were on good terms. I think we both found the conversation stimulating and helpful. He realised I was not Hindu-bashing and I understood his position and appreciated the fact that he had taken the trouble to come and discuss the matter with me.

Then, about four years ago, Dr Naidoo was again in Johannesburg. He had retired from the university and was writing a book comparing Krishna, Jesus and Mohammed.¹ As usual, he came right to the point: "I don't get Jesus," he said, "He makes no sense to me!" It was not that he could not understand the claims

¹ I have checked the internet and found some of his other books, but there is no mention of this book, so it may have been abandoned or possibly was not published.

of Christ. He understood those very well indeed. In fact, that was the source of his difficulty. If what Christians say about Jesus is true, why should he have been born at such an inopportune time and in a small and insignificant land? And why should he have taught for only three years if what he had to say was so important? I suspect that behind those questions was the Eastern concept that the truths of eternity cannot be dependent on the accidents of history.

In his quest for truth, he was raising what, to my mind, was the most important of all inquiries about Jesus. Did he really claim to be divine and, if he did, was this claim confirmed or contradicted by the circumstances of his life and death, and the events that followed his death?

This morning our attention is focussed on a claim that Dr Naidoo found unreasonable and unpalatable. What's more, the vast majority of the world's population and, for that matter, the majority of the population of Canada and most of the people on the South Surrey/White Rock Peninsula, would agree with him. Jesus said: "I am the Way the Truth and the Life; no one comes to the Father except through me." People don't mind it if you say, "Jesus is *a* way," or "Jesus is *my* way." But to say that he is *the* way for everyone is offensive. Some believe it implies a bigoted rejection of others and borders on hate speech.

This, of course, is not a new problem. The original followers of Jesus were Jews. Had they become just another sect within Judaism with Jesus as their deceased leader and spiritual hero, they may well have been tolerated. Judaism was accustomed to diversity and could accommodate a difference of opinion and practice. But they were convinced that Jesus was both Lord and Christ. (Acts 2:36) When Christianity spread to the Mediterranean world, and Christians, together with everybody else, were required to burn a pinch of incense and say, "Caesar is Lord," they could easily have construed this as no more than paying their political dues. Once they had done so, they were free to go and worship any god they liked, including Yahweh or Jesus. But they wouldn't do that. Stubborn lot, these Christians!

And now, in 2006, we live in a global village. What sort of dinosaurs still have the temerity to declare their way is the only way? Well, we cannot make Jesus' words say *more* than they do, but neither should we make them say any *less* than they do. It is *always* important to read passages in context. Here it is particularly important to do so. Perhaps Jesus was speaking just to the disciples. Or maybe what he said has validity for the Christian community, but not for sincere believers in other traditions. Possibly, if we read this statement

in context, we shall see that it is more accommodating than we thought.

Reading the Statement in Context

Jesus and his disciples are reclining around a low eastern table at the Passover meal. It is his last night on earth. The day ahead of him will include the anguish of Gethsemane, his arrest, Jewish and Roman trials, a brutal flagellation, public humiliation and crucifixion. Within 24 hours his dead body, wrapped in grave clothes, will be lying on a slab of stone in the pitch-blackness of a sealed tomb.

He is deeply troubled in spirit, but his concern is not for himself. (13:21) It would have been appropriate for his followers to lend him emotional and spiritual support. Instead, it was he who comforted and encouraged them. They were confused and unnerved because he kept telling them he was about to leave them. They were about to be scattered like sheep without a shepherd and much of what he says and does is to prepare them for the turmoil of the next few days.

The Passage

Jesus has just told the disciples that one of them will betray him and that Peter will disown him. I can see the bewildered look on their faces. They have often been surprised both by Jesus' actions and his statements. But they are now in totally uncharted territory.

'Do not let your hearts be troubled,' he says, 'Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me, that you may also be where I am.'

Jesus introduces a theme he will develop over the next 3 chapters. What is about to happen is actually to the disciples' advantage. He is not being snatched from them by an unexpected turn of events. He is intentionally taking leave of them with something very definite in mind. He is going to prepare a place for them so that they can, one day, join him. He will take them to a place where only he has been.

There have been some weird and wonderful interpretations of this passage. Some have fancied the idea of 'mansions'. Those who have modest homes down here understandably look forward to having a mansion in glory. Some will remember a little song we used to sing back in the sixties (and maybe the fifties). If I'm not mistaken, even Elvis Presley sang it.

I'm satisfied with just a cottage below
A little silver and a little gold
But in that city where the ransomed will shine
I want a gold one that's silver lined

I've got a mansion just over the hilltop
In that bright land where we'll never grow old
And some day yonder we will never more wander
But walk on streets that are purest gold

The KJV followed the (Latin) Vulgate which translated the Greek word (*monai*) - *mansiones*. But the word in the original simply means dwellings, and "rooms" is more appropriate since we are talking about a metaphorical house. The whole point here is not the lavishness of each apartment but the fact that ample provision has been made and there is more than enough room for every one of Jesus' disciples.

By the way, the idea is not that he is going ahead of them to complete the construction or arrange the furniture but rather that his very going is preparing a place. In other words, he is saying, "I'm not deserting you. The very reason I'm going is to prepare a place for you. This is part of the plan.

Thomas' Objection

Jesus then says something that may, at first, seem like a mistake: "You know the way to the place where I am going." From what the disciples said in response, it seemed as though he was giving them too much credit. But he had repeatedly told them that he had come from the Father. (Jn. 3:13; 6:32-35) And he had made it clear that he was returning to the Father. (7:33-36) In a very real sense, they did know the way to the place to which he was going without realising it. They were nevertheless mystified by his statement. Thomas, "the man who could not live with an unanswered question" raised a query, "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?" What he failed to understand was that Jesus was speaking primarily about a relationship with God, not of the details of a locality. That remains the important thing about 'heaven' - not *where* it is but *what* it is.

Jesus' response is crystal clear: "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on you do know him and have seen him." Jesus emphasises that in seeing and knowing him, they are seeing and knowing the

Father.

Philip's Request

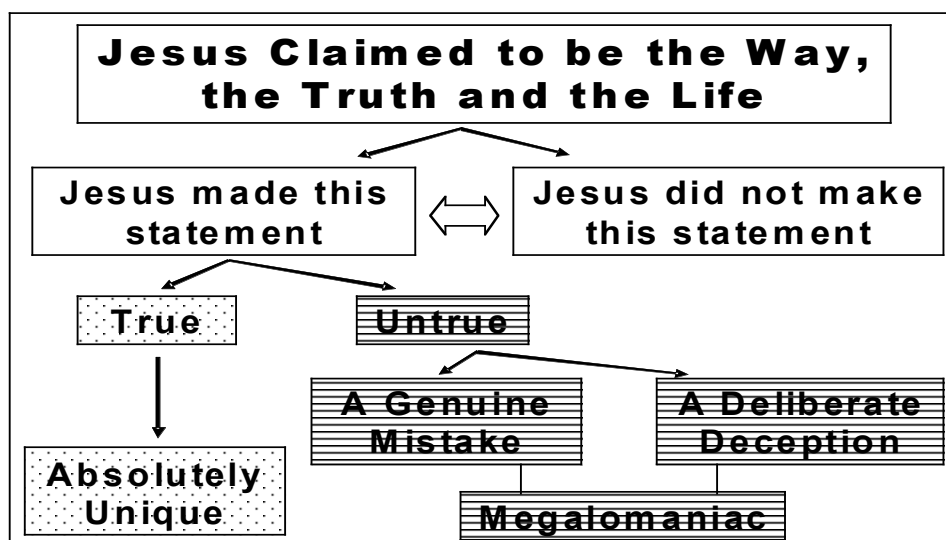
Philip is still mystified. "Lord," he says, "show us the Father and that will be enough for us." He asks for direct access - an immediate display of God himself.

Jesus' response is tinged with sadness. "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and the Father is in me? The words I say to you are not just my own. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing the work."

So, what was Jesus saying? Does it sound as if his categorical statement can be softened in some way?

Please join me in a simple logical exercise.

- ⇒ Either Jesus said these things or he did not.
- ⇒ Either they were true or they were not true.
- ⇒ If he said them, and they were not true, they were an indication of megalomania and they were tantamount to blasphemy.
- ⇒ If he said them and they were true, they determine our view of who Jesus was and is. They place him in a position of uniqueness.



Jesus' Explanation

Let's unpack the statement a little. Philip was asking to see God and Jesus was saying, "You *have* seen him. When you look at me it is exactly like looking at the Father". This was not a flash-in-the-pan statement, a rush of hyperbole and enthusiasm. On one occasion the Jewish authorities wanted to stone him. The reason given is clear enough: "Not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his Father, making himself equal with God" (5:18). In other words, he was saying: "Look here! What you see is God. This is how God acts. This is what he is like."

If we argue that Jesus never actually said these words, you destroy the entire narrative. It would mean that people like Thomas and Philip were speaking in a vacuum. Everybody got it wrong. The authorities got it wrong: they wanted to stone him and ultimately they did convict him of sacrilege and blasphemy? The disciples all misunderstood him. The early church got it wrong: they created the most monstrous myth of all time - and were prepared to die for it!

What's more, Jesus' entire life was a statement. When he healed the sick and cast out demons, when he fed the multitudes and cleansed the temple; when he invited the people to come to him and drink; when he rode into Jerusalem as King ... these *actions* were eloquent and provocative statements.

So what are we to say about Jesus' great declaration: "I am the way and the truth and the life; no-one comes to the Father except through me"?

It certainly has an absolute ring to it. I agree that we should not take it out of context. But it is even more categorical when read in context than when it is read out of context. Just how do we 'soften' the statement, "No one comes to the Father except through me"? Can we make the "no one" a relative term referring to the disciples, but not to others? In the context of John's Gospel, Jesus' mission is to the *kosmos* - the whole world. This is one of the key words in John. It occurs no fewer than fifty-six times in the Gospel and in all but four chapters. Take, for example, verse 17 of chapter 3: "For God did not send his Son into the *world* to condemn the *world* but to save the *world* through him." True, he entered the world at a particular point in time and a specific place - but he came for the whole of humanity. The sweep of his mission is universal, not sectional or national.

May I return, for a moment, to my discussion with Dr Naidoo? One thing, more than any other, seemed really odd to him.² If Jesus was the greatest teacher, and God actually sent him, "Why did his ministry last only three years?" If God wanted to show us how to live and explain eternal truths to us, we could surely have expected thirty to forty years? But only three years, in a remote corner of the Roman Empire?

Well, he had put his finger on a very important spot. First of all, is it not amazing that, in just three years, teaching mainly peasants, in a backwater of the Mediterranean world, he should have made such an impression? Perhaps three years was all he needed!

More importantly, if we think of Jesus as a great teacher, whose teaching career was cut short by a tragic set of unforeseen events, then three years *was* possibly too short. But that's not why he came. He did not come to have a protracted teaching career and leave behind some pearls of wisdom by which people could order their lives. His teaching was profound but he did not come primarily as one teacher among many. If we take the Bible seriously, he came to die and to rise again.

He did not come to show us the way; he *is* the Way! He did not come to impart truth in the form of religious precepts; he *is* the Truth! He did not come to point us toward life; he *is* the Life!

Some time ago I came across a poem by Dr D. A. Carson which is theologically profound and poetically powerful.

² One of the values of honest inter-faith dialogue, in which we endeavour to listen as well as to speak, is that we are able to see how concepts that are easy to grasp in one tradition seem really difficult to one working on a different set of presuppositions. Eric Sharpe commented: "The worst possible dialogue would be between a Hindu pretending to be a Christian and a Christian pretending to be a Hindu. The next worst would be between a semi-secular Christian and a semi-secular Hindu in a demilitarized zone between the frontiers of the two great traditions, out of earshot of Christians and Hindus alike."

I am the way to God: I did not come
To light a path, to blaze a trail, that you
May simply follow in my tracks, pursue
My shadow like a prize that's cheaply won.
My life reveals the life of God, the sum
Of all he is and does. So how can you,
The sons of night, look on me and construe
My way as just the road for you to run?
 My path takes in Gethsemane, the Cross,
 And stark rejection draped in agony.
 My way to God embraces utmost loss:
 Your way to God is not my way, but me.
Each other path is dismal swamp, or fraud.
I stand alone: I am the way to God.

I am the truth of God: I do not claim
I merely speak the truth, as though I were
A prophet (but no more), a channel, stirred
By Spirit power, of purely human frame.
Nor do I say that when I take his name
Upon my lips, my teaching cannot err
(Though that is true). A mere interpreter
I'm not, some prophet-voice of special fame.
 In timeless reaches of eternity
 The Triune God decided that the Word,
 The self-expression of the Deity,
 Would put on flesh and blood - and thus be heard.
The claim to speak the truth good men applaud.
I claim much more: I am the truth of God.

I am the resurrection life. It's not
As though I merely bear life-giving drink,
A magic elixir which (men might think)
Is cheap because though lavish it's not bought.
The price of life was fully paid: I fought
With death and black despair; for I'm the drink
Of life. The resurrection morn's the link
Between my death and endless life long sought.
 I am the firstborn from the dead; and by
 My triumph, I deal death to lusts and hates.
 My life I now extend to men, and ply
 Them with the draught that ever satiates.
Religion's page with empty boasts is rife:
But I'm the resurrection and the life.

Conclusion

Over the last few months we have focussed on John's bold claims concerning Jesus and on Jesus' own words about himself. We have seen people come to him and receive the life he promised. I could not be faithful to the message of John if I did not emphasise the need for a personal relationship with Jesus. There is no genuine Christianity without it. But it would be a mistake to present this as an arbitrary *stipulation*. It flows from all that we believe about Jesus. It is a gracious *invitation*. If what John says about Jesus is true, it is not amazing that he is presented as the only way to the Father. But "God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world but that the world may be saved through him." (3:17) John's entire *Gospel* is actually an invitation. If we accept what John says about him, why would we want to come in any other way?