LENT 3A 2017

The former chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks often addresses issues that reach beyond his personal Jewish faith. He genuinely values the insights and traditions of those who do not share his own religious convictions. He also shows in word and deed that everyone, regardless of their religious tradition has a role to play in promoting cohesion, harmony and mutual respect. He once said:

*In thinking about religion and society in the 21st century, we should broaden the conversation about faith from doctrinal debates to the larger question of how it might inspire us to strengthen the bonds of belonging that redeem us from our solitude, helping us to construct together a gracious and generous social order.*

He hints here at an interesting link between a good society and the quality of its conversations. He proposes that we commit to conversations with rather than merely talking at or about others who may hold different views from ourselves.

His proposed starting point is the same as that now associated with the murdered MP Jo Cox. The starting point is to recognise that we hold more in common with one another as human beings, than the differences between us. He calls these bonds of belonging which hold these key to freeing from feelings of isolation and separation.

The very word *conversation* implies a coming together rather than keeping distance, *con* = with and *versare* = towards.

Today’s gospel presents what is quite possibly the longest conversation recorded in the gospels. It is a conversation between people of two very separate tribes with contradictory beliefs and customs. The separation had major implications for all involved. These two tribes had come to despise each other; they had developed patterns of mistrust, mutual insults and discrimination.

The conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman got off to a shaky start. Jesus’ opening gambit is rather abrupt, even rude (if I may dare to say). He demands a drink.

The woman stands her ground; she has her dignity and seeks clarification of Jesus’ intentions. Indeed, she shows many of the hallmarks of a good conversationalist.

Great conversationalists have a sincere interest in others, notice things about them, and use these things to start and fuel their conversations. The Samaritan woman sees that Jesus is willing to engage, to share something of his own vulnerability and need. He is also offering her something no other Jew would think her worthy of, a share in eternal life.

Her response shows that she is listening but hasn’t quite grasped the meaning so she seeks clarification.

Patiently, Jesus rephrases the offer. Then, as they relax into the conversation they are able to explore one of the big issues of dispute between Jews and Samaritans. The dispute about whether Jerusalem or Mount Horeb has been has been ordained to by God as the primary centre of worship?

Jesus handles this religious hot potato with the insight that there is no place on earth from which we cannot surrender to God’s majesty and render praise. In other words, no human tribe or nation holds a monopoly over matters of faith and worship.

This message resonates with the woman, so much so that she can recognise this vagrant Jew to be the Messiah. She goes further, and puts her reputation on the line with the other inhabitants of the town.

It is now more than fifty years since the Catholic Church adopted a new approach to people with different faith positions. The Church made a conscious decision to become a people of dialogue, of enquiry and respect. We began a multitude of conversations both formal and informal with non-Catholic Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, and Buddhists and others. We have even sought common ground in sincere conversations with humanists and atheists.

This is a timely indeed long overdue development, but it is one to be proud of. It deserves our full support. It places us full square with the endeavours of all people of good will, integrity and conscience regardless of creed in seeking to forge a world which gives effect to the visions of such giants as Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, Dorothy Day; to which it is now fair to add Pope Francis, each in their own way sought to *construct a gracious and generous social order, for the flourishing of all the world’s citizens.*

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