

LIVING WELL TOGETHER

8.12.15

- In May last year my colleague the Vicar of Luton was knocked off his bike and trapped under the hot exhaust of the car that had run into him. Two passers-by, one a professional boxer and the other a taxi driver, rushed over and lifted the vehicle of him. The air ambulance paramedic said ‘he was the luckiest person alive in the County that day’. The two good Samaritans? They were Zulfiqar Afsar and Manny Mohammed – both local Muslims. Zulfiqar said afterwards: *As a Muslim it's something I would do regardless of faith. Our core teachings are for Muslims to help anybody and everybody. "It's something I would expect anybody else to have done".*

The local Islamic Radio Station in describing the rescue reportedly headlined it Praise be to Allah for saving the Christian Vicar!

Living Well Together; embracing that compassion and concern for our fellow human beings that bridges difference, is something we know when we see it; which despite the impression often given happens more frequently than is given credit.

- I take off my shoes to attend the school governors meeting. There is a simple shrine at the end of the room, which in this new and yet to be fully built school functions in many ways, but is also the place for worship. I am there to attend as a governor of then newly formed i-foundation Hindu school in Leicester; a Christian alongside Hindu members. The agenda is wide-ranging but includes discussion about how to include those beyond the Hindu community.

Living Well Together happens for all ages and in all spheres.

‘Living Well Together’ is a popular theme. The Interfaith Network UK has explored it; it has been used by the Near Neighbours Programme; it is the theme of our conference today. But what does it mean to live well together? What do the differing faith traditions bring to this? How does faith get in the way? What is the opportunity of this for our educational system; our schools and our colleges?

In this contribution I want to explore three propositions:

1. ‘Living Well Together’ is not the same as living comfortably together.
2. ‘Living Well Together’ benefits from the insights and contributions of faith
3. ‘Living Well Together’ can be a critical contribution from schools and colleges

1. ‘Living Well Together’ is not the same as living comfortably together.

This summer I chaired a plenary as part of the Vth Congress of the Leaders of World and Traditional Religions in Astana, the capital city of Kazakhstan. My panel included Muslim leaders from Afghanistan, Egypt, Croatia and Pakistan; a Taoist from China; a Hindu from India, a member of the Russian Parliament, and a Roman Catholic Professor from Rome.

If you had joined us from another planet, not knowing anything about the context, you might have perceived a remarkable witness to how human beings are united in their commitment to peace and harmony; how faith is a universal good; and that religious dialogue is the answer to all our concerns.

Pleasantries and superficial generalisations are not the stuff of ‘Living Well Together’. Talk of peace and harmony are worthless if the reality of Iraq and Syria, Israel and Palestine, Caste and Conversion, the persecution and deaths of Muslims, Christians, Yazidis and others, and much else is not addressed.

Or again, for many years I was a member of the Bishop of Leicester’s Faith Leader’s Forum and attended many of their meetings. But of all of them one that I remember was the evening we sat down to talk openly about conversion; when at last we were able to discuss one of the tougher questions with sensitivity.

‘Living Well Together’ is not the same as living comfortably together. And that is why the essential characteristics of ‘Living Well Together’ are about learning to live with difference in a manner that values the other person; builds bridges to the other; makes relationships with the other; is enriched by the other; and is open to the challenge from the other. To ‘Live Well Together’ requires all the best values and virtues of our faith traditions, as seen in the

‘Values Education’ practiced in so many places. But I suggest there are three essential characteristics that are at the core of ‘Living Well Together’.

1. Firstly, it is the capacity to disagree well. Archbishop Justin Welby addressing a gathering of church school leaders in Birmingham spoke of it as reconciliation. He said: *Reconciliation means finding ways for people to disagree well. It means finding ways for people who disagree to go forward together without reducing their beliefs to a lowest common denominator or pretending that their difference does not exist. It’s honest, loving, faithful, committed disagreement.*

Arriving slightly delayed at a local Mosque I walked into the prayer hall only to discover, to my surprise because no one had mentioned it, the children of the Mosque sitting patiently and beautifully behaved on the floor waiting for me. I responded to the invitation to say something about my Christian faith and then the questions began. The one I especially recall is the girl aged six or seven who, when chosen, asked me: When are you going to become a Muslim? They listened patiently as I spoke further about my faith and why despite my regard for Muslims I didn’t see it happening – at least in the foreseeable future! In that exchange was something of that ability to disagree well.

2. Secondly, it is the courage to be self-critical. And that is far harder than being critical of others. Jesus knew what he was talking about when he instructed us to address the plank in our own eye rather than the splinter in our sister’s eye.

As a Christian it is all too easy to call on others to get their house in order, and be blind to those who exercise violence in the name of Christ. Christians in parts of our world believe that those who are gay should be punished or killed; it is a Christian narrative that cloaks the violence of the Lord’s Resistance Army or haunted the massacre of Muslims at Srebrenica. It will not do to say that they are merely political events – or not true representations of the Christian faith.

The courage to be self-critical is the courage to recognise in ourselves and our faith all that has the potential to deny the humanity and value of our brother and sister.

3. There are many contenders for the final place on this short list of critical characteristics of ‘Living Well Together’. A serious contender is the important theme of respect or hospitality that blows apart the more conditional ‘tolerance’ that for some is so popular; that hospitality which Justin Welby describes as the *generosity that is resourced in God’s own generosity and it makes welcome and relationship possible across boundaries of faith or race or background, or even boundaries of ingratitude and hostility.*

However my third characteristic alongside the capacity to disagree well and the courage to be self-critical is the readiness to receive from the other, because the well-being of the other person is critical to my flourishing. It is rooted in the essential belief that ‘I am because you are’ and I need to be in relationship with you, and receive from you.

Andrew Wingate, who more than anyone has encouraged me on my journey of interfaith understanding, recently cycled frantically to his local station and rushed onto the departing train. He was sweating and coughing. Seeing this, the young man of Middle Eastern origin turned to the young woman of similar background and asked if she could pass over her bottle of water. With a smile she handed it on. When Andrew had stopped coughing he expressed his thanks. To which they replied: ‘We are refugees from Syria.’

2. ‘Living Well Together’ benefits from the insights and contributions of faith

The Commission on Religion and Belief in Public Life that reported yesterday entitled their report *Living with Difference: community, diversity and the common good*. They understand that agenda of honest relationship that is at the heart of ‘Living Well Together’. Indeed, once one gets past the headlines on the House of Lords and Faith Schools there is a central emphasis on the understanding of the interaction of religion and belief in our society. *It is only with such an understanding, says the Preface that communities can be sustained, and that people can live with difference and contribute to the common good.* It is noticeable that their recommendations include reference to the importance of religious literacy and the contribution of faith to developing principles and values that foster the common good.

‘Living Well Together’ is not in any way exclusive to those of faith, but there are particular insights and contributions that the faiths bring to our theme. Apart from the reality that many of those who work hardest at the local level to build relationship and understanding are people of faith; there are especially those shared theological insights that undergird and motivate our shared living. I highlight three significant themes:

- The first is that of Love of Neighbour; that dedication to the needs of our neighbour that unites us with them. In its most well-known form it is the shared commitment to altruism across the faiths of the *Golden Rule*; whether the *In everything do to others as you would have them do to you* of Matthew’s Gospel (7:12) or the *Whatever is disagreeable to yourself do not do unto others* (Shayast-na-Shayast 13:29) of Zoroastrianism. More deeply it is that holding together of Love of God and Love of Neighbour found in the Judeo-Christian tradition that was identified as a fruitful area for dialogue in *A Common Word between Us and You* sent by 138 leading Muslim theologians, spiritual leaders and political figures in 2007 to 27 Christian leaders and ‘leaders of Christian Churches everywhere.

At a more practical level it is that shared commitment to compassion that requires in us a response to the needs of our sister or brother. It is the Islamic understanding of mercy (Hilm) that feeds the hungry, responds to the needs of the poor and the oppressed (Surah 90:13-17).

For the last four years in Leicester the Islamic Society of Britain has partnered with the Anglican Church of St James the Greater to provide a weekly meal for the homeless. Originally funded by a grant from the Near Neighbours Programme it is just one example of the practical love of neighbour happening across our country that witness to what it means to ‘Live Well Together’.

- If Love of Neighbour inspires that bridging of difference that is central to ‘Living Well Together’ then secondly it is that understanding of God who is worshipped and who holds us to account that is at the heart of that proper humility that both challenges self-centredness and all ultimate pride in human achievement. ‘Living Well Together’

does not happen when there is a selfishness of heart; an over-exalted sense of one’s own self-importance!

It is Paul in his Second Letter to the Corinthians writing of the judgement of God: *For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.* (5:12) or the Sikh desire for Mukti (liberation) that switching of the focus of attention from oneself to God.

It is that same dependence on God that gives a proper humility when speaking of God for we discern what we know and what we do not know. Archbishop Rowan Williams speaking to the Christian Muslim Forum in 2010 said: *A very significant part of the Christian tradition, especially the Christian mystical tradition, is the conviction that you will never have said enough about God ... Your words, you believe, are true, and yet they are not a truth that allows you to say there’s no more to discover.* ‘Living Well Together’ begins with that attention to the other in the expectation that one will discover something of God.

- Love of Neighbour; humility before God; and finally in this select list of theological themes that concern for our planet that is seen in many faiths, that engages with one of the most critical issues of our times, and extends what we mean by ‘Living Well Together’ from just a present concern to a priority that extends to future generations.

It is the Psalmist singing: *The earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it.* (Psalm 24:1) or the Hindu prayer from the Vedas: *Supreme Lord, let there be peace in the sky and in the atmosphere. Let there be peace in the plant world and in the forests. Let the cosmic powers be peaceful.* (Atharva Veda).

Some years ago a sceptical official from the Eden Project in Cornwall came to meet a multi-faith group from Leicester for a discussion on the environment. He clearly didn’t expect anything useful, but as the discussion developed you could see his interest growing. At the end he said how amazed he was to be part of discussion where not only was the environment treasured, but unlike most discussions there had been a concern for the future. Our theology helps us to ‘Live Well Together’.

3. **‘Living Well Together’ can be a critical contribution from schools and colleges**

- The coaches disgorge the children after their journey from a local rural primary school. The welcome is well practised as is what happens next. For the group I have joined it is first the Gurdwara, then five minutes across the road to the Mosque and finally a further five minutes to the Parish Church. At each place an accessible and engaging introduction to the place of worship and the faith it represents; together an opening up of understanding, encounter and discovery.
- The Jamiatul Uloom Al-Islamia Secondary School in Luton has recently been graded ‘good’ by Ofsted. The report acknowledges *the active promotion of interest in, understanding of and respect for diversity in modern society*. The school has worked for the last seven months with the Luton Council of Faiths.
- Recent events at the Leicester FE College Multi Faith Chaplaincy have included the transformation of a hall into a huge Sikh Langar Hall which draws the crowds to the free food; celebrations of Diwali, Armistice Day, the Magna Carta and Holocaust Memorial Day and a Roadshow highlighting the contribution of faith to society.

Our schools and colleges often are exciting places where young people are enabled to relate to and make common purpose with one another in our diverse society. At the heart of this is often the contribution of faith enabling the young to ‘Live Well Together’. It is schools and colleges as communities of value where those theological themes are explored; communities of encounter where they learn to live together in a way that encompasses disagreeing well, the courage to be self-critical, the readiness to receive from others and builds that relationship that fosters community; that understanding of the common good that as Nigel (Genders) has written *is not just the aggregate of numerous individual goods but a shared perspective across diverse communities about the conditions for communities and individuals to flourish*. (Submission of National Society on ‘Proposed New Independent Schools Standards’). More succinctly it is Archbishop Justin’s reflections on Church Schools: *We are the solution, not the problem*.

However we must not be naïve. It is so easy to get it wrong, as much in schools and colleges as elsewhere. ‘Living Well Together’ often fails – and not just because in all our faiths and traditions there are extremists; those whose agenda is to destroy diverse community.

It could be a long list but it would include these threats to ‘Living Well Together’.

1. Stereotyping – All too often we fail to escape generalisations about those who are different, or simply because it is easier to talk in that way. All Jews are All Muslims are As a Christian I am all too aware of the breadth within my own churches, let alone the other churches. General statements divide not unite.
2. Failure to address ‘fear’ – All of us have our ‘fears’ about those who are different from us. Some of major; some quite trivial, but all the product of our backgrounds, our experiences or lack of experience, what our parents say to us, what we read from society and so much more. When we fail to make the space for safe exploration of these ‘fears’ we will not live well together.
3. Failure to value all – A current challenge is the understandable emphasis on the Muslim Community, but all too often the impression is given that others don’t matter. In particular the Dharmic Faiths, often rightly or wrongly resent the prominence given to Islam. ‘Living Well Together’ must take no-body for granted.
4. Bad Religion – Here I mean not the extremes of radicalism or the distortions of terrorism, but that religion that is lived and offered without the generosity, mercy, compassion and other blessings of faith; that religion that is inward looking, self-concerned and diminished. It has been said that ‘bad religion’ will always drive out the good’ – it is easy to undermine what it is to live well together.

But to return to my third premise ‘Living Well Together’ can be a critical contribution from schools and colleges. And I say that especially at this time of genuine concern about the building of common values and the desire for ‘British values’. For I would suggest that even when taught well – and there is evidence they can be – British values as defined only go so far in building our common life. The values of democracy, rule of law, individual liberty and

mutual respect and tolerance of those from different faith and beliefs are part of our common framework, but they are not the rich relationship of which I have been speaking. 'Living Well Together' is at the very least a complementary strand that must not be ignored. Indeed I think I would argue that until we genuinely learn to love our neighbours in a generous way, we will never really understand together what a British identity might look like that is inclusive of all.

Last week I represented Christianity at the dedication of the new faiths room at Bedford Hospital, alongside representatives of Buddhism, Hinduism, Sikhism, Islam, the Quakers, and the Humanists. For the first time I saw the new stained glass window: A tree of life within which sat several birds of different design; an image, among other things, of diverse faiths and beliefs living and working well within that hospital community; an image that expresses the fruit and the hope of what it is to 'Live Well Together'.

Although I just wondered however if overall it was just a little too comfortable!