

Passionately Christian, Compassionately Interfaith

‘Passionately Christian, Compassionately Interfaith’ was the title of DMin module I attended at Wesley House Cambridge a few years ago. The title coined by Dr Sathianathan Clarke, known as ‘Sathy’ [SUH-t(h)ee], who is a professor at Wesley School of Theology in Washington, DC and led the course. He and I hadn’t met before, but we soon realised we shared many Methodist and interfaith connections, including the fact that his son and my daughter had been classmates at Kodaikanal International School in South India, where my husband and I had taught for many years. Small world! Or is it just that our world is becoming more connected?

Connected or not, nearly all our neighbourhoods are becoming more diverse. Most of my adult life, I’ve lived in places where people from different faiths intermingle daily. Even in my current stationing in Maidstone, Kent, I have neighbours who are Hindu and Muslim and good friends who are from the Baha’i faith. I’m personally intrigued to find ways to connect with this diversity, seeing what God has to teach me from the encounters with difference.

This exploration of difference has been with me all my life. When I was six years old, I ‘fell in love’ with my Jewish classmate, Kenneth, whose show-and-tell explanation of Hanukkah, complete with dreidel and menorah kept me puzzling for days: could the daughter of a Methodist minister marry a Jew?

When my husband and I lived and worked for twenty years in S India, our colleagues and our students came from a wide variety of faith traditions. We raised our children in that multi-cultural setting: raised them to recognise and value the traditions of all faiths, even while we also ensured they learned the Christian faith well, attending church and Sunday School and church youth and prayer groups all along the way. I shouldn’t have been too surprised when they, as young adults, decided to marry persons from other faiths: a Muslim, a Hindu/Catholic, an atheist, another with Buddhist leanings.

The way they and their spouses lived out an understanding of God’s inclusiveness through their marriage relationships has led me to further exploration. Researching interfaith marriage became the focus of my doctoral studies, though some felt this was not an appropriate topic for a Methodist minister. One of the retired ministers’ wives who agreed to write a reference for me to do the DMin research said she was doing so in order that I might realise the error of my ways! ‘This is not a Methodist belief,’ she said.

My explorations convinced me that Methodism was larger than her definition. Indeed, John Wesley himself, in his sermon on ‘Catholic Spirit’, said, ‘If your heart be as mine, give me your hand.’ By that I think he meant we should look beyond the outside wrappings of religious tradition that *separate* us from each other; if we agree that God is love and wants us to love each other, then we can find ways to walk together towards all that is Good and Right and True.

Of course, just agreeing on ‘love’ is something that virtually everyone on the planet could do. Sometimes that general agreement leads people to reject ‘religion’ as an outdated way of understanding or sharing love. As Sathy’s title suggests, I find my passion for loving God and all God’s creation firmly grounded in a Christian understanding of God’s love for us, the source of our being and hope. That same passion drives me to love ‘my neighbour’ as myself,

which in turn implies that I need to listen carefully to my neighbour to hear how s/he has learned about God's love as well.

Does that mean that 'anything goes', as we explore our understanding of God from different faith perspectives? Surely not. If, for instance, I find an aspect of a faith tradition which appears to glorify evil (even within our own scriptures!), then my Christian faith requires me to consider more carefully: what is this really about? Is there a kernel of truth here which has been distorted to justify a human – rather than godly – concern? Jesus encouraged us to be 'wise as serpents and innocent as doves.' John Wesley set 'reason' as one of the four ways for doing our theology. We are to use our God-given brains to think through, to push past easy assumptions, to dig deeper for a fuller understanding of God's truth. In the process, I can gain that a fuller understanding of who God is and what God intends for me, even a fuller understanding of Christian theology.

The Methodist Conference's official statement on interfaith issues from 'Called to Love and Praise' states:

The Church's vocation is to be a sign, witness, foretaste, and instrument of God's kingdom . . . engaging with people of differing cultures and religious faiths . . . Christians of all traditions are at the beginning of a long period of growing dialogue with people of other faiths. To refuse opportunities for such dialogue would be a denial of both tolerance and Christian love. To predict . . . the outcome of such dialogue would be presumptuous or faithless; Christians may enter such dialogues in the faith that God will give them deeper insight into the truth of Christ.

This is the Methodist interfaith spirit in which I look forward to sharing with you over the coming year.

■ Bonni-Belle