

IS GOD CHRISTIAN?

Isaiah 60: 1-6; Matthew 2: 1-12

Abdallah has been in Canada ten years now. He works hard to provide for his family and he's so happy to be living in a part of the world where there is opportunity, safety and respect for human rights. He is also exceedingly grateful for having access to excellent medical care for his elderly parents and wonderful educational opportunities for his children. His wife Amina also began working recently now that all three children are school age. With the extra household income they've moved into a much larger three bedroom apartment. Life feels wonderful right now.

Abdallah and his family are also devout Muslims. They worship regularly, do their daily prayers, offer their volunteer time and money to help at the local food bank, as well as provide support for recently arrived refugees. People would describe Abdallah as a gentle man, warm, compassionate and generous. Even as he has suffered hardship and violence where he came from, as well as the death of family members, somehow Abdallah feels that gratitude for all the good things he is enjoying now are helping him heal the difficult memories. His ability to give back for his many blessings has helped him release the anger, hate and survivor guilt from his heart and replace it with feelings of compassion and even forgiveness. He has come to see how people get caught up in terrible things in times of war and conflict. The burden those who commit violence must carry must be far worse than any guilt Abdallah is carrying for surviving.

Abdallah believes in a God of compassion and mercy. Even as terrible things happen in the world and people do terrible things to each other, and sometimes in the name of his God too, Abdallah also believes God's compassion and mercy will triumph in the end. It's a mystery why innocent people suffer and the guilty often prosper. But eternity belongs to God and Abdallah will continue to commit his life into God's hands.

One of the people Abdallah runs into at work is Jack. Jack calls himself a Christian. He is a faithful member of his church, he prays regularly and reads his bible daily. Because Jack belongs to a sister faith, Abdallah respects him. Both he and Jack belong to God even as they worship and pray to God through their own religious traditions. Jack, on the other hand, feels it his mission to try to evangelize Abdallah. Muslims cannot go to heaven and are destined to hell if they remain Muslim. Unless Abdallah embraces the Christian faith and confesses Jesus Christ as his saviour, he and his whole family are doomed. Jack feels it urgent to evangelize as many people as he can because the world is divided between those going to heaven and those going to hell. There's no in between. Even though love and compassion are important, what you believe is most important. Experiencing rebirth through a confession of Jesus as Lord and saviour is essential to your salvation. Even though Abdallah is one of the best human beings Jack has ever met and even though Abdallah's character and integrity are second to none, that's not

enough to get him to heaven. If you don't believe in the right way and experience God as a forgiveness of sins through Jesus' sacrifice on the cross, you cannot be saved.

Many have called Jack narrow minded, racist and judgemental. But Jack isn't offended by such criticism. He feels it a badge of honour to be persecuted for doing the work of a disciple. Jesus called his disciples to go into all the nations evangelizing and baptizing people living in ignorance and sin.

Now Abdallah wants to meet Jack halfway. He wants to respect him and what he has to say. But he just can't understand how a good God can demand the sacrifice of God's own child on a cross. Why would God require such suffering to accept and love people who have taken a wrong path in life? Isn't God compassionate and merciful as the Koran teaches?

Hmm, what do you all think? I've met people like Abdallah. I've also met people like Jack. Both Abdallah and Jack challenge us to think about what it means to be a Christian and what it means to be a child of God not just in name, but in spirit and in truth. To help us get some clarity and direction, let's explore the revelatory wisdom of our gospel lesson. The heroes of the story are "wise men from the East" as our bible translation names them. These folk are astrologers whose religion includes examination of the stars and the natural world in search of signs which are communications from the divine. We could easily dismiss their faith as nature worship ignorant of the divine revelation of scripture, except that their religion brings them to Jesus. Not only that. Their actions of kneeling down and paying homage to Jesus, as well as their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, speak of a confession of faith. Clearly they believe Jesus is someone royal – the gift of gold, and someone divine – the gift of frankincense. This is why they kneel down before him. They also have a sense that his life will not be easy among his people and that he will be rejected and killed – the gift of Myrrh (a spice used for burial).

How can they know all this through their faith? We're not told. But clearly their faith and their actions of making the long journey to come and pay homage to Jesus, fulfills the prophecy of Isaiah that people from all over the world will be embraced by God. The job of God's people, represented by Israel, is to shine a light so bright, people will recognize God and be drawn to God. God is a God of all people not just the people of the bible.

OK, preacher, so does it not matter what you believe then? Does it not matter to have the bible and the biblical story? Are we simply to be relativists who proclaim that it doesn't matter what you believe because it all leads to the same destination in the end? Is there no higher truth? How do we distinguish true from false, right from wrong?

Well, the wise folk from the east are contrasted with King Herod and the religious leaders of the people. The irony is that Jesus' own people should be the first to pay him homage. But no! They see Jesus as a threat. A threat to what? A threat to their power and control over the

people. And even though they know the prophecies and their scriptures, they don't care about finding out the truth about Jesus. The only truth that matters is power and what they have to do to keep it. They will use violence and deceit in order to get rid of Jesus even if he may be the Messiah. It doesn't matter who he is and what he says. If he doesn't support their cause and bolster their power, he is enemy number one and must be destroyed. If he turns the people away from their power and control he's a threat. Truth and lies don't matter. Whether news is genuine or fake doesn't matter. Whether some claim is fact checked or pure conspiracy doesn't matter. Whether something is right or wrong by some higher standard of justice and love, doesn't matter. All that matters is who has the power and control.

So then, this is the difference between the faith of Abdallah and the faith of Jack. Abdallah's faith in God motivates and inspires him to live out compassion and feel gratitude, to find the courage to forgive and a heart to be generous. Abdallah also believes truth is higher than what he wants it to be for himself and what serves his own interests. The higher truth of God's compassion and mercy calls him in all humility to submit and surrender to a higher law and a higher goodness. His life is not his own. It belongs to God.

Jack, on the other hand, believes he and his own kind are right and everyone else is wrong. Unless people fit into his truth and his confession, and unless they experience a rebirth through acceptance of Jesus Christ as their saviour and Lord according to his understanding, they're doomed to hell no matter who they are. God is a God of judgement. God's love is conditional on someone accepting Jesus in name and belief. All of us deserve punishment. God's wrath has no tolerance for sin. God's love for us is in God's accepting of Jesus' suffering and death in place of our own as punishment for sin. But what kind of divine parent demands the death of their own child as payment for sin? And what kind of God is so full of wrath that nothing less than a torturous death committed by wicked men is what's needed to save those and only those who submit to this kind of faith?

You see, we need to be careful what we mean when we say Christian. There are many kinds of Christian and many kinds of Christianity. We must also be careful what we mean when we say Muslim or anything else about another faith. We must be clear what it is we believe about God's truth, justice and goodness. The Jesus we're given in the gospels is all about love. Love defines the highest truth, the highest justice and the highest understanding of what it means to be compassionate and merciful. We stand under such love and submit to it with our hearts in order to understand and confess it better. As we experience life with all its challenges, we also discover new ways love challenges us to find a way forward. We are always challenged to discover anew what it means to repent in the face of wrongs, to forgive rather than hold on to our grievances, to advocate for justice without being contaminated by bitterness and a desire to see the offender suffer somehow. This is all gospel truth. There is no reason anyone from any faith cannot embrace such truth even though they don't know such truth through the person of Jesus. Jesus is present among them and his Spirit, which we also call Holy Spirit,

blows through as energy awakening, inspiring and provoking open hearts to come and pay him homage.

Jesus the Word of God made flesh, Jesus the divine incarnation of love in a human, Jesus is not confined to a particular religion or religious expression. His Spirit is alive and active in many ways and among many different peoples. The key is to discern what the Spirit of Jesus looks like: mercy, compassion, a passion for justice that is not vindictive, a repentance in search of healing and reconciliation, a solidarity with the suffering, crucified victims of the world, and a transformative capacity to forgive and let go in order to heal and to rise again into newness of life...

Knowing someone like Abdallah challenges me to become a better Christian, to root myself ever more deeply in my own tradition and community as he is so rooted in his own. We can be good friends and I know he will have my back like few others would. Jack, on the other hand, scares me. He would see me cast into hell because I don't believe what he believes. I couldn't trust him. And if his brand of Christianity was the only option I had, there's no way I could be a Christian.

What about you? If someone asked you what kind of Christian you are, how would you answer? Amen.