

## CONNECTING WHAT YOU BELIEVE WITH HOW YOU LIVE

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

Let me begin with a true story, although names have been changed...

Astur is a black woman originally from the Sudan. She is also a devout Muslim who wears a hijab. Steph identifies as gender non/binary and trans and is part of a charismatic Jewish community. Astur and Steph met each other when they both began studies at University of Toronto, in a Masters program that teaches spiritual psychotherapy. The program is also multi-religious. Against all odds, Astur and Steph became friends, close friends. They not only studied together, but they also spent lots of free time together. Their differences of culture and religion made no difference to their intimate bond and connection as friends. In fact, they developed a deep respect for each other's faith, spirituality and identity...

News flash: there is a mass shooting at a Mosque in a major city in Canada. This followed many racist acts of terror against Muslims in North America. News flash: There is a rise in anti-Semitism, from vandalism at Jewish cemeteries, swastikas spray painted on synagogues, and mass shootings at religious gatherings.

Astur and Steph were horrified and outraged at what was happening. They felt they had to do something. But they wanted to confront the hate and terror not just with protests and awareness-raising. They also want to fight the hate and terror with the power of love. They would use their friendship and bring together their respective spiritual communities to demonstrate what can happen when people learn to love and respect one another for who they are, as they are.

And so, they contacted their people, they spread the word, and a large gathering was scheduled on the grounds of U of T. Large numbers of folk, especially young folk representing the Muslim community, the Jewish community and many other religious communities including Christians, came together to worship together, sing together, and eat together. It was a glorious event, a beautiful event. The flow of love, the energy, the Spirit who is God, was truly present there.

But what about Jesus? If you ask a fundamentalist Christian whether such a gathering is inspired by the Spirit of Jesus as much as any other spirit, the answer would be: definitely not. Unless you confess your faith in Jesus Christ as the son of God and accept him in your heart, and unless you believe that he died for your sins and receive his offer of forgiveness, you are not only lost, you will end up in hell. There is no middle ground. You're either in or you're out, on the right side or the wrong side. Unless Muslims and Jews, Buddhists and Hindus and everyone else gives their hearts to Jesus and receives his forgiveness for their sins, they are damned. They may be good people. They may do all kinds of loving deeds. But it's what you believe in the end, not what you do. We're all human and imperfect after all. We are saved by our faith in God, and specifically, the God who is embodied in Jesus who died on the cross for our sins. Unless you have this faith, you are doomed.

On the other side are those who argue that it doesn't matter what you believe in the end. It's how you live that counts. As long as you respect each other, your beliefs are secondary. If you're good and try your best to be kind and loving, that's what matters. But is that enough? Even if we don't go to the extreme of fundamentalism, do we simply accept a relativism that declares beliefs don't matter and only actions do?

Let's zero in on our scripture readings in search of some revelatory guidance. First, the prophecy of Isaiah. The prophecy is not just about the people of Israel returning home. It is not just about their sons and daughters returning home to them. It is also about light and darkness. In a world of darkness, there is a light shining among them. The light is God, and it will attract not only the people of Israel to return home. It will also draw many peoples from other nations, seeking light in their darkness. "They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord" we're told. So how do we interpret this passage? Clearly, our gospel reading is inspired by this prophecy of Isaiah with its reference to searching for light in the darkness and the shining star leading wise men from the east all the way to Bethlehem. The reference to gold and frankincense is also a clue.

But when we study how the gospel interprets this prophecy, what do we discover? The wise men most certainly do make this journey all the way to Bethlehem, from darkness to light. But how do their beliefs connect to their actions? They come and bring gifts to baby Jesus, and their gifts express their beliefs: The gold expresses the belief that Jesus is king; the frankincense expresses the belief that Jesus is divine; and the myrrh expresses the belief

that even though Jesus is the true king of the world and the divine embodied in a human being, he will be rejected and killed. The whole gospel faith and story is reflected in the faith of the wise men and their actions in coming all the way to Bethlehem and kneeling down in reverence and worship before this little child.

But here's where it gets even more interesting. The wise men know nothing of the scriptures. Their faith in Jesus, their enlightenment and revelation have come through their own faith. The original word for wise men is 'Magi' or 'Magoi' in the original. They are astrologers whose eastern faith discerns the divine in the movement of the stars among other things. And it is this faith that has led them to Jesus. God is speaking to them through their faith, not demanding they convert to biblical faith in order to belong to God. And in case anyone wants to dispute this interpretation, we're told that the Jewish king Herod consults the biblical experts in Bethlehem who know their scriptures inside out as to what biblical prophecy says about the Messiah. They confirm that his birth would be in Bethlehem, but neither they nor Herod care to find out more about whether Jesus is truly the Messiah. He is a threat to their power and authority. Even though they have the scriptures and know the scriptures, they stand against God and God's true messiah revealed to the Magi.

So then, what are we to conclude from this gospel story? What is God trying to tell us through it? First of all, the Magi are led to Jesus and believe in Jesus through their own faith, not biblical faith. And even as they recognize all kinds of things about Jesus – that he is king of the world, that he is divine, and that he will be rejected and killed, they will return back to their homes and to their faith. They're not expected to change their faith because their faith leads them into light and truth and to genuine goodness in their actions. They are motivated by the right things and their hearts are pure. They don't need conversion because they already belong to God.

Second, this passage is telling us that you can have all the biblical knowledge in the world and all the right Christian language and doctrine in your head, but if your heart is not right before God, it matters little what you claim to believe. Actions must speak from your heart and your heart must be genuine before God.

OK, preacher, so how do we bring together our beliefs, a genuineness of heart and right actions? What does that look like for us as followers of Jesus so that we can discern it in others?

Well, the story of the Magi is setting us up for the rest of the gospel story. What we learn from them is that if you have the right spirit in you – sincere, genuine and open, then you will see in Jesus all you need to believe and live. Let me express some of what Jesus reveals and embodies in the rest of the gospel story in five points:

1. You are created out of love and for love by a God who is infinite love not judgement.
2. Even though you make mistakes, abuse, mistreat and neglect other life and the earth, the way to challenge and evoke change in you is not by judging you as bad, condemned and damned to hell, but calling you forth into your created purpose to love as you are loved.
3. Those who are healed and transformed through Jesus' ministry by his embodiment of God's love rise up, seeking to make amends, advocate for truth and justice, let go wrongs and open up space for reconciliation and friendship rather than retaliation and condemnation.
4. Those healed and transformed by Jesus are sent out into the world to become the hands, feet and heart of Jesus in the world, inspired and empowered by his Spirit, the Holy Spirit, active in the world.
5. To be so healed and empowered, inspired and challenged, followers of Jesus need community around them. They need to worship, sing and gather together, learn and relearn the story of Jesus and the scriptures that lead to him and follow from him.

These are all beliefs, but beliefs based on a way of life and a relationship to God as Jesus reveals and embodies God. Following Jesus is about connecting beliefs and actions and how beliefs support and encourage actions, providing a framework and a language expressed in worship and embodied in community.

And one final thing. The infinite love which as Christians we name God, revealed and embodied in Jesus, and flowing out of him as Holy Spirit, is also a love we can recognize in other people, people who wouldn't identify as Christians or as followers of Jesus. This tells us that Jesus can inspire and empower such love-energy in all kinds of ways through various worship languages and practices, various names for the divine, and various beliefs.

What we recognize as familiar is the love language of God in how they live, how they treat others and how they tread on the earth. We see Jesus embodied in all kinds of ways hidden and revealed.

So then, we are called to follow Jesus which also means believing in him. But we also recognize Jesus in those outside the church because we know something of what the Spirit in Jesus looks like through the love that lives in us. Someone of another faith who takes their faith seriously, actively participates in a spiritual community and expresses compassion, generosity, kindness, forgiveness and a commitment to greater justice in society, especially for those marginalized because of race, gender, sexuality or religion... they are our siblings in faith. They are Jesus people even if they go by other names.

Conversely, those who are into judgement and exclusion, blame and fear, even when they use the name of Jesus and favourite bible passages to back up their faith, are not people I would consider siblings in the faith. They lack the love-energy which is home for me.

I must always keep a door open because divine love can work miracles even in the hardest of hearts. But I also know that we must spread love, not hate in the world, compassion not indifference, openness not exclusion. How do we find fresh inspiration, courage and empowerment so to be and do? Thank you, Armour Heights, for providing a space for communal worship and engagement, for being a beacon of light, a shining star leading us to the love who is God, the human face of such love in Jesus, and the energy and power flowing out as Spirit. Amen.