

JOHN
RACKLEY

Reflections

They were there - Barabbas

Mark 15:6-15

OUR VIEWS of the various people who were with Jesus in the last week of his life are shaped by different factors. It might be a sermon, or the way the story was told in our school or church children's work.

These days it might be as likely from a radio play or one of the numbers of films that have depicted the story of Jesus.

There is no record that Jesus and Barabbas actually met at any other time than when they became a strange prisoner exchange at the instigation of Pilate. Who knows whether they passed in a corridor in a Roman fortress or exchanged glances as the crowd demanded to have their way?

Perhaps both Jesus and Barabbas were too preoccupied with what it meant for them to notice each other. But a glance from the Lord could turn a person's heart, so who knows?

I have had only the occasional experience of living in a society under terrorist threat. I could feel the tremendous need to carry on as normal. There was a deep-seated desire not to let the possibility of brutal terror take away the power of doing normal things in their everyday way.

But I also remember talking to people in whose name the suicide bombers were acting. They didn't want it to happen, but they could understand the compulsion that drove someone to do such a thing. The desperation of the terrorist was a mirror to their own fear of helplessness.

The crowds who demanded Pilate release Barabbas had more hope in the stealth of a knife attack than the weaponless Jesus. I don't imagine that they knew what he had said to Peter when he had got out his knife to defend his master. But they could see it written all over him. He offered no resistance to the brutality of Rome. He spoke no word of defiance to bolster their nerve.

He was dumb before his accusers. What sort of Christ was this?

Well that's a turn-up for the book. Freedom.

A walk in the park, not a stagger to a cross.

But why me?

I know my people – full of talk and protest, but when it comes to it, do they do anything? Of course not. It takes the likes of me to actually do something.

You can't just talk about the Romans behind closed doors.

Mumble, mumble, groan, complain, complain.

That gets you nowhere.

'They took my water!'

'They slaughtered my lamb!'

'They beat up Abner's son.'

'Herod should stand up to them.'

'Caiaaphas should pray more.'

Herod stand up to the Romans? He's in their pay!

Caiaaphas pray for God to do something?

He doesn't want God to do anything.

He just wants his precious temple to be finished,

then he can prance around in his robes.

The priests will never bring back the glory of Israel.

No, nothing changes unless there's armed conflict.

Those who live by the sword – win by the sword.

That's what I believe.

They are violent – we need to be more violent.

Roman sword against terrorist knife.

The swift knife. The dead of night knife!

My knife!

And I'm free – to knife again!

To knife again?

Jesus?

You think Jesus makes it different.

Why?

It's the terrorist code – you are ready to die for your friends.

He was no friend of mine;

But he died instead of me.

That made me his friend.

God knows why – anyway, his story is over

And mine is starting all over again.

Because of a carpenter from Nazareth – I'm free

The Revd John Rackley is minister of
Manvers Street Baptist Church, Bath

Sense an

Sharing their texts is one way
faiths can understand their
differences, writes Jenny
Williams

IT'S ABOUT getting a second chance. There's a high moral demand, but Jesus is very kind. She felt fear, but was shown love. It was so powerful, it worked,' says a woman from the local mosque.

It isn't every day you watch Muslims poring over the Bible, shoulder-to-shoulder with Christians and Jews.

Or Jews and Christians immersed in the text of the Qur'an.

But this is Abrahamic Scriptural Reasoning. Here Jewish, Christian and Muslim men and women – clergy, academics and scriptural novices – unite to read and interpret their respective scriptures.

The group I join, held at St John's Wood Church, London, is new, and for many the experience is a first.

The focus tonight is Sin and Salvation. The biblical and Qur'anic passages we look at focus on adultery.

Biblically, we explore John chapter 8, the story of the woman taken in the act of adultery.

'Do you think she sinned again? If not, why not?' we're asked.

The same Muslim woman speaks up.

'If she was stoned, they'd be no chance to redeem herself. If she were to be punished for it in hell, there would be no reason not to do it again.'

'In forgiveness, she gets a second chance.'

Hearing such words from a biblical novice is powerful stuff, prompting a renewed appreciation of Jesus' love for the sinner.

The term 'Scriptural Reasoning' loosely defines an evolving practice of scriptural study by those of different faiths.

Rather than debate the various texts' merits, the idea is to focus on the scripture of the respective traditions, and, using the tools of exegesis and deep reading, better understand each tradition, its roots and context.

This one is run by the Scriptural Reasoning Society. The 20 of us gathered tonight are seated in the main church hall. Several Christians and Jews and four Muslims comprise our group, with a Rabbi, a mullah, several ministers, students and scriptural novices, aged between their early 20s and late 70s.

Nerves swiftly ease, and

laughter punctuates lighter moments.

The faith groups here lay claim to the most complex set of relationships anywhere in the world. Yet tonight there's a genuine desire among each to engage.

History tells of their conflicts, but instances of this very human desire to connect are peppered throughout its pages. Tonight we recognise our spiritual differences, but we engage as human beings.

The need for dialogue is indisputable. And while the practice is steadily gaining appeal, it's no modern phenomenon. 'The name might have been invented in recent periods, but the practice is as ancient as Jews, Christians and

and importantly the scriptures that came with them – are essentially part of our Islamic history,' continues Muhammad. 'Any more than Christians can turn their back on the Old Testament, Muslims are in no position to turn their back, at any level, in recognising the importance of the scriptures that went before.'

Nevertheless, Muslim participation in interfaith dialogue is 'extraordinarily' difficult to achieve. But Scriptural Reasoning Society groups are now welcomed in major UK mosques – a feat achieved through a fatwah (a scholarly opinion on a matter of Islamic law) accomplished by the society.

Drawing upon fundamental Islamic teaching, the fatwah lays down guidelines that enable Muslims to feel comfortable in participating in the dialogue.

'It's an absolutely groundbreaking document. There's nothing like it in the modern period that gives explicit licence to [this] text-based study by the Muslim community.'

Muhammad draws a parallel with *Nostra Aetate* – the Declaration on the Relation of the Church with Non-Christian Religions – from the Vatican in 1965, a landmark in Catholic history.

'Hopefully the fatwah is a first step to challenging the extremism and intolerance in the Muslim world today, and starting to build a new relationship with other faith communities.'

For friendship, rather than consensus, is integral to Scriptural Reasoning.

He describes it as 'interfaith relationships through intra-faith reading', and believes that a person's faith can be greatly enhanced by the practice

'It's a deepening of understanding of "who I am" as a Christian or who I am as a Muslim or a Jew with respect to others.'

'Once you have that secure sense of your own identity, in fellowship and genuine friendship with people who are clearly different, that sets a pattern for building interfaith relationships.'

Thus, the crucial ingredient to the success of Scriptural Reasoning is trust.

'Strangers very quickly become friends if there is trust. Trust arises on two levels. Firstly with people coming to the table, feeling that they're coming as Jews, as Christians or as Muslims, and nothing else.'

'I come as a Muslim, to read my sacred text. But I come to read it in the company of others who are equally devoted to their own sacred scriptures.'

'In that environment, if there's no blurring of distinction

Friendship,
rather than
consensus,
is integral to
Scriptural
Reasoning

Muslims,' explains Muhammad Al-Hussaini, an Islamic scholar, trained mullah, and part founder of the Scriptural Reasoning Society.

'It simply picks up on ancient Islamic principles around the sanctity of scripture and the imperative for dialogue. It sets a precedent for that to happen based on what the Prophet [Muhammad] himself did during his lifetime.'

'People should not feel afraid of it, because you're not doing anything than you'd otherwise do as a Christian in terms of Bible study, or as a Muslim or Jew than your own study of sacred text.'

Why should a Muslim reader of the Qur'an be mindful of the biblical text? The Qur'an explicitly, and reverentially, speaks of 'the scriptures that went before' – widely believed to include the Bible.

'Judaism and Christianity –

d spirituality



A meeting of minds - Clockwise from top left: Rabbi Mark Solomon, Muhammad Al-Hussaini, the Revd Dr Anders Bergquist, vicar of St John's Wood church; Dr Ida Glaser in her study

between our differences as Christians, Jews and Muslims, then we're able to develop authentic relationships across those traditions, without in any way undermining our particular identity.'

Trust also centres on the issue of parity.

The Society's committed to ensuring Scriptural Reasoning is practised purely for the sake of God. It actively seeks to run on a shoestring, giving time for free. Its groups are democratic – everyone has a say and everyone pitches in. There are no leaders – it aims to be a community of equals, regardless of faith, gender or educational background.

'You can't build relationships if they're not based on equality,' says Muhammad. 'If Scriptural Reasoning took place in a Muslim majority country, where there was a persecuted Christian minority, there'd be very little scope for genuine relationship, if that relationship was based on intimidation and fear.'

For Muslims in this country, there can still be an inequality in terms of their relationship with the majority culture.

The 7/7 attacks in 2005 in London, followed by 2007's attempted Glasgow bombing have changed things for Muslims, and the government is anxious to promote its own agenda of community cohesion. It does this by attempting to promote a gentler version of Islam and marginalising extremists.

As such, interfaith dialogue has often become aligned with government agendas around citizenship, says Muhammad. 'The idea being that "If we can get Muslims to start being moderate and interpreting their Qur'an in a particular way, they'll stop blowing themselves up on the tube."

'Stopping Muslims blowing themselves up on the tube is a very worthy cause. But that doesn't have the trust relationship in the practice of people reading their texts together.'

Authentic Scriptural Reasoning can only happen through genuine relationships, which bypass hidden agendas.

'For Muslims, particularly in the current climate, there have been initiatives which have said, "We are going to get you to do an Islamic reformation and, through a certain amount of arm twisting, read your text in a different way."

'While it may be all of our wish that Muslims distance themselves from extremist interpretations, getting government[s] to sponsor a new interpretation of the Qur'an is just going to lead to a backfiring.'

This is a perception shared in

part by Dr Ida Glaser, academic director at The Centre for Muslim-Christian Studies, Oxford, and a Christian.

Ida has published widely on Islam and Muslim-Christian interaction, and has taught Muslim-Christian relations in Jamaica, Nigeria, India and the Philippines. 'Once you get government funding you know that there are political agendas that need to be followed,' says Ida – and secular agendas can impede genuine dialogue.

Community cohesion, of course, isn't the only agenda people engaged in interfaith dialogue have to deal with. For both Christians and Muslims – far less so for Jews – there is a conversion imperative. Ida believes that this has to be honestly acknowledged and that it should not be a problem.

Herself a Christian, she's frequently asked the question, 'Why read the Qur'an at all?'

'Well, it's interesting,' she reasons. 'But more than that, the Qur'an is a book that is accepted as truth by millions of people. At the very least, I need to

not encouraged in Scriptural Reasoning, where focus is upon understanding – is an inevitable motivation in believers of any faith, she continues. Muslims believe God speaks through the Qur'an, and Christians, through the Bible, both want the other to believe as they do.

And in an environment of respect and trust, it needn't be a hindrance when believers are open and honest from the outset. The result? At the least, understanding.

'My personal wish is that it would be a contagious practice, which ordinary friends might do in their kitchen,' Muhammad explains. 'They don't need any money, they don't need to call it anything, and they don't need to have a great big song and dance about it.'

'Whether they're Christian, Muslim, or Jewish, Hindu or Buddhist, or whatever background, it's important that we start to engage the great bulk of believers.'

Ida doesn't believe that studying the Qur'an is a necessity for everyone, considering it more a fruitful academic practice. But Islam does pose a clear challenge to Christians.

Specific Qur'anic passages display high regard for Jesus and his followers. Surah 57:27 talks of Jesus, a Gospel messenger, whose followers' hearts were filled with compassion and mercy.

This presents a 'huge challenge' as to our treatment of one another, she notes.

'In our relationship with Muslims, we are going to be able to live with the compassion and mercy that the Qur'an says Jesus placed into our hearts.'

The Qur'an asks time and again whether Christians are really following Jesus.

'Very often, Muslims know that Christians are called to love their neighbour as themselves, to turn the other cheek – and there are Muslims who are looking at Christians today and saying, "Are you actually following Jesus?"'

It's thus essential that in entering into dialogue, Christians first critique themselves.

'Whether you're wanting to discuss politics, mission, evangelism, scriptural reasoning, dialogue – whatever. Are you first making sure that you are honouring Jesus in your life? If you are not, if you're not living a life of compassion, mercy and love, then whatever your intention is, you're going to subvert it.'

To find out more about The Scriptural Reasoning Society and the fatwah on scriptural reasoning, go to www.scripturalreasoning.org.uk/index1.htm

Scriptural Reasoning: A reflection

Scriptural Reasoning – 'the shared reading by Jews, Christians, Muslims and others of their sacred scriptures' – is intended for grass roots as much as scholars.

What does this possibility bring to mind? • Communication and mobility characterise a world in which people of different faiths interact with each other like never before.

• We have not only to recognise the presence of other religions around us; we have to be in relationship with them.

• Jews, Christians and Muslims alike have deep roots in the life of Abraham.

• Christianity is a missionary religion with an exclusive claim. But so is Islam. We have to talk to each other – and listen. The alternative is unthinkable.

• Dialogue begins when people meet each other, risking the first step to break a tragic circle of misunderstanding.

• Jews and Muslims are people of the book – the Hebrew Bible and the Qur'an. Scriptural Reasoning introduces the Gospel story of Jesus.

• 'To hold back from the fullest meeting with Muslims would be to refrain from the fullest discipleship to Christ ... we cannot tolerate an alienation bridged only by the curious or the aggressive ... the very difficulty must be made an opportunity.' (Kenneth Cragg).

• The best thing people in disagreement can do is to talk to each other with a mutual willingness to exercise the ear more than the tongue – endorsed by the rarely-used caution of Jesus, 'be very careful how you listen' (Luke 18:8).

• If Scriptural Reasoning can move Muslims, Jews and Christians one inch towards an answer to the haunting prayer of the Psalm, 'pray for the peace of Jerusalem' ...

Alan Pain, director, BMS International Mission Centre