

Gifts to share – Christians, other people of faith and the Bible

Introduction:

What does the Bible say about relating to people of non-Christian faiths? This is a question that can make faithful Christians uncomfortable, because so often the stories and teachings that come to mind have been presented to us in ways that make it seem as if God is interested only in Christians and Christian faith. That suggests that the only way we should relate to others is to try to bring them to Christ – and in our multi faith London in the twenty first century most of us know people as neighbours or colleagues who are deeply rooted in another faith and happily blossoming there spiritually. We can either try harder to make converts or become ashamed of our failure in evangelism and fall into hopelessness. There has to be a better way!

The Bible doesn't really say ANYTHING that applies directly to our twenty first century experience of people of other faiths. But here are six stand-alone bible stories that tell us something about the experience of inter faith encounter. Each is titled with a theme - the gifts of humility, freedom, acceptance, wonder, compassion, and friendship. These are strong biblical themes but they also relate to our day to day life. Each study starts with one or two examples of how those themes have come up in the lives of some real Christians and one or more questions. There follows a bible passage on the same theme, some more questions for discussion, and some simple ideas about how you might follow up.

I hope they will be of help to people who *don't* consider themselves inter faith enthusiasts. They might be helpful as a simple bible study series, or in preaching, or just for an individual to browse.

And I hope they will help people to be confident in building relationships with people of other faiths and sharing those precious gifts of humility, freedom, acceptance wonder, compassion and friendship with them.

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HUMILITY

A question from life

Eileen is a photography lecturer and URC member. She has roots from Ghana and the Caribbean. She tells:

A shy hijab-wearing Muslim girl took a Work Placement Module with me in her second year of studies. She gained hugely in confidence. I was impressed to see how much she had progressed through this Module; I thought 'she's gone out of her comfort zone'. She changed; she took a risk. I admired her. In her final year of studies, she went to Calais, to the Jungle. She's brave!

Hazel is a URC member who is involved in a church-run community lunch. She says:

Visiting the Mosque and the Temple on the inter faith study course I felt I knew a little bit more about people of other faiths, and had their welcome. It made me think, do we do enough? I visited India, and saw the hospitality of the Sikhs, and all the Indians, and their generosity. People at the community lunch say, 'People don't pay properly for our community lunch' and I say, 'The Sikhs do it for free!'

Do these stories remind you of similar encounters? Tell your story.

Has the behaviour of a believer of another faith ever humbled you by its courage or generosity?

Did it make you question your own values and lifestyle?

A story from the Bible

Mark 7: 24-30

Jesus has travelled north of Israel, and is trying to lie low. But a woman comes and seeks him out in the house where he's hiding to demand healing for her little daughter. It's an outrageous intrusion on his privacy. A woman of that time and place shouldn't approach a man like that. And she is a pagan, a polytheist, one of those who babbles ignorantly in her prayers (Matthew 5:7). Jesus doesn't need to have anything to do with her; his mission is to the Jews only, he tells her. But she is feisty and answers back. Rather than get angry in

response, Jesus hears, admires her faith, agrees with what she says and does what she asks.

The last thing Jesus' followers would expect of him is that he would be humbled and brought to change his mind by a pagan woman. But this is exactly what happens.

Some questions for us:

Can you see any similarities between the reaction of Eileen and Hazel in their encounters with people and Jesus' reaction in this Bible story?

What does this story tell us about Jesus?

Ask yourself: Am I humble enough to recognise that I too carry stereotypes of other people of faith that need to be challenged? What might be the best way to do that?

Ideas for exploring:

Find a way of visiting a Sikh Gurdwara through your church or Council of Faiths. Enjoy the hospitality and the food you will be offered, and think about what Christians can learn from such hospitality.

If you have a friend or neighbour or co-worker of another faith, find a relaxed moment to ask something about their faith (e.g. *What does Diwali mean to you?* or *What does your faith teach about hospitality/how to pray/poverty?*) and listen attentively to the answer; ask some more questions on the same subject and be ready to answer some yourself.

FREEDOM

A question from life

Cathy is a member of the Church of England and talks of the time when, as a newly baptised Christian, she went to teach English in Thailand:

Participating in the rituals of another faith, I did what local culture asked me to do, out of respect. Sometimes I hoped I was doing the right thing. In the temple in Thailand I bowed down; I didn't chant because I didn't have the language. It was painful on the knees because of sitting on the floor. It was all very interesting: I was contemplating things like – am I participating or not? I felt drawn to understand Buddhism more; it challenged my faith. I have incorporated some Buddhism as part of my faith.

Hesitation about entering another's worship building affects people of other faiths who think about entering churches, too. Here's a story from Hazel's lunch club:

A Muslim bus driver came to our church lunch club. 'Can anybody come along?' he asked. His bus broke down one day and he came in. 'Can I?' he said. 'This is exactly what the community should be about, welcoming everybody'. He used to park the bus outside the church and come in for his lunch break. He brought his passengers too. Then he stopped coming. He had gone on a diet!

Have you visited a place of worship of another faith or witnessed the rituals of someone of another faith?

What was your experience?

Were you drawn by their devotion? Did you ask yourself 'Is this OK?' or 'How far can I go?'

A story from the Bible

2 Kings 5: 1-19 (a Jewish story)

Naaman is a high-ranking much respected soldier from Syria. He suffers from leprosy. His wife's maid, an unnamed young girl taken as a war prisoner from Israel, recommends the prophet Elisha. Grandly, with the King of Syria's recommendation, Naaman goes to see the King of Israel, who thinks this is a trick to start a war. But Elisha hears and sends for Naaman. He gives

instructions for him to be healed by dipping in the river Jordan. Naaman is furious not to be treated with more ceremony, but his servants urge him to give it a go and he is healed. He goes to thank Elisha and says that from now on he will serve the one true God of Israel, not Syria's God Rimmon. But the King of Syria demands that he accompany him to the Temple of Rimmon – is it OK, he asks, to bow down with him to Rimmon? 'Go in peace', says Elisha.

Some questions for us:

What is it that enables Naaman to move from being closed minded to more open minded?

When Naaman tentatively asks if he may have a bit of a foot in both religious camps, Elisha gives him his blessing. How do you feel as you explore relationships with other people of faith? Can you sense God's blessing?

Where is God in the stories told by Cathy and Hazel? Can you see something of the same freedom that Naaman is given in their stories of encounter?

Where are the limits to freedom? At what point in an inter faith encounter might my own integrity in relation to my Christian faith be compromised? If discussing this in a group, rejoice if you come to differing conclusions. That's ok!

Ideas for exploring:

Arrange to visit a Hindu Temple, along with others. You will probably be offered *Arti* – the opportunity to wave your hands over a flame and then raise them to your face, and *Prasad* – a gift of sweets that have been offered to the god. Use your freedom to choose whether to accept or respectfully decline. Share your feelings and responses with the group afterwards.

Do you know anyone from a family where more than one faith is followed by different members? There are more than you might expect within our churches. If they are willing, ask them about how that works in their family setting. (Don't push if there is unwillingness – this can be a very sensitive topic for some).

ACCEPTANCE

Questions from life

Noble is a URC pastor with a minority congregation that has suffered a history of religious persecution in their country of origin.

A Muslim woman, a single parent, came to the church to ask about the Christian faith. The church community was suspicious of her motives and protective of the pastor, but she turned out to be a genuine seeker, with a genuine hunger for the gospel, although she knew nothing in any depth. The pastor didn't criticise her original faith. In due course she asked for baptism. She now calls the pastor 'dad'. He reflects: Jesus accepts; he never says 'Change, and then come back'. Spirituality is a developing process.

Another pastor, Tim, from a white British background, reports a conversation between a senior Imam and a young Christian who wanted to bring him to faith in Christ.

'You want to convert me!' said the Imam. 'And I want you to be a Muslim. But you won't! So where do we go from here?'

Have you felt your faith to be honestly respected by another? What happened?

Have you been able to listen appreciatively to someone of a non-Christian faith? Tell your story.

Have your beliefs changed over time because of the influence of others?

A story from the Bible

John 4: especially verses 3-30

Jesus is passing through the country of the Samaritans, whose faith is not recognised by Jews. Sitting alone on a well in the heat of the day, he meets someone who comes to draw water. She's an unlikely conversation partner for a man of that time and place because she is a women, because she is a Samaritan, and because she has a dodgy sexual history, all of which, from a

traditional standpoint, make her contaminating to Jesus. But he accepts her as she is and they have a frank and lively exchange about who Jesus is, and about who she is. It's a life-changing conversation for both of them. She recognises Jesus as Messiah and spreads the word about him; she is no longer an outcast to her village. Jesus launches a whole new phase of his mission.

(If you have time, read the full story in John 4 – it's easy to read and it's a really interesting conversation. Notice how it develops in four of five stages)

Some questions for us:

Have you talked to someone and been able to disagree honestly and without judging the other person? How did the conversation unfold? How were you changed by it?

How would you answer the Imam's question in Tim's story?

Ideas for exploring:

Courage leads to acceptance and acceptance can lead to friendship. But it takes time. What relationship with someone of another faith would you like to develop and can you commit to prioritising it over time?

Do some research (books, internet, visits) about a faith you don't feel specially attracted to. Give it some time. Note your reactions to what you discover. Do they change over time?

WONDER

A question from life

Cathy, an Anglican Londoner and teacher:

When I lived in the Far East, I had a Thai colleague. She meditated regularly. She was deep, warm, human, understanding. Everything was based around the Buddhist way of life. I learned so much about life and faith from other people immersed in Buddhism. 'She's got something I'd like to get'!

AND

Yousif (a neighbour Muslim) has got something. Depth of understanding and connection with things that are beyond.

Hazel, a URC member:

When I feel closest to God is outside in nature. When I feel that awe is in nature; in the tiny details of something or standing by the sea. It gives you a great sense of something. I don't want there not to be mystery. Not only religious people have a sense of mystery – my children and grandchildren, Non-believers are bowled over by the experience of mystery.

What has caused you wonder in the life of a non-Christian?
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A story from the Bible

John 20: 24-29

Ten of the disciples have an amazing experience of meeting the risen Jesus on Easter evening but Thomas is somewhere else and has missed out; he is disappointed, angry and perhaps even panicky (*Does Jesus hate me that he allowed me to be left out?*) and it's totally in character that he insists on having his own first - hand experience of seeing and touching (even poking) the risen Jesus. The next Sunday, Jesus meets him with sudden peace and he is overawed. *My Lord and my God!* He breathes. Suddenly everything looks completely different. It's a life changing experience.

Some questions for us:

Where do you recognise wonder in your own life? In a group, exchange your experiences.

Am I willing to hear stories of wonder from non-Christians?

What is going on? Do we all have the same experience when we are 'lifted up', Or is it different? If different, is this because of the faith we belong to or because we are all unique?

Ideas for exploring:

Share, if you can, in a worship ceremony at a Hindu Temple or any place of worship. Go ready to catch a sense of wonder. Note your reactions. Share with the group if possible.

COMPASSION

Questions from life

Noble, a URC minister from a minority background, speaks of the gap he's experienced between the prosperity of the West and the poverty of people in his homeland:

Among my people, there is criticism of inter faith work; people are exclusive; they are not helping a person of another faith who may be oppressed The person who helps is usually someone going through a tough time, who is marginalised, who understands, who has experience of poverty and humiliation. Westerners don't have experience of that! We fail to share our resources. We won't take a risk.

Eileen, a URC member of African-Caribbean heritage was walking to work.....

...down a side street, when I saw an elderly man, Mr Singh. He had this big bag and said to me 'I was praying to God that someone would come by. Will you carry this bag to the station?' So I did. This is, like, God's working there. God's in that encounter.

Tim, a URC minister, says:

I think of the refugee crisis and how we've benefitted from people who came here, for example the Jewish refugees who came here in the 1930s, many of them going on to become leading scientists, academics, writers and artists or to serve in World War 2. I think of the things refugees have done to help others.

Have you received compassion at the hands of someone of another faith?

Have you failed to show compassion to someone because they are of another faith, and so a bit alien to me?

Have you reached out in compassion across a faith divide?

A story from the Bible:

Luke 10: 25-37

Re-live the well-known story of the Good Samaritan from the point of view of the victim. If you are working in a group, have one person ask the group to close their eyes while you take them slowly through this imaginative exercise. If alone, read what's below first and then close your eyes and work through what's suggested. Allow several minutes for this – up to half an hour if you have that amount of time.

You're a first century Jew making the six-mile journey on foot from Jerusalem to Jericho; you're alone on the road. It's not very safe. In your imagination, notice what you see as you walk, what you hear. What about the sense of smell? Is it hot/cold? How do your clothes feel in contact with your body? How do your feet feel on the road? What emotions are you aware of?

Suddenly you are attacked by several robbers, who take everything, including your clothes, and beat you up. You are left lying in the dirt. Once again, study in detail what your senses are saying to you. Where does it hurt? Can you see anything as you lie there? What can you hear? Maybe you can taste dust, or your own blood, in your mouth.....What are your feelings? Loneliness? Anxiety? Anger? Something else? What do you tell yourself about how you are going to get out of this situation – or are you thinking you will die there?

You hear footsteps and are aware of someone coming past. You become aware – imagine how; is it by sight, hearing, or how? – that this person is a priest. What are your feelings, hopes? Imagine this priest walking on. What are your sensations, feelings, now?

The same this happens again. This time you become aware the person is another member of the pure priestly clan. How do you become aware of him; what do you feel as he draws near; and what do you sense and feel as he passes by without helping you?

Once more someone comes along the road. This man is a Samaritan, a non-believer, a polluted person whose touch would normally defile you. He stops. He comes over. As he touches you, moves you, tends to your wounds, what do

you feel in your body? What do you see, hear, smell of this man? And of what is in the background? What are your emotions?

As he journeys on, leading his donkey with you carried on its back, perhaps you have enough strength to turn to him and say something. What is it that you say? What does he say back? Find a bit more strength to say something to God, too. What is it that you say?

Some questions for us:

Are you willing to both receive and give costly compassion across the boundaries of faith?

Are there ways in which you have been/ can be mutual in our compassion, sometimes giving, sometimes receiving?

Ideas for exploring:

Watch out for news items about surprising compassion across the barriers of faith. OR (more hands-on)....

.....Find out if there is any local inter faith group doing the work of compassion for vulnerable people in our society and world (work with refugees, night shelters, food banks, overseas development) and get stuck in.

FRIENDSHIP

A question from life

From recycling to reincarnation - Tim, a URC minister, once had Sikh neighbours on both sides; both were assimilated in that they had cut their hair; one was religious, one not. There was a problem in the street – the recycling bins were filled up with clothes as soon as they were emptied. Everybody was watching to see who was doing this and getting twitchy. Tim noticed one of the Sikhs using the bin around 11pm, and his wife putting clothes out too. So he slipped a leaflet about the Council's take-away recycling service through the letterbox. Within a week, the neighbour opened his garage to Tim and it was stuffed with clothes (his wife was a hoarder!). Tim explained how to get it recycled and within a week everything was cleared and the street relaxed. Three months later the neighbour remarked: *Tim, I can now put my car in the garage!* And later, one day, as he was washing the car, *Tim, what do you think of reincarnation?*

Sister Maire, from Luton, tells: When the elderly French priest Father Jacques Hamel was murdered by terrorists in 2015, the Council of Mosques wanted to make a gesture of solidarity; so they brought a rose to each church with a message of sympathy. Some churches were open and welcoming and others treated the gesture with suspicion.

Has God used ordinary neighbourliness to increase your depth of communication and understanding with a person of another faith?

A story from the Bible:

The Book of Ruth (a Jewish story):

Ruth is from Moab and worships the gods of Moab. But she is married to an immigrant from Israel who worships Israel's God and is very attached to her mother-in-law Naomi. When her husband and his brother both tragically die, Ruth accompanies her mother in law on the journey back to Israel and her

village of Bethlehem, where she hopes to find help in her destitution. Naomi urges her to return to her parents and re-marry in her own country; Ruth insists, vowing to Naomi that she is part of her life for ever, and that her people and her religion are now Ruth's. And so it is: together, with great difficulty, they establish a life in Bethlehem and Ruth becomes the great-great-great grandmother of Israel's greatest king, David.

Some questions for us:

How would your church respond to a gesture like the one described by Sister Maire?

What mixed faith families do you know? How has that affected the faith of the different parties?

Do you know someone who has converted to Christianity from another faith or from Christianity to another faith? What do you know about why they did this and what the process was like?

Ideas for exploring:

Set about developing a friendship with a person of another faith. Grab every opportunity for a chat; invite them into your house; accept an invitation to theirs. See how things develop as you build trust.

Do the same at the level of your local church. Go as a group to visit another place of worship; eat what they give you. Invite their people to visit the church. Be prepared to be the first to leave the comfort of familiar territory and do the visiting!