

“I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” John 14.6.

John Parry was brought up in Congregationalism in Wales and having trained for that denomination's ministry was ordained as a Presbyterian of the Church of Bangladesh shortly after the civil war that saw the creation of that country. After working as a Rural Dean and teaching in a newly established Bengali medium theological college he returned to ministry in Southall, West London, for the United Reformed Church and was later given a three-year fellowship to research for a PhD in Sikh Studies at the University of Birmingham under the guidance of Prof Werner Ustorf. Subsequently he taught World Church Studies and World Faiths at Luther King House in Manchester for nearly 20 years but also spend short periods of time teaching in Samoa, Taiwan, Madagascar South India and the University of Bangor. He first retired in 2012 only then to become the minister of a small church in Buckinghamshire and later Director of the London Inter-faith Centre. He has now retired properly.

Written so long after Jesus lived, one must ask if these claims are the actual words of Jesus accurately remembered or do they reflect the belief of the Gospel writer and his contemporaries in the Early Church of the day? In either case an exploration of their meaning and implications for us today is vital. Such an exploration I shall undertake in the light of a long relationship with Sikh colleagues whose insights have considerably influenced my own faith and understanding whilst I still hang on to my upbringing within the Reformed traditions of the Christian faith. So...

This is a very personal essay, more a reflection on 50 years of ministry among people of differing faiths – I can't really call them other because the 'other' is never wholly the 'other'. It is far from an attempt to convince the reader of the 'correctness' of my ideas but an attempt to establish where I now stand having been called to ministry and believing that I am still so called. But it is also a recognition that I no longer speak with the certainties that upheld me in the early days of education for ministry or missionary endeavour.

There are so many questions that the text invites – if one is brave enough to recognise them.

Can we use scripture as simply a proof-text? Were I to be of another faith community and a Christian were to say, 'The Bible says...' I would be inclined to think, but probably wouldn't say, 'So, what?' How do I deal with those texts that I find difficult? Inherent in my upbringing and faith is the concept of *sola scriptura*, but certainly not a literal view of scripture. So, I am forced to recognise the importance of provisionality, metaphor and the implications which arise.

I must view theology with Guru Nanak's question in mind: How can finite human-beings understand the nature of an infinite God? I would suggest that there must be a provisionality to all our theological statements and this essay must be read with that in mind, we still 'see through a glass darkly'.

Context is everything. Just who was John and precisely when he wrote the Gospel are not issues for discussion here, but it is important to point out that it was written at

a time when relations between Church and Synagogue were in tension with the consequence that exclusive claims or statements of rejection would not be uncommon. Exclusive claims on the part of Christians have been made on the basis of this text, claims that I find difficult to justify in the light of experience of the practice of faith on the part of people of deep spirituality from other faith communities.

So, what can be gained from this text?

Way

The text is not to be used as a mantra. Way is precisely that – a way of life. It is derived from *halakha* – where way, I would suggest, is to be seen more in terms of the way to walk rather than religious law. I would, therefore, see it in terms of a guide to life and if one takes the life of Jesus as an example, then it is about love, care for people, openness to others and self-giving – the list could go on. It is the way of Jesus, one which is meant to be replicated in the daily life of a person of faith. Since the Early Church places the way of Jesus as being of the essence in contrast to the Jewish Halakha then one begins to understand the burgeoning antipathy between the two faiths at the time. At about the same time the Qumran community would have also claimed theirs was The Way. And besides, within Greco-Roman religions, Emperor worship was being instituted. The claim that Jesus is the way would have been vehemently declared by Christians, possibly using polemical language, by members of the new faith – a minority community - much as has been seen in the last century of the mission movement.

Truth

Given the Greek text uses the word *aletheia*, it is hardly surprising that the claim is so often seen in more philosophical terms – truth, reality, certainty, fact. But I am aware that since Jesus did not originally use Greek as the language of communication, would he have been thinking more in terms of the Hebrew *emeth*? I see this concept more in terms of trustworthiness, of something to be experienced, particularly when it comes to the experience of God's trustworthiness. Does the term truth qualify the way of Jesus – that such a way is trustworthy because God is trustworthy?

Life

If we see truth as qualifying the way, then life is to be seen as the consequence of the way of Jesus. It is a life enhanced by God's grace, lived for others, fulfilling and complete.

What always strikes me, however, is that these three words are to be seen not as ends in themselves but as pointing beyond themselves in exactly the same way that Jesus points beyond himself to God and the realm of God. A way, unless it is the M25 or the M60 or is a vanity project ordered by a political tyrant, leads somewhere, has a goal, an end point. It is a way to, just as truth is the truth of, and life is life in, that is, life enhanced by the presence and grace of God. Each of these words needs qualifying. Let me suggest that our phrase indicates Jesus as the one who leads beyond himself to God. I do not see the text as one that negates other faiths, but it

does point to fulfilled life as something that is only possible through selfless life which trusts in the grace of God. Of that Christians do not have a monopoly of such a life, nor of God's grace. I am not making a claim that all religious faiths are 'the same'. I am making a claim that we and they have the potential to discover, and live by, God's trustworthiness. That word 'potential' is pivotal.

Our text continues: 'No one comes to the Father except through me.'

Did Jesus really say this? Or was it a claim put in the mouth of Jesus by the author of John's Gospel at that time of burgeoning antipathy between Church and Synagogue? It really does seem out of keeping with the Jesus who spoke so positively and movingly of Gentiles outside his own Jewish faith. But the phrase is in keeping with the claims that would be made by those who considered themselves a persecuted faith group. However, I do find myself wanting to affirm something of the text in terms of the importance of the way Jesus presents – that the self-giving, sacrificial selflessness that was central to the life and death of Jesus must be replicated in the life of a person of faith, whatever it may be. I'd want to affirm that the more self-centred one is, the less God-centred one is likely to be. My goodness, that sounds exclusive, but I would want to argue that it's not Christian exclusiveness.

There is an arrogance to both exclusivity and inclusivity. The latter may be genuinely held but may reflect a mistaken commonality that reflects an attempt to absorb, overlooking the very real matter that people of other faiths may not wish, in any way, to be considered part of the Christian whole. Certainly, Gandhi felt that way very strongly when people suggested that 'deep down he must be Christian'.

By the same token the exclusive arrogance of claiming to be 'the only way', as some Christians use this text, leaves me cold and makes me ask questions about the wider experience of those who take that line. They have often missed out on the deep spirituality and trust my colleagues of other faiths have in that Being we are apt to call 'God'.

The use of a pluralist line I find difficult if it is expressed in terms of all religions being true. That they often contradict each other makes that difficult to accept they are 'all the same' when expressed in such a bold manner. I recognise that they all exist in parallel and may, in one way or another, contain elements of truth. Thus, there is an element of the continued search needed – I was brought up with the lines of a hymn ringing in my ears: 'The Lord hath yet more light and truth to break forth from his word.' It's a life-long occupation of having to deal with the jack-in-the-box God who, just when you've got all the God questions sorted to your own satisfaction and God nicely packaged, God bursts out saying, 'Sorry, sunshine, you've got it wrong!' Back to Guru Nanak: 'How can finite human-beings understand the nature of an infinite God?'

Whilst we Christians may be very familiar with the Muslim rejection of the word 'Father', relatively few would come across Sikh critiques of this passage, two of which are worth exploring.

In the nineteen eighties, when the URC organised bilateral conversations with Sikhs some of our number dared to use the term 'Mother' of God. There was a murmur of

embarrassment – what would the Sikhs think? They laughed, ‘Oh, we’ve been doing that for the last three hundred years,’ and politely countered our theological foolishness and indicated, from the Guru Granth Sahib, the formlessness of the One who possesses all qualities and transcends all qualities (A.G. p.290). Guru Nanak says of God, ‘You are my Father, you are my Mother, You are the giver of peace to my soul and very life’. (p. 1144) We talked of the difficulty of the English language’s having no gender-neutral personal pronoun leaving those of us who craft sermons or theological essays with having to find ways of avoiding gendered pronouns. It’s a problem Sixteenth Century Panjabi doesn’t have, but it can be a problem when translating Sikh scripture into English when ‘He’ is regularly used giving altogether the wrong impression. For our Sikh colleagues ‘Father’ is an inadequate concept, but even worse is the seeming arrogance of exclusivity.

For many years Sikhism was regarded in the West as a synthesis of Islam and Hinduism. I believe this to be incorrect. Guru Nanak’s purpose was much more in terms with a protest against the religiosity of the followers of the two faiths. He rejected neither of the two faiths. His understanding of them was thorough. He had a knowledge of both Arabic and Sanskrit, but that did not preclude his criticisms.

That said, he befriended God-conscious human-beings and was accompanied on his travels by a Hindu and a Muslim colleague. When the fifth human Guru, Arjan, started compiling the Sikh scriptures he followed Guru Nanak’s example of respect and appreciation and so included verses penned by Muslims and Hindus that were in keeping with Sikh philosophy. One of his predecessors, the third human Guru, Amar Das, once said: "God, save this burning world through your grace by whatever way it can be saved" (A.G. p.853). This prayer for the welfare of all human-beings has been taken by Sikhs to indicate the recognition and value the Guru gave to all religions and revelations. Exclusivism plays no part whatsoever in a faith that encourages co-operation with all God-guided people. Given the present state of God’s creation Christians would do well to recognise that we’re all in it together.

I have been deeply and gainfully influenced by discussions with my Sikh colleagues and am deeply grateful for their friendship which I believe is God’s gift, so in responding to the verse from John’s Gospel I must indicate both my discomfort and my appreciation.

My discomfort is because of the way in which it leads some Christians to claim exclusivity. Is this really what Jesus had in mind? I shall not say he didn’t – who knows his mind? But I do find it out of keeping with the open-minded figure I read about elsewhere, particularly in the Synoptic Gospels.

I am further challenged by another matter – that is the challenge to live the Way, to take up the Cross daily by living a sacrificial life. I have stressed that even if Jesus did say these words, I do not believe they were to be used as a mantra – ‘Jesus is the only way’. If anything, Jesus is challenging people to live out, not simply claim, the Way. Truth becomes a sphere of pragmatic action not simply a matter of belief. I am constantly challenged by Guru Nanak’s question: What is the use of your spirituality if my stomach is still empty? The question can be replicated, of course, in many ways including, for instance, my spirituality being useless unless I involve myself in the struggle for the maintenance of God’s creation.

A further challenge to see this verse in a positive light is in terms of Sikh colleagues opening up an understanding of The Way. In a discussion about the biblical text that if you want to gain your life you must lose it, Sikh colleagues spoke of the need to eliminate *haumai*, self-centredness. It's a dominant theme within Sikhism, for the more self-centred you are the less God-centred you're likely to be. When Jesus talks of 'taking up the Cross daily' is he thinking in these terms if not these words? And it is in dying to self-centredness that one finds fulfilment in the self-hood of others. Selflessness is not self-negation, it is the finding of the symbiotic self, lived in tune with others, with creation as a whole and with God. Is this what Jesus calls 'the fullness of life'? I'm not convinced that such a life is confined to Christians only.

The text is not one I find easy to deal with, but it does give rise to significant matters:

- Context is everything and claims made about Jesus must be seen in terms of the persecuted minority community that was the Early Church when determined and unequivocal conviction was vital.
- Yet the importance of 'way' is so significant. It requires pragmatic action. 'Jesus is the only way' is not to be used as a mantra, rather the way of Jesus is crucial in which one searches to be God-centred, not self-centred and my experience is that Christians don't have a monopoly of such a lifestyle.
- If we're to deal with 'truth', perhaps we need to recognise the understanding grounded in the Hebrew recognition of the trustworthiness of God rather than thinking in abstract philosophical claims. But we also need to see truth as that which is grounded in the historicity of Jesus of Nazareth. We're not dealing with a mythological being.
- Given the Gospels as a whole, I believe Jesus points beyond himself towards God. I seek a theocentric theology, grounded in God's grace, lived to God's glory.