

EASTER 5A
ALL SAINTS BIRKENHEAD
REVEREND JORDAN GREATBATCH

I was confronted by two Mormon missionaries when I opened my front door. What possessed me I don't know but I heard myself inviting them inside. They immediately launched into their patter about how they were the true religion and if you didn't believe then you would end up in a very nasty place. Of course I argued with them. I think I got the better of the argument because after 15 minutes they asked if they could leave. Clearly they had no interest in me or who I was. There was no sense of wanting to form a relationship that we might understand each other. They were only concerned to prove by argument that theirs was the true faith.

There was a time when churches used to vie for the position of being the only true church. Mostly we don't do that any more. Nowadays we are confronted by non Christian religions and are required to decide what place they have in the scheme of things. Of course some Christians say they are pagan. But I think many would look at other faiths and say they see something of God in them.

No longer do we see these people as living in darkness who need to be saved from error.

2

Generally speaking the Christian Church is not quite so arrogant as to believe we have the whole truth and others have nothing. Nowadays there is a willingness to talk, to learn, to understand, to seek the good in other religions.

This dialogue between Christian traditions and between Christians and other religions has revealed one thing we all have in common. In every religion there is what we call "spirituality". This is the art and practice of prayer. This spirituality is the means by which an individual learns to understand and communicate with the divine. Anyone who follows a religion is seeking God and this search and the prayer which accompanies it are common to all religions. Whatever else may divide religions and whatever else may divide Christians, this practice of prayer is common to all and provides a meeting point.

3

Then we are confronted with a passage like this morning's Gospel. At first sight it seems to suggest that outside the church there is no salvation. Jesus said "I am the way the

truth and the life, no one comes to the Father except through me.” This sort of claim was once the basis for much of the church’s missionary work. Christianity was seen as the only way to God. This meant that everyone had to be a Christian if they were to reach God. This was the reason for the great flood of missionaries which populated the world in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Then of course there is the concern much closer to home. What about our own family and friends who are not Christians. Are they too not going to find salvation? I still have parishioners who question me about their children who were brought up in the church but no longer believe.

4

To use such texts in this exclusive way denies another truth of the gospel which tells us Christ died for the salvation of the whole world. Christ came, not to condemn the world, but to save it. How then do we make sense of this Gospel reading. Is it saying something about those

inside or outside the church, or is it saying something different.

If we are to make sense of this passage it is worth considering the context from which it comes. Just before the crucifixion Jesus gave some teaching to his disciples. In this passage Jesus was saying something about his own nature. He was telling the disciples, and also telling us, that to have seen him was to have seen the Father. Jesus and the Father are one. So if Jesus and the Father were one, then following Jesus was a sure way of worshipping God.

5

This does not mean that there is no other way to God. It does mean that through Christ there is a sure way to God. No other religion claims that God has revealed himself completely in a human being. This is unique to Christianity. We claim that the nature of our God is clearly revealed in Jesus. Therefore those who follow him know

in truth the divine life. Other religions can and do contain much that is true about God. Only Christianity provides us with the human face of God. Because of this very humanity we gain access to God which gives us life.

With the world's nations becoming more involved with each other, with the migration of peoples from one country to another, the question of how we look at other faiths will continue to be our concern. Can we be open enough to listen and learn from others? Can we be patient before we launch in with our own understanding of God?

6

I think that much of our understanding of other faiths is simply by what we see and hear in the media. If what they say about Christianity is anything to go by then we need to be careful about taking their word as true. Perhaps we would be better to inform ourselves from the people who belong to other faiths. There are societies in Auckland which encourage conversations between Christians and Jews and between Christians and Muslims. Maybe belonging to one of these will help us to see the value of

other faiths because we are willing to enter into relationship with those who are practising their faith. Surely understanding will lead to tolerance. If we are secure in our own faith we need not be afraid of listening to how others see God and the world.

That Jesus is the way the truth and the life is a bold claim. It is not intended to separate us from others. It is simply intended to tell us who Jesus is and where we his followers gain our access to God. This is the Good News.