

Islam, Mohammad, and Muslims

Sermon by Laurie Wesley,
St Andrews Church.

Readings: Genesis 12:1-4, Genesis 17:20-21, Matthew 5: 43-47

Introduction.

As we are all aware, Islam has a very bad image at present, which is deserved to some extent, but is very sad because it gives an extremely distorted picture of Islam, and especially of Muslims.

I have a number of friends or colleagues that I have made over the years and that I keep in touch with from time to time, especially at conferences or seminars. I have two very good friends from Egypt, a couple from Turkey and very many from Indonesia. As it happens they are all Muslims, though I don't think of them as such. I have travelled widely in Indonesia and briefly visited both Turkey and Egypt, and I have always found the locals very friendly and welcoming. The fact that they are Muslims and I am a Christian has never been of any consequence.

The three Abrahamic Faiths.

We heard the reading about Abraham and the promise that his descendents would be a blessing to all the nations. Judaism, Christianity and Islam all trace their roots to Abraham, and clearly worship the same God. Muslim Arabs see themselves as the descendants of Abraham through his son Ishmael, and see themselves worshipping the same God. Yet they share a very unhappy history of conflict and bitter enmity. Christianity is the worst offender - Christians started persecuting Jews right from New Testament times, and engaged in mass slaughter by the Crusaders.

. The Prophet and His Life Story

Arabia was a rather lawless place at the time of Mohammed, who was born in **570AD** and died in **643AD**. It was ruled by clans, and the clan that ruled Mecca, the holy city of the Arabia, was the Quraysh. They were corrupt rulers who exploited and oppressed the poor. Despite its rather lawless state, Jeddah and Mecca were both important centres of trade, on regular caravan routes.

Mohammed was born in Mecca and brought up by his uncle, with whom he travelled in merchant caravans to Syria (Damascus). Later he made similar journeys in the service of a wealthy widow, Khadijah, who was very impressed with his character and ability. She proposed marriage to him when he was 25 and she was 40. It was a very happy marriage. Mohammad was religious by nature and undertook regular sessions of meditation and prayer.

He had his first revelations at age 40 in a cave where he meditated. Three years later he began to preach in public - his message was to turn from idol worship, and to stop exploiting the poor and show compassion to them. His message incurred the wrath of the ruling clan at Mecca. Eventually Mohammed had to flee for his life and took refuge in a city called Medina, at the invitation of its residents. Following a number of years of conflict Mohammad and his followers returned to Mecca and by this time the Meccans had accepted him as a true prophet.

The building known as the Kaaba (cube) was the central shrine of worship for Arabs long before the time of Mohammad. Arabs came to worship at the Kaaba, which was originally rather different from what it is today. It contained various idols and is believed to contain the stone where Abraham and his descendents made offerings, including Abraham's offering of his son Isaac..

Outline of Muhammad's life

AD 570: Born in Mecca. Brought up by his Uncle **Abu Talib**. As a boy he travelled with his uncle on merchant caravans to Syria (Damascus). Later he made similar journeys in the service of a wealthy widow, **Khadijah**, who was very impressed with his character and ability.

595. Khadijah proposed marriage to him, which he accepted. He was 25 and she was 40. It was a happy marriage that lasted until her death 23 years later.

610: First revelations at age of 40 - in a cave, and traditionally believed to be recited to him by the angel Gabriel

613: Muhammad begins to preach in public in Mecca. His message is a call for worship of the one God, and a condemnation of the oppression and greed of the ruling clan the Quraysh,

618: Khadijah and his uncle Abu Talib die. Muhammad and his followers are threatened with violence by the rulers of Mecca

620: Muhammad meets Arab tribes in Medina, who request his help in their dispute with Mecca. Medina at the time was not so much a city as a collection of small tribal villages.

622 (24 September): Mohammad and many of his followers flee to Medina. This flight, known as the Hegira (Hijrah), marks the first year of the Muslim calendar.

623: Mohammad and his followers start attacking caravans heading for Mecca.

627: Meccans attack Medina and a bloody battle follows, the attack fails and they withdraw. Arab cities and towns near Mecca and Medina begin converting to Muhammad.

628: Meccans again attempt to capture Medina, and fail.

630: Muhammad and an army march on Mecca, the Meccans capitulate and Muhammad enters Mecca peacefully, and then returns to Medina

632: Muhammad dies in Medina, aged 62, after a short illness.

There were a number of both Jewish and Christian communities in Arabia at the time of Mohammad, and he saw himself as a prophet to the Arabs, in the line of Old Testament prophets and of Jesus himself.

The Qur'an (Koran)

Some Verses: Which are from the Qur'an and which from the Bible?

Nothing in the earth or in the heavens is hidden from the Lord.

If God is your helper, none can overcome you.

There is nothing in creation that can hide from him; everything lies naked and exposed to the eyes of the One with whom we have to reckon.

Do you not know that to God belongs the sovereignty of the heavens and the earth, and that God alone is your friend and helper? God is always forgiving and merciful.

When the anger of Moses abated, he took up the tablets, and in their inscription was guidance and mercy for those who fear God.

God created the earth for your dwelling place and the sky for a canopy, and has provided you with good things.

And Joseph's brothers came and stood before him, and he knew them but they knew him not.

And David slew Goliath, and God gave him the kingdom and wisdom, and taught him his will

Every chapter of the Qur'an opens with the sentence:

"In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful"

The first chapter (surah) of the Quran is repeated in daily prayers and on other occasions. It consists of seven verses, and is the shortest and most often recited chapter in the Quran:

"All praise belongs to God, Lord of the Universe, the Beneficent, the Merciful and Master of the Day of Judgment. You alone we do worship and from You alone we do seek assistance, guide us to the right path, the path of those to whom You have granted blessings, those who are neither subject to Your anger nor have gone astray."

The Quran assumes familiarity with major narratives of the [Jewish and Christian scriptures](#). We can assume that Mohammad had contact with both Jewish and Christian communities in Arabia, and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quran_-_cite_note-sanigosian-12 had a limited knowledge of their main contents. It is generally believed that Mohammad was illiterate.

To many, if not most outsiders to Islam, the Qur'an is not easy to read, and seems rather muddled and repetitive. However, the Arabic language used in the Qur'an is apparently a fine mixture of poetry and prose, and can be very moving to the reader or listener. Perhaps this is not unlike the situation with the King James version of the Bible.

Jesus is mentioned in the Qur'an many times, and recognised as a prophet but **not** as Son of God. Excerpts are:

"Say (O Muslims): We believe in Allah and that which is revealed unto us and that which was revealed unto Abraham, and Ishmael, and Isaac, and Jacob, and the tribes, and that which Moses and Jesus received, and that which the Prophets received from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and unto Him have we surrendered." (3:69)

"Do not say that there are three gods. It is better for you to stop believing in the Trinity. There is only One God. He is too glorious to give birth to a son. To God belongs all that is in the heavens and the earth. God alone is a Sufficient Guardian for all." (5:171)

The Sunni / Shia split

The split into Sunnis and Shiites occurred soon after the death of the Prophet Muhammad, in the year 632. There was a dispute of succession, that is, who would take over the leadership after Muhammad. Most of the Prophet's followers wanted the community of Muslims to determine who would succeed him, and they favoured **Abu Bakar**, who was the prophet's right hand man at the time of his death. A smaller group thought that someone from his family should take up his mantle. They favoured **Ali**, a cousin and son-in-law of Muhammad - he was married to the prophet's daughter, Fatimah. They were "**partisans of Ali**" and became known as **Shiites**.

After a violent struggle, the Sunnis triumphed after two of Mohammad's descendants, Ali and Hussein were killed by supporters of Abu Bakar. There are sacred mosques and shrines to Ali and Hussein in Najaf and Karbala respectively in Iraq, to which large pilgrimages are made at certain times of the year. Pilgrims in today's Iraq have been attacked by Sunni suicide bombs on several occasions in recent times.

Christian Attitudes to Islam

Jews, Christians and Muslims all worship the same God - the God of Abraham, of Moses, of the prophets and of Jesus. Should we not have more in common with Jews and Muslims than with those

who have no religious beliefs? Why is it that the three theistic religions (ie: that believe in the one God) have historically been the most warlike?

It seems rather pointless to argue that any one religion is true and another is false, because there is no way of proving this one way or the other. Religious beliefs are not like scientific facts. It is a strange thing that many religious people hold on to religious beliefs with more dogmatic certainty than they do to scientifically proven facts.

Our attitude to those of other faiths must begin with Jesus' teaching in Matthew about *loving our enemies*, and *doing good to those who seek to harm us*. However, I am not for a moment suggesting that people of the Islamic faith seek to harm us, apart from the tiny minority who use Islam to justify terrorism.

If Christendom has a mission to Muslims today it must surely be to *build bridges of friendship*, not to try to convert them to Christianity. Missionaries have been trying to convert Muslims for about thirteen centuries with very little to show for it. In fact, **because most missionaries have only seen Muslims as people needing to be converted, their missionary activity has been counterproductive.**

Should we recognise Mohammad as a prophet? His message was very similar to the message of the Old Testament prophets - worship the one true God, by merciful land just, and stop exploiting and oppressing the poor.

Many years ago when I worked in Indonesia, a prominent Dutch theologian, Berkoff, visited Jakarta and sought to have conversations (dialogues) with local Muslim leaders. A meeting was arranged between him and Mukti Ali, a renowned Islamic scholar. At the start of the meeting Mukti Ali asked Berkoff whether he recognised Mohammad as a prophet. Berkoff replied that in the early chapters of the Qur'an he heard the authentic voice of a prophet, but the voice became less clear in the later chapters. Mukti Ali accepted this as an ***acceptable position for them to have a useful conversation.***

While we were working in Bandung (West Java) we once had a conversation with an American missionary in the course of which the education of our children was discussed. We explained that they went to local schools, and had become fluent in Indonesian. The missionary looked puzzled and said ***"You mean they go to school with Muslim children?"*** It seemed extraordinary to us that a missionary could regard those of another faith in that light.

I will close by mentioning a couple of examples of cultivating good relations with Muslims.

The first one relates to Ahmed Zaoui, the Muslim Algerian who sought refugee status in New Zealand. He fled his country because his political activities had upset the military rulers and they wanted him eliminated. When he fled they spread the message that he was a terrorist and they wanted him back in Algeria to bring him to justice.

He was greatly helped in his struggle to gain refugee status by a **Christian lawyer**, and on his release from detention was provided with accommodation by a **Catholic priest**. I heard that the support given to Ahmed Zaoui by Christians made quite a deep impression on parts of the local Islamic community

The second one is a visit I made to Banda Aceh in September, 2014. Banda Aceh is the capital of the province of Aceh which bore the brunt of the terrible tsunami of 2004. I gave lectures at the main government university, but also visited one of the Islamic Universities to have a look at new buildings that had been provided with assistance from the New Zealand Government. The two buildings were new and had just been officially opened by the New Zealand ambassador the previous week. I thought this was an excellent thing New Zealand was doing in assisting this university.