

Religion and Peace

*'I want to break down walls, Lord
I want to break down walls,
Between rich and poor, Lord,
Between young and old, Lord
Between East and West, Lord
Between the great religions, Lord
O help me break down walls.*

These are words from a poem by a priest who has spent most of his life in India. And I have been thinking a lot about breaking down walls, as I am just back from an interreligious peace conference in South Korea.

The highlight was a peace rally in the World Cup Stadium and speaker after speaker affirmed the longing for peace and for the reunification of Korea. There were some 80, 000 people – many of them young – and I have never had such a big audience before – it was as near as I will get to playing in a cup final.

I have been to Korea before – the first time some thirty years ago was to another Peace Conference with very much the same hopes and some ten years ago I went with members of the Peace Council to the Dedication of a Peace Park in a small town called Hwaechon very near the DMZ, a sterile wasteland where soldiers from each side eye each other. One local said that it is only otters in the river which can cross from one side to another. The Mayor asked us to take spent ammunition which was to be used to make a Peace Bell which will be rung when Korea is reunited – One thing I learned was that taking spent cartridges around the world is risky and we were nearly arrested at Seoul airport.

So now another great Peace Rally – the day after Trump had left. What did we achieve?

Certainly the South Koreans felt supported that religious leaders from around the world had come to be with them – and we should never underestimate the

importance of such support. The event was widely reported in the Korean press. We can all help to make sure that the suffering in Yemen or of the Yasidi or Rohingya people and of so many others is not forgotten by the press and politicians.

Will those in the North see there is a genuine desire in the South for reconciliation? With the Peace Council we sent medical supplies to the North as a goodwill gesture. Would generosity be more effective than sanctions?

Again I first went to the Holy Land in the 1950s and have prayed regularly ever since for the 'Peace of Jerusalem. I remember watching President Sadat's historic address, forty years ago, to the Keneset and receiving a letter of thanks for the World Congress of Faiths' message of support from the Israeli Prime Minister, Yet every time I have been back the situation is worse – not that I think that is entirely my own fault.

So how, I have been asking myself, do we ensure our efforts for peace are as effective as possible?

The physical wall that surrounds Bethlehem or the barriers that divide South and North Korea represent the walls in our hearts, the walls between nations, the walls between religions, the walls between people. So too do the barriers and barbed fences that keep out refugees and economic migrants.

In the Jerusalem temple, at the time of Jesus, there was a wall beyond which Gentiles were not allowed to go. St Paul said that Christ came to break down the wall that divided Jews and Gentiles and kept them enemies. He came to unite them in one body and bring them back to God." (Ephesians 2, 14 ff)

The calling, surely, for all people of faith is to do the same - to break down the walls that divide and bring us all nearer to each other. We can do quite simple things. At the height of the troubles in Sri Lanka, a Buddhist monk decided to go and live in the north among the Hindu Tamils. He then just walked around the town smiling at everyone he saw. After about three months, someone smiled back!

Perhaps most importantly, we need to challenge all that is exclusive in our religions: all that obscures our shared humanity and no longer claim that any one of us is God's favourite. God, I believe, like a good parent loves us all

equally but not necessarily in the same way. If we say this, we will face hostility from members of our own faith. When I first got involved in interfaith I received some vitriolic letters and I knew they were vitriolic by looking at the bottom and seeing they were signed 'Your beloved in Christ.' By now, I have been given up as a 'lost soul.' This is why we need to support each other and I still remember being cheered up when I worked for the Council of Christians and Jews when Rabbi Lionel Blue asked me, 'Which religion do you dislike the most today?'

Writing in the 1930s, The Indian philosopher Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan said that in a world that is becoming one, religions together need to 'give a world soul to this growing world consciousness.' This is more so today with the world-wide web and Multinational companies. Radhakrishnan said that as religions adapt to this new world so they are approximating to one another.' For example, religions compete to be the most environmentally aware. But we still often hesitate to say there is One Divine Reality and as one rabbi said, religions don't all have to be the same, as God doesn't have to keep repeating Herself. And a Buddhist, asked about God, replied. 'The Buddha and God send emails to each other all the time.'

The deepest meeting point is in the presence of the Holy One – a meeting in the cave of our heart. This is why I believe shared prayer, which many interfaith activists still find too challenging – is so powerful. It affirms the Oneness of God and the oneness of humanity.

To quote again from Fr Lesser

*I want to break down walls, Lord
Between Muhammad's sons, Lord
And worshippers of Shiva,
Between low caste and high, Lord
O help me break down walls.*