

THE BIRMINGHAM POST

Weekend reflections

in partnership with WMFF and BCF

6 Jan.

Preaching to the converted

The profile of faith has risen throughout 2006 but this has not all been positive. Terrorists presumed to be Muslim, the wearing of a veil, wearing a crucifix, faith schools, morality and family values, the real meaning of Christmas - all have made headlines, reminding us that faith is important to society and still has a very significant role to play.

Traditional faith, whilst subject to attack and ridicule, is having to 'accept' new notions based on the secular values of human rights. Such values are being championed in a manner I would call 'preaching' whilst Christians, Muslims, Hindus and so on are all pressurized not to speak up in the same way about their views. This is a neat twist as secularists are now 'preaching to the converted', i.e. preaching to those who already have a faith.

Aside from the apparent hypocrisy of those who don't want to be preached at, there is the irony that bullying the faiths in this way will actually cause those groups to use the same human rights legislation to protect themselves from further victimisation and to 'acquire' the right to assert their views without politically correct restrictions.

I do see comparisons with the early church as mentioned in the New Testament, when under persecution Christians were scattered across the world. This meant they shared the gospel with more people than they thought they could. There is a lesson for us all to learn, whatever side of the debate we sit on.

Gerald Nembhard worships at the New Testament Church of God, Brookfield. He is an executive member of the Council of Black-led Churches, Birmingham Council of Faiths and West Midlands Faiths Forum

13 Jan.

In synagogues around the world, Jews today begin the second book of the Torah – the book of Exodus.

The first book, Genesis, introduces the concept of monotheism and traces the lives of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob - patriarchs of the Hebrew nation. When Genesis ends, Jacob – also known as Israel – and his twelve sons are re-united in Egypt, where the famine back home has driven them.

As Exodus opens, Jacob's descendants have prospered and now comprise twelve tribes. Meanwhile, there is a regime-change in Egypt and the new king has conveniently forgotten the huge debt that his country owed to Jacob's eleventh son Joseph. Instead, he rallies his people against the Hebrews on the pretext that, in time of war, these foreigners may side with

Egypt's enemies. His solution – the murder of all newborn Hebrew males – is the first documented genocide in history.

The Hebrew name for Exodus is *shemot* (names) because the book opens by recapitulating the names of the twelve sons. Then, after revealing the genocide plot, two further names are mentioned – Shifra and Puah – two Egyptian midwives who minister to the Hebrew women and to whom the king delegates the execution of his plan. But Shifra and Puah are compassionate and thwart the plan – the first recorded instance of civil disobedience.

History shows that despots never do their own dirty-work, relying on underlings for ‘just carrying-out orders’. Though it has taken some 3500 years to recognise, civil disobedience by ordinary people of courage and compassion *can* work miracles.

Brian Cooper is a member of the Birmingham Hebrew Congregation, Singers Hill. He is a retired electronics engineer and an active member of the Birmingham Council of Faiths. He lives in Balsall Heath.

27 Jan.

Using your talents

I was inspired to go into politics in a homily by my then parish priest at the church where I still worship. He spoke of the need for Catholics to enter the world of politics to help create social justice in Britain, to help create a nation where every person regardless of background has the chance to succeed and to obtain the help they need in difficult times.

Jesus' parable of the talents and the commandment to “love thy neighbour as thyself” neatly illustrates my inspiration.

The parable of the talents talks about servants entrusted with money by their master, using their God-given talents, to declare a profit – by investing in the market and trading in commodities. Once they had shown themselves capable and responsible they were entrusted with more money, power and responsibility. Even the “wicked, faithless servant” who did nothing was advised that he should have put the money in a bank where it would have at least gained interest. Let us never forget that politicians are servants whose master is the electorate - who entrust them with their hard earned money through taxation to look after wisely.

But once you have made “a profit”, there is the duty to look after your neighbour. In my opinion, your neighbour is every person regardless of background – but especially the unborn (who cannot speak up or defend themselves and who since the Abortion Act no longer have the right to life), the poor and vulnerable residents, and the hard working families in the ‘struggling middle’.

Councillor Tim Huxtable worships at Our Lady of Lourdes RC Church, Yardley Wood

