

Above a church in Shiraz, Iran, is written the following poem:

‘Where Jesus lives, the great-hearted gather.
We are a door that’s never locked.

If you are suffering any kind of pain,
stay near the door. Open it.’

These are words by the thirteenth century Persian scholar, philosopher, mystic, and founder of the order of the Whirling Dervishes, the Islamic poet: Rumi.

Two events in Hall Green in March remain in my mind as a sign of what people of different faith communities can be.

On March 29 we held one of our Families Together days at St Peter’s - mainly Muslims and Christians meeting twice a year in St Peter’s. We gathered to have what we called ‘Tea in Kabul’ as we met to raise money for the Afghan Women’s Education Centre, supported by Christian Aid*. Under gazebos in church, decorated with lovely fabrics, we had tea and cakes. And more than 200 of us, of different faith communities, came throughout the afternoon to talk, to do craft, perhaps to buy some plants or some hand made goods from a couple of stalls.

On the following day Kay and I went along to the opening of a new Scout troop in Hall Green, at the invitation of the organisers, the Birmingham Shadhiliya Trust, a Sunni Sufi Muslim group who are keen to develop relationships within the local community. We and several other neighbours were made most welcome. We were told that the former Sea Scout hut, which has been lovingly restored, is for them, a Zawiyah - a place of spiritual learning and hospitality, a place of beauty and meditation, remembering and honouring God’s presence. On this warm Sunday afternoon, among friends happily conversing and enjoying a good buffet, this was how it seemed to us.

As I write the national press has news of investigations of an alleged plot to flood Birmingham governing bodies with certain hardline Islamic groups and principles. The investigation will take its course, but our experience of March 2014 in Hall Green tells another story - a story of friendship, of common values, of the shared language of faith and of openness to one another as ‘Families Together’.

This is not unique, but the story needs to be heard. For centuries religious groups have lived alongside one another in peace and mutual respect. This has been the case in Syria, for example, until quite recently. It has been the case in Nigeria, in Egypt, and in many other communities around the world. But as horrific violence erupts, fuelled by a religious zeal that has little to do with the founding principles of the religions concerned, communities will increasingly be set against one another. As Christians following in the steps of Jesus, who pointed to people of another faith community - Samaritans - as examples of compassion and obedience to God, we must renew our commitment to building these relationships of mutual understanding, friendship, respect, and love. Our churches, mosques, community centres, scout huts, temples, gurdwaras must be, above all, places of welcome. We owe it to the One who has called us.

Of course, when we meet others in friendship from a different faith community we not only discover things we share, but things that separate us too. Which means, in my and others’ experience, that we clarify a lot of things that are precious about our own faith tradition.

Fundamentally, though, there is so much sweet compassion in our relationships that should be celebrated, whatever our differences. Let's draw from that well. Two more little pieces of Rumi about Jesus are worth finishing with:

'Jesus wasn't running from actual people.
He was teaching in a new way.'

'Christ is the population of the world,
and every object as well. There is no room
for hypocrisy. Why use bitter soup for healing
when sweet water is everywhere?'

Martin Stephenson

*Afghan Women's Educational Centre - undertaking a three-year project to empower over 1000 women and young people to speak out for change.
Supported by Christian Aid's Community Partnership Programme - see:
www.christianaid.org.uk/partnerships