

**St Hugh's Interfaith Sunday Service Address**

**15th November 2015**

**Dr Asma Mustafa**

**Senior Tutor and Senior Research Fellow, Linacre College, Oxford**

**Research Fellow in the study of Muslims in Britain, Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies**

**'Shared Values and the Common Good'**

In the name of God, most gracious, most merciful.

Thank you Dr Henson for this kind invitation, and to St Hugh's for hosting such a welcoming and inclusive event in beautiful serene surroundings.

Like all others, I was incredibly saddened to hear of the murder of civilians in France, Lebanon and Iraq days ago by those who share the same ideology - the families, friends and fellow citizens are in my prayers. As we continue to repeat, these murderous acts have no place in any religion and society. We must ensure we continue to persevere in challenging the very divisions the terrorists wish for; in the face of such adversity we must be united. On Friday I spoke at a conference after which a group of French graduate students came to chat with me about integration and society, they were honest and interested, little did we know what the night would bring and I can but hope that those conversations will continue to build bridges and deepen understanding.

In light of this, I'm glad that my address here today reinforces these themes and was titled 'Shared values and the common good' weeks ago, serving to emphasise the importance of working together.

Much of our lives, we aspire to follow in the footsteps of people we revere. In this Century, we have unfortunately seen celebrities take the 'revered' role with little skill, contribution or content over more traditional heroes, saints, sages, holy people or philosophers. Having said this, in attempting to follow in the goodness and light of the later group; we sometimes forget that the same goodness and light surrounds us in those alongside us who take the same steps.

I favour the word 'Humanity' for meaning both all Human beings as one, while also as a cherished and beautiful overarching term, incorporating the valuable qualities that we all share and pursue. In having humanity, we must remind ourselves that we humans are not angels, like our first father Adam we are all fallible. Recognition of our human fallibility and proclivity to temptation will enable us not only to tolerate and to cherish a sympathetic understanding of the faults and blemishes of others, but will encourage us to remember to have faith and hope in God's Mercy.

Our rational mind is judgemental, yet no one but God knows what goes on in the innermost depths of our souls and what context people are acting in. We wouldn't know if a driver cursing while rushing home had just heard her child had been hurt for example; Plato is quoted as saying "Be kind, for

everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle.” Therefore, we can only but hope to seek the goodness in everyone and to forgive those who have hurt us, to search for our deepest compassion.

In Hamlet, Polonius advises his son “Give every man thy ear, but few thy voice; Take each man’s censure, but reserve thy judgment”. I can’t help but think that if we all listened more to those whose voices are marginalised, spoke up in cases of injustice rather than staying in silent disagreement, accepted constructive criticism without being offended on a regular basis and kept our judgements to ourselves a little more often, our kindness would have a stronger impact on this world. The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) once said, “Kindness is a mark of faith, and whoever is not kind has no faith.”

Humanity also refers to all people, created equally and the modesty that comes with an awareness of this egalitarianism. It is said that when the city of Jerusalem had been besieged by the Muslim armies, the city leaders decided to surrender on condition that the Caliph Umar ibn al-Khattab himself collected the keys of the city. The Caliph left Madina and travelled modestly with only a single camel and a single attendant. The two men rode the camel alternately, each taking turns at riding or leading. It happened to be the servant’s turn to ride the camel on the day they were due to arrive in Jerusalem. The attendant offered to give up his turn because he felt it would not be fitting for the Caliph to arrive leading a camel. Caliph Umar replied that the honour of riding into the city was for anyone regardless of position. This was the egalitarian attitude of the leader of a Muslim empire. One of my favourite thoughts when I begin my prayer (Muslims pray five times daily) is that across the world, in countries I have not travelled, nor languages I can speak, people are praying like me, regardless of wealth or status, whether she’s a Queen or a cleaner, we pray to one God. The only difference between us in His eyes is our piety, God consciousness and good character.

Aspects of good character are many times subtle yet steady acts, that the human eyes cannot see, nor the ears hear. It is narrated that the Prophet Muhammed (PBUH) said to his companions “Do you want to see a man of Paradise?” A man then passed by and the Prophet said, “That man is one of the people of Paradise.” So a companion of the Prophet decided to learn what it was about this man that earned him such praise from the Messenger of God. He observed the man closely. The companion noticed that the man didn’t perform prayer through the night or anything that seemed special. The companion finally told the man what the Prophet had said about him and asked if he did anything special. The man replied, “The only thing I can think of, other than what everybody else does is that I make sure that I never sleep with any rancour in my heart towards another”. The replacement of anger and stress leads to the peace, forgiveness and contentment with God’s judgement, knowing that at an unknown time in a yet unknown afterlife, God knows what is in our hearts and his mercy and judgement will prevail.

That benevolence of spirit leads me to the much needed concept of charity and generosity. Charity is one of five pillars of the Muslim faith (called Zakat). There is no adequate word in English to translate Zakat. However, Zakat can be described as a means of distributing excess wealth a little better. Zakat in fact is an obligatory tax which every Muslim has to pay on remaining capital. Zakat is not reluctantly paid because it is considered as a ‘purifying tax’, Zakat originates from the word tazkiya which means ‘to purify’ - a tax which is given as a duty and a form of worship.

There is, in addition, the voluntary sharing of wealth on a personal level which is termed sadaqa. This is the optional form of charity giving and is distinct from the compulsory Zakat. Charitable

donations are in a way super important in our highly materialistic lives, branding and designer goods are an ingrained part of our lives – the ever growing marketing of products to people who ‘must’ have. I jokingly mentioned to a shopkeeper last week that I wasn’t sure I ‘needed’ this bag, and he replied ‘what’s need got to do with it?’ Sheer desire, demand, dare I say self-indulgence is balanced by our ability to give in equal measure. One of the Companions of our Prophet and later Caliph Ali said “Asceticism is not that you should not own anything, but that nothing should own you.”

Of course charity is not solely monetary, I am reminded of another of my favourite sayings from our Prophet ‘Your smile for your brother is charity.’ And The Prophet also said: "Every act of goodness is charity." Charity is truly not just monetary, American author, poet, and civil rights activist Maya Angelou said “I’ve learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.” which is so true. How many people do we walk by who do great acts of kindness, that we never know about? A few days ago, a friend’s purse was taken. She noticed only when she was at the till paying for a pack of beautiful ‘thank you’ cards. Unable to pay, she stood aside calling her bank to cancel her bank cards, only to turn around and find that a kind stranger behind her had paid for the cards in goodwill. How beautiful, generous and honourable. She will never have the chance to say thank you, but can thank her in prayer and appreciation. In that moment of stress, that lady’s actions made my friend feel solaced and thinking of the goodness in the world.

Good actions as charity lead nicely to the widely held belief in reciprocity, which I know is deeply entrenched in the Christian faith. The ethics of reciprocity as a moral principle calls upon people to treat others the way they would like to be treated. This principle was stated several times by our Prophet. In fact, traditional sources state that this principle is the root of all good character and manners. The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) said: ‘None of you has faith until he loves for his brother or his neighbour what he loves for himself’ and note that it does not specify the religion or lack of religion in the ‘brother’ or ‘neighbour’ - It doesn’t say ‘None of you has faith until he loves for a fellow Muslim what he loves for himself’, the meaning is clear as Al-Ghazali also writes, that every time you deal with people, treat them as you would be pleased to be treated by them, for the faith of a servant is not complete until he loves for all people what he loves for himself.

Reciprocity is based on human equality – one must wish for the other what they wish for themselves, regardless of socially contrived status. One of the major problems confronting us when attempting to act upon such selflessness is unfortunate discrimination, prejudice and bigotry in its many forms. Our differences are celebrated in the Qur'an: "Surely in the creation of the Heavens and the Earth and in the variety of your tongues and your complexions are signs of wonderment." [Qur'an, 30:22] – We are to celebrate this diversity and variation, but it is not intended to cause antagonism, inequality, discrimination and arrogance.

[Qur'an, chapter 49: verse 13] "O humanity! We have created you from a plurality of peoples and tribes in order for you to come to know one another." this verse actually reminds us that given our global world, the plurality of our nations and the variations in our languages, we are meant to be mutually benefiting from one another, learning, deepening our knowledge of the unknown and gaining an appreciation of the contributions that we can all make.

Essentially we are talking of mutual respect. The Anglican Church has been supportive of Islam and Muslims, both in being vocal about the values that the two religions hold similar, and also in the positive contribution that Muslims bring to British society. The Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby said recently in a lecture “Our faiths, coming from different theological presuppositions, recognise the value of the human being and the dignity of the human being... With these differences and similarities, and above all the call to the common good and the value and dignity of the human being, we have to ask ourselves about our vision as faith communities, and how we interact with the secular power. I should say here that that interaction, although it is not always smooth, should always be from our part with respect.”

Her Majesty the Queen and the Prince of Wales have also spoken of their support of a multi-faith safe space, in a society that is becoming vocally secularist. On the ‘Sunday Hour’ on BBC Radio two, Diane-Louise Jordan interviewed HRH Prince Charles and asked him on the premise that he is a ‘defender of faiths’ and he replied by saying:

“I didn’t describe myself as the Defender of Faiths, I said I would rather be seen as the defender of faith all those years ago...because I mind about the inclusion of other people’s faiths and their rights to worship in this country, and it always seemed to me that at the same time as being Defender of the faith, you can also be protector of faiths. It was also very interesting that twenty or more years after I mentioned this, which has frequently been misinterpreted, the Queen in her Jubilee address to faith leaders, she said that as far as the role of the Church of England was concerned, it is not to defend Anglicanism to the exclusion of other religions, instead the Church has a duty to protect the free practice of all faiths in this country. I think in that sense she was confirming what I was trying to say, perhaps not very well, all those year ago.”

Religious tolerance is and has been the norm in different parts of the world for many centuries. However, the UK has seen a growth in secularism, agnosticism and atheism that mean requests and requirements by religious groups for equality in public spaces (such as state-funded religious schools, the inclusion of religious dress codes in public services or prayer spaces during the working day) has become more challenging. This will continue to require honest dialogue, negotiation and accommodation.

Finally, fostering dialogue is crucial, but we all have a responsibility to identify, promote and act upon the set of shared moral values that could positively influence and impact our communities, wider society and ultimately be the common good.

Dr Asma Mustafa  
Senior Tutor & Senior Research Fellow, Linacre College, Oxford  
Research Fellow in the Study of Muslims in Britain, OCIS