

The Prophet Mohammed

Celebration of the Life of the Prophet Mohammed

This talk was presented by Nigel Cohen at the invitation of a Muslim group in Maidenhead to celebrate the life of the Prophet Mohammed, on 30 April 2006

My name is Nigel Cohen. I am a member of Maidenhead Synagogue.

I was in London recently, about to get on a Tube train. I was standing next to a blind man who was looking a little uncertain where to stand to get on the train. So I sidled over to him and lifted an arm to help him onto the train that I was getting on. His reaction surprised me. He was emphatic in his thanks. But I had done just about nothing. I had done nothing that was particularly difficult, nothing that particularly warranted thanks. I simply lifted an elbow and got on the train I wanted to get on, but in step and arm in arm with someone I did not know personally. It struck me as quite an indictment on society that this sort of thing is even the tiniest bit out of the ordinary.

It seems we live in times where glitz and glamour are idolised, where people are respected by what is displayed on their arm or neck, by the car they drive or even by the clothes they wear. We, in our wealthy corner of our wealthy homeland, seem to have forgotten the values and beauty of basic human kindness. We do not give enough respect to the rights and beliefs of others we live with. If we can not respect others' rights and beliefs, how can we expect them to respect ours? How can we hope for Care? How can we enjoy the simple beauty of human companionship when we are so out of touch with simple humanity?

We live in a complex and dangerous world. We receive a continual stream of conflicting advice from a huge diversity of people about life. It is hardly surprising that we find it difficult to know how we should live. Within this cacophony of opinionators, there are a number of good people who live amongst, who are willing to guide us. The difficulty is being able to discern the sense from the senseless.

But it is a rare gift for us to have truly great people to turn to for inspiration and direction. Today, we have people like Mother Theresa, whose life was devoted entirely to care of people in need, and Nelson Mandela. Nelson Mandela was subjected to thirty years of imprisonment and isolation. On his release, one of his first actions was the forgiveness of his captors. One of his first actions when coming to power was to set up a "Truth and Reconciliation" council. He did not want the inhuman behaviour of apartheid to go unnoticed or unpunished. But equally, he did not want to unleash a blood-bath of murder and retribution against the people who had persecuted him and his people. This would only have served to deepen the division of peoples for decades. His solution was to persuade the perpetrators to face up to the reality of what they did - to entice them to look their victims in the eye and to confess. Through his great humility and wisdom, we saw the workings of a truly great man.

But if today, we have a handful of great men and women, how wonderful must it have been to the people who lived a little under 2000 years ago when Jesus first blessed the world with his genius and wisdom, or a little over 600 years later when

people were first exposed to the breathtaking intellect and spirit of Mohammed. These two great men delivered messages and insight of such profound importance and value, that the two most followed religions on the planet were born.

In the Prophet Mohammed's last public sermon, he exhorts his followers to "hurt no-one so that no-one may hurt you, neither inflict nor suffer any inequity". He reminded us that all mankind is from Adam and Eve, no one person has superiority over another - "except by piety and good action". He expressly waived any rights he has arising from the martyrdom of his uncle, bestowing a wisdom echoed so many years later by Nelson Mandela. To his believers, his teachings are divine. Even to non-believers, his teachings are of huge importance and beauty, as much today as ever.

As a Jew, I feel a little like the blind man getting on the tube. Perhaps it might be nice if I were able to see the spectacular flowers adorning Maidenhead Bridge in the Spring. I struggle to see the divine source of either of these great men. But if I can't see the flowers, I can at least get a sense of their beauty from their smell. I have been privileged with the company of several members of the Mosque, who could not have been more welcoming to me. Here, I feel a basic love and warmth that is missing from many aspects of today's society. Aspects of Islam have been explained to me both individually and as a member of the wider Maidenhead community. The Mosque put together a wonderful presentation to introduce people to the reality of Islam first hand, helping dispel some of the many myths fed to us by the press, by Islamaphobes and by the action of extremists from all the murky corners of our society. If I can not see divinity, it is a blessing that someone will take the time to describe the life of the Prophets to me, so that I can at least get a sense of its beauty.

Perhaps it is not important to focus on the source of the messages gifted by Jesus and Mohammed, but on their substance. Society praises material things. But the individuals who love within this material society ail. Even just 150 years ago, our current standards of living could not have seemed more than just a fantasy. Life expectancy has more than doubled. We see almost none of the starvation and disease that littered our Victorian streets. We do not experience the devastating wars that cropped up every 20 years or so in Europe. Our material wealth has reached levels unimaginable at the time. Yet very few people consider they are blessed with wealth. We may be materially better off, but has it been at the cost of our spiritual wellbeing?

The experience and insight of our many faiths in Maidenhead, and in this Church, have so much in common. At a time when the benefits of basic human values and kindness are so poorly understood, the lessons from the Bible, the Koran and the Prophet Mohammed are no less imperative now than ever they were.

A faith whose prophet is sufficiently respectful of others to say "anyone who hurts a non-muslim hurts me", and whose faith follows four directions that say their faith should be true and sincere, that we should be prepared to show our faith in deeds of charity to our fellow men, that we must be good citizens supporting social organisations and that our own individual soul must be firm and unshaken in all circumstances is one that has my enormous respect.

I have enormous respect of the many members of Maidenhead Mosque who have made me so welcome amongst them, who have embraced me and who have walked in step with me, patiently helping me to appreciate some of the beauty of your faith. Long may you continue to stand up for your core values and to share your warmth and compassion with us all, with humanity, irrespective of our own, personal, faith.

