

## **Exploring God in Judaism and Christianity**

### **3 September 2009**

Well over 100 attended an engaging evening organised by the Council of Christians and Jews, in the Anglican Parish of Applecross on 3 September. Guest speakers for the seminar were Rabbi Dovid Freilich and Archbishop Roger Herft, both Honorary Presidents of the Council. In his introduction, CCJWA Chairperson, the Reverend Associate Professor Rowan Strong, explained that while the group's usual focus is the commonality of the two Faiths, it would on this occasion be upon their different perspectives on God.

Rabbi Freilich, through repeated use of rabbinic midrash, argued that, for a Jew, knowledge of God is more deed than creed: 'The hands fashion the heart's knowledge about God'; it is not a head thing. That is, one only knows God by acting in a godly manner — with compassion, mercy, kindness. Repeatedly, in delightfully crafted nuances, Rabbi Freilich stressed that God has no form, and no gender (though conventionally designated in masculine terms), but is sought by deed, prayer and experience.

The pivot around which Rabbi Freilich's address revolved was this twisting comparison: As the soul is to the body, so God is to the world. Thus: (1) as the soul is one with the body, so God is one with the world; (2) as the soul is pure and above the body, so God is pure and above the world; (3) as the soul does not eat or drink, so too, God; (4) as the soul fills the body, so too, God fills the world; (5) as the soul sustains the body, so God sustains the world; (6) as the soul sees and is unseen, so too, God. And here is the turnaround ... each of us is a world in him/herself and God is the soul to each of our worlds.

Where is this Jewish God? He is in whatever heart, whatever event, to which people give 'him' entry. And 'his' concern is not so much that we worship 'him' but that we act in godly manner toward each other — with mercy, compassion, kindness, for 'My thoughts are not your thoughts and my ways are not your ways.' (Isa 55:8)

Perth Anglican Archbishop, Roger Herft, grounded his presentation in the earthiness of Australian indigenous people: 'it is the earth that shapes a people's actions, indeed, shapes themselves, and lifts them to a Dreamtime.' All people share the common earth, a holy ground, and it is from this ground that thoughts of God first come.

Jesus, the revelation of God in Christ, is grounded in being a Jew during the time of Roman tyrannical occupation. A Jew at that time would take one of two paths: (1) walk the path of purity — follow the ritual laws, avoid taboo, remain holy, radically exclusive from 'outsiders'; (2) walk the path of mercy, compassion, of radical inclusiveness. Jesus took the latter path as seen by his choice of disciples, table companions, persons he healed and taught by earthy parables, and by his use of the Sabbath. His messianic purpose behind this radical inclusiveness was to make all the earth holy. This led to the scandal, the foolishness, of the messiah hanging from a cross.

Jesus' radical inclusiveness by his outpouring of self on the cross is mirrored in the Trinity —a concept still debated, but which is certainly not a mathematical formula. God is not three, but one — a communion of self-giving in himself and in his creation; in the latter, so to reshape us into being self-giving for all others by walking the path of mercy and compassion.

Walking this path, as Jesus' death shows, leads to wounding, suffering. But, the resurrection of Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, transforms the suffering community into a joyful community.

God is love: radical inclusiveness, mercy and compassion. To enter the presence of this God is to enter a life of love. We travel into transformation in fear and trembling, walking this earth as sacred ground.

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Following a break for refreshments, there was an opportunity for questions. Time and time again, the questions and answers returned to Dr Strong's opening remarks about the evening's focus: our differences. Time and time again, we also returned to the commonality of our walk together as Christians and Jews which Rabbi Freilich and Archbishop Herft mapped for us: godly, earthly acts of mercy, compassion, kindness ... of love. Rowan Strong captured this conclusion in his closing words: 'Our God is one and expects us to celebrate life with each other, despite our differences.'

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