

For all faiths, the Easter message is important beyond belief

Natalie O'Brien, *Sydney Morning Herald*, March 31, 2013

Religious and community leaders tell Natalie O'Brien why it's time to put differences aside and remember the values we all share.



Message of hope: Sydney's Rabbi Jeremy Lawrence. *Photo: Lee Besford*

As Christian priests deliver their Easter messages to their congregations this weekend, religious and community leaders of other faiths have been taking the opportunity to deliver messages of their own.

In 2013, interfaith activities have been focusing on talking about the similarities, rather than the differences, in some of the world's major religions, and the need to respect each other even if there are fundamentally different viewpoints.

Catholics from the Archdiocese of Sydney joined Muslims, Greek Orthodox, Buddhists and Sikhs at a Passover dinner organised by the Jewish Board of Deputies outreach program at the University of NSW to promote better understanding about the Jewish festival.



Bringing people together: Dr Ibrahim Abu Mohammed, the Mufti of Australia. *Photo: Janie Barrett*

Muslim leaders have been speaking during Friday prayers about the common respect for Jesus shared by Muslims and Christians.

One of those community leaders speaking out and trying to set an example towards better understanding is the Mufti of Australia, Dr Ibrahim Abu Mohammed. He was appointed Mufti in 2011 and is the leader of the Australian National Imams Council. He is also a highly educated Islamic author and scholar, and is firm on the concept of bringing people together through commonalities.

Speaking at his Fairfield offices, Ibrahim says he is keen to explain to people that Muslims, too, believe in Jesus and his virgin mother Mary. He says he wants to remind people that Jesus is an important figure in Islam as well.

"We regard Christ as a brother to the prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon them, and both are participating in the business of bringing ethics and goodness to humanity," he says.

Ibrahim says the acceptance of Christ is mentioned by the Muslims and they regard him as one of the greatest messengers of God.

"Our esteem for him is like our esteem for the prophet Muhammad and this was the recommendation of Muhammad, 'Don't put me ahead of Christ, the son of Mary, and do not give me preferential treatment'."

Ibrahim's message to the community is that they believe that the divine messages all come from the one source. "There is unity in the origin and the message, and the goal for humanity," he said.

Ibrahim says he believes the greatest threat to human culture is to think that our intellects are self-sufficient and to refuse to read about what people think is the so-called other. He believes the lack of desire to read and learn about others is what leads to ill intentions.

"What some people might find amazing is that Mary is put forward by Muslims, ahead of their own mothers," he says.

"She commands a great deal of respect among Muslims and she is regarded as one of the greatest women to have graced this world.

"What humanity needs today is to work on the commonalities between all the people. What people need to do is understand the nature of the heavenly message. If we understand it, then there will not be any conflict or religious minority suffering from oppression. The problem is not with the messages from God but with some followers."

Community leader Keysar Trad has also been delivering Friday sermons celebrating the acts of Christ. Although he says that while Muslims don't believe in the crucifixion, they do believe in his selfless sacrifice and his mission. Handing out Easter eggs last week, he said he wanted to wish everyone a happy Easter.

The popular Sydney-based website Muslim Village, run by Ahmed Kilani, has also been discussing Jesus this week and published a story from *The Huffington Post* explaining the idea of the Muslim Jesus.

Written by Alayna Ahmad, the article said that "the Bible and the Koran both agree that Jesus was born by miraculous birth to the Virgin Mary. There is a chapter in the Koran named Mary and she is mentioned 34 times in the Koran, which is much more than the entire New Testament."

Ahmad goes on to say that "the Koran makes clear that Jesus was sent to earth to preach a new gospel ... which reaffirmed the message of the One True God, given to the earlier prophets" and that Jesus foretells the coming of a messenger after him named Ahmad, which is another name for Muhammad.

"... I believe the shared love Muslims and Christians feel for Jesus can be the basis for mutual understanding and interfaith dialogue. The three Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam are undoubtedly linked. However, even though the Judaic tradition rejects Jesus, Islam has always accepted him.

"Given that belief in Jesus is central to the Muslim faith, why does the West persist in remaining so hostile to Islam?"

The Easter week coincides with the Jewish Passover and the community in Sydney has been promoting understanding of the festival. Rabbi Jeremy Lawrence from the Great Synagogue in Sydney says that while Jews don't believe in Jesus, there are many similar messages of redemption.

Lawrence says that Jesus' message was born out of the Jewish message, and mirrored the Rabbinic teachings of the time.

Rabbi Lawrence points out that some people consider Jesus' last supper to have been the traditional Jewish Seder dinner, a ritual meal held in celebration of Passover.

"The festival of Passover commemorates the liberation of the Jewish people from Egypt," he says.

"Its thematic message is remembering our ancestors who were idolaters, to looking forward to messianic redemption. It also includes welcoming hungry strangers to their dinner tables."

Rabbi Lawrence says the Jews could not enjoy the thought of liberation unless they extended their hospitality to the people who may be bereft of means.

"The physical liberation from oppression and servitude in Egypt to the freedom we enjoy today yearning for the time when God's message will be shared among all people with peace," he says.

Rabbi Lawrence says Passover is "a message of hope of aspiration and a festival of redemption which is a similar message to the Christians".

But the Anglican Archbishop of Sydney, Peter Jensen, says while the hope is that there is a great deal of respect for other religions and other people, the essential teachings are contradictory. Archbishop Jensen says people think Christianity is about being a good person and going to heaven. But it needs to be remembered that Jesus died on the cross and he didn't die for good people, he died for bad people so they could be forgiven.