

Dear Friends,

JOHN 14: 1-14

The words from John's gospel that I am writing about this week include the verse in the Bible that my dad found the most troubling. Jesus says, "No one comes to the Father except through me". This bothered him because his mother was not a Christian. As a Japanese woman she practised Shintoism. There are some Christians who take the view that the only way to God is through accepting Jesus here and now. While there are others who are convinced that God's presence, action and truth may be found in religions alongside Christianity.

One of my ways in to this conversation is through the film "Of Gods and Men". This is set in Algeria and is based on the true story of a community of monks who were kidnapped and murdered by religious extremists in 1996. The film shows the bravery of the monks. They are terrified. There is something in all of them that would prefer the option of running to that of staying for what is likely to be suffering and death. They nevertheless choose to stay. They don't put their own survival first.

Clearly such a story confronts us with bad religion. One of the monks quotes these words from the French philosopher Pascal, "Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from a religious conviction". The evil acts on this occasion were done in the name of Islam. But the brothers know that plenty of evil has been done in the name of Christianity. They are also able to distinguish between the acts of the fundamentalists and the lives of the faithful Muslims in their local village. The monks have studied Islam and can quote the Koran. Their desire is not to argue with Muslim thought but to understand it and thereby also better understand the people they live alongside and serve. Their attitude has helped the villagers to trust them and welcome them so that they are invited to share in the religious ceremonies and events of the local community. As one of the monks approaches death, he talks of his hope of soon immersing himself in the vision of God which will enable him to see Islam through God's eyes.

I come away from the film knowing which path I want to take. Not the way of fear and arrogance which makes me want to be the one with the loudest voice shouting "You're wrong". But the way of gathering with people in their variety so that we may share together what we all know about God.

God bless you,

Tony