

St Peter & St Paul's Godalming

June 14th, 2009

Colossians 1: 15-20; & John 20: 19-31 Islam & Jesus ~ 1: Jesus in the Qur'an

NB: This is a slightly extended version of the sermon and includes references to verses in the Qur'an.

This is the first in a 2-part series about Islam and Jesus. Today I'm going to explore what Muslims believe about Jesus, looking specifically at what the Qur'an teaches about Jesus. (Next week I'll be looking at the place of Jesus in Christian-Muslim relations.) For me this is no academic exercise: as some of you will be aware, part of my non-parish work takes me overseas where I meet with Muslims, and I am also a member of the Bishop of Guildford's Christian-Muslim Leaders Forum.

I want to state the obvious from the outset: Islam, Muslim perceptions of Jesus, and Christian-Muslim relations, are vast subjects, and in the few minutes we have today I can only scratch the surface, by way of an introduction.

But first we need to note the status and authority of the Qur'an in Muslim eyes. Both the Qur'an itself and Muslims see the Qur'an as a revelation of God like no other that has gone before it, in both the means of its revelation and its divine authority. This is saying more than, just like some other scriptures it claims to be the word of God. Two things mark the difference: Muslims believe that Muhammad had no part in its authorship – he received it, and had not one iota of influence on its contents. Therefore every word is the direct, unmediated word of God himself. Simply put, this is in contrast to the Hebrew and New Testament scriptures, where the human 'authorship' of their various writers is acknowledged in what for Jews and Christians are the inspired word of God.

Now the world of Islam is very diverse and therefore it is difficult to talk about one Islam view of almost anything, but as Muslim scholars themselves have pointed, when it comes to the Qur'an's view of Jesus there appears to be substantial agreement

between the two main branches of Islam, *Sunni* and *Shi'a*. So what does the Qur'ān say about Jesus?

Christians are often surprised to discover how much the Qur'ān has to say about Jesus. For uniquely among world's other major faiths, Islam has a 'high view' of Jesus, and arguably Islam sees Jesus as the most significant prophet after Muhammad. The Qur'ān affirms the immaculate conception of Jesus (Q 21:9), his miracles (Q 3:43), his ascension to heaven (Q 3:48; Q 4:157), and refers to Jesus as 'Messiah' (Q 3:46), etc. In addition, the vast majority of Muslims believe in the second coming of Jesus. And of major importance to Muslims, Qur'ān claims that Jesus foretold the coming of Muhammad (Q 61:6) But crucially, in contrast to Christian belief and tradition, the Qur'ān denies the crucifixion of Jesus (Q 4:157-159) and his deity (Q 5:7; Q 6:101-2).

Jesus (*'Isā*) is directly mentioned in 25 verses with a further ten references using terms such as Messiah (*al-Masih*) and 'son of Mary'. The Qur'ān explicitly affirms the miraculous virgin birth of Jesus to Mary (Q 3:47), with the conception as the result of God breathing his spirit into her womb (Q 21:91; 66:12). But for Muslims this miraculous conception is not evidence for Jesus' divinity, citing Adam with no human parents, as a precedent for the miraculous creation of a solely human entity (Q 3:59). Jesus also prophesied from the cradle (Q 3:46; 5:110; 19:29ff).

In his adult ministry Jesus was strengthened by God's spirit, and performed various miracles (though never in his own right or power, but only by God's permission): changing clay birds into real ones, healing the blind and lepers, raising the dead (Q 3:49), and sending down from heaven a table spread with food for his disciples (Q 5:110). As to his prophetic message, the Qur'ān states Jesus was taught Scripture by God (the Torah and Gospel), and he confirmed the truth of the Torah. Jesus was taught the same, one religion of Noah, Abraham, Moses and Muhammad (Q 33:7, 42:13). The Qur'ān makes reference to Jesus being taken to the point of crucifixion, where God raised him to himself (Q 4:156-9). The Qur'ānic Jesus denies that he is God or part of a trinity (Q 5:116).

Jesus is more than a prophet, he is one of the four messengers who are given God-related titles: Abraham is the ‘friend of God’ (*khalil-Allah*), Moses is ‘one who speaks with God’, (*kalim-Allah*), Muhammad is the ‘Prophet of God’ (*nabi-Allah*), and Jesus is the ‘spirit of God’ (*ruh-Allah*). Though both Abraham and Moses are mentioned more times than Jesus, it is only Jesus who performs miracles, and according to Islamic tradition will come back to earth before the day of Judgement.

The Qur’ān gives a greater number of honourable titles to Jesus than any other figure of the past. Jesus has the titles Messiah, Son of Mary; is given the names Prophet, Messenger, Servant, Word of God, and Spirit of God. He is referred to as a ‘sign’, ‘witness’, ‘example’, ‘parable’, ‘mercy’, as well as ‘eminent’, ‘blessed’, ‘one brought near’, and ‘one of the upright’.

Despite this plethora of titles for Jesus (which have a rich resonance for Christians) the Qur’ān gives little or no clue to their meanings. The most common terms used for Jesus are ‘son of Mary’ and messiah – but Muslims find it difficult to explain what ‘messiah’ means, and tend to think of it as an honorific title, rather than its Hebrew meaning of ‘anointed one’ or more specifically, the Messiah – the One appointed Messiah of God (which Christians understand).

Muslim understanding of Jesus leads to a number of crucial differences and disagreements with Christians – but I want to highlight two: Christian belief in the deity of Jesus, and the death and resurrection of Jesus.

First, Islam is adamantly and tenaciously a monotheistic religion: believing that there is only One God, creator of the universe. In Islam the unforgiveable sin, is the association of any thing or any person with God. The first pillar of Islam is the profession of faith (*Shahada*) ‘I bear witness that there is no god save God (*Allah*), Muhammad is the messenger of God.’ Therefore most Muslims view Christians as polytheists because of Christian affirmation of the deity of Christ and their consequent

belief in the Trinity. This is why in some Muslim countries (but by no means all Muslim countries) Christians are persecuted – because they are deemed to have committed the unforgiveable sin by associating the human Jesus of Nazareth with God himself. However, some Muslims do acknowledge that Christians are in fact monotheists, and accept the affirmation which we make in every service at the introduction of the creed when we ‘declare our faith in one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit’.

Secondly, was Jesus crucified, did he die, was he buried, and did he rise again, as Christians affirm in the creed each week (and will do so again in a moment or two)?

Certainly almost all Muslims believe that Jesus was not crucified. This is based on one text in the Qur’ān which states:

And because of their saying: We slew the Messiah Jesus son of Mary, Allah's messenger They slew him not nor crucified, but it appeared so unto them; and lo! those who disagree concerning it are in doubt thereof; they have no knowledge thereof save pursuit of a conjecture ; they slew him not for certain, But Allah took him up unto Himself. Allah was ever Mighty, wise. (Q 4:157-8)

There are two crucial questions for Muslims here. What ‘appeared’ to take place at the crucifixion, and to whom? If this text implies Jesus did not die but was taken up to God, how is that reconciled with other verses in the Qur’ān, such as this one where from his cradle Jesus prophesies about himself, saying, ‘Peace on me the day I was born, and the day I die, and the day I shall be raised alive!’? (Q 19:33)

There are different understandings among Muslims of what took place at the cross. The most common and popular view among Muslims is that the phrase ‘it appeared to them so’ has been taken to mean that the people present at the crucifixion believed they witnessed Jesus’ death on the cross; however God performed a miraculous deception and raised Jesus to himself before he could be crucified. Jesus was taken up to God before he died, is now with God, and will return again – and when he does, he will then die.

From a Christian perspective, it is interesting that a few Islamic scholars argue that the verses in the Qur'ān about the crucifixion, doesn't contradict the New Testament record that Jesus was crucified and rose again. One Muslim scholar points out that when the verse says 'because of their saying, We crucified the Messiah Jesus...' the people being referred to saying We did this, are the Jews – and the verse appears in a context in the Qur'ān describe as 'diatribe against the Jews'. Therefore 'the words 'they did not kill him or crucify him' may merely have been intended to rebut their boasting that it was they who killed Jesus.' – an attack against Jewish arrogance , claiming for themselves responsibility for the death of Jesus – which in fact was part of God's plan and God's doing. 'In other words, it was not the Jews but God who was ultimately responsible for Jesus' death, and hence [Muslims] should think of [Jesus] as alive with his Lord like their comrades who die in battle.' [Neal Robinson 'Christ in Islam and Christianity' 2005:141]

So in Christian – Muslim dialogue we have a paradox surrounding Jesus. For Jesus is both a bridge and the gulf between us. A bridge because of the high view that the Qur'ān has of Jesus, and a gulf because of our radically opposing views of Jesus divine nature. As Christians we should affirm everything in the Qur'ān which is consistent with God's revelation of Jesus in the New Testament.

We should be glad of the common ground between the Christian faith and Islam – but also help Muslims to see where the Muslim understanding of God differs from the Christian understanding of God and Jesus.

Our Scripture readings today affirm what we hold dear and claim to be true: the death and resurrection of Jesus, that he is the Messiah, the Son of God, and in Paul's words that 'Jesus is the image of the invisible God ... in him all things were created ... and in Jesus all the fullness of god was pleased to dwell.' And of course, that is why this Sunday, and every Sunday, we come to share in the Eucharist, and worship the one God: the Father, the Son – Jesus Christ, and the Spirit.

Amen.