

Visit by a delegation from the Catholic Church to Ashwal Centre
16th of May 2012

Address by Archbishop Kevin McDonald

It is a great pleasure and privilege to be here today at the Ashwal Centre and to receive the warm hospitality of the Jain community here in London. I thank Mr Namu Chandaria and all those who have been involved in preparing this very special event and I bring the greetings and good wishes of the Catholic community in England and Wales. A visit such as this is a sign of the times, and a sign of changed times, of times in which friendship and good will between religions is not only important but necessary - necessary for the good of each religious community and for the good of society as a whole.

In thinking about today's visit, in reading about the Jain tradition and being welcomed and greeted here today I am, of course, struck by the difference between this religious community and my own. Indeed engaging with that difference is the object of the exercise and is central to the whole purpose of our being together. For all of us, our religious training and formation is one of the main things that makes us the people we are. We are all naturally sensitive to, and probably fascinated by the difference between other religions and our own. That situation is surely one of the great gifts and opportunities of living in the age we do.

Two years ago the Catholic Bishops published a booklet about interreligious relations entitled Meeting God in Friend and Stranger. We have the opportunity today of moving from strangeness to friendship, from suspicion to collaboration and in doing so to help to create a new kind of society in which religions can work together for the Common Good. Positive and constructive relationships between religious communities are important for social harmony and for peace both locally and in the wider world. We all have a part to play.

I suggest that the word dialogue gives us a metaphor for the society of the future and a programme for greater integrity for us all both as individuals and as communities. Let me just indicate some of the things that I have especially appreciated about the Jain tradition. There is the importance of personal integrity and personal responsibility. What we say, think and do really matters both in the short term and in the long term. And there is the question of having the right relationship with the whole of the natural order, of which we are an integral part. Then, too, there is question of the right attitude - especially an attitude of forgiveness - in respect of what happens to us and what goes on around us. Related to this is the emphasis in the Jain tradition on non-violence towards all living beings, so much admired by Mahatma Gandhi. There are lessons here that are badly needed in the world in which we live and all this I find reflected in the welcome we have received today.

One person who understood very deeply the importance of right relationships and, particularly right relationships between religions, was Pope John Paul II. He invited religious leaders to come together in 1986 to make their own specific contribution to world peace. It took place in Assisi, and it struck me reflecting on this meeting how appropriate the figure of St Francis is as a figure to whom we can all look for wisdom and inspiration. Pope John Paul said on that occasion, that what religions could do - each in their own way - is to pray for the gift of peace. That is our contribution. That, if you like, is what we are for. He did a great deal to build up a spirit of solidarity and common purpose between religions in the service of world peace.

Respect for one another's spiritualities is vital for that agenda and the point was reinforced by Pope Benedict when he met with religious leaders during his visit to Britain two years ago. He encouraged members of different religions to share their experience of divine love. He also said that religions have a vital contribution to

make to establishing a sound moral basis for our legislation. These are challenges and opportunities for us all and I see today's visit as a moment in the pursuit of these goals.

So today is more than just an exercise in good neighbourliness, though it is certainly that. It is part of a movement towards a new vision and a new situation. It is about sowing seeds and witnessing to what society can become. I greet you all. I thank you for welcoming us and coming to meet us, and I ask God's blessing on our time together.