



Christian Education

A series of Sermons and Occasional Papers
From the clergy and members
of Holy Trinity Church
Forbes Park, Makati

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Title: **"How Can This Man Talk Like That?"**
Comment: Insert Comment here
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Readings for this Sunday:

Old Testament Isaiah 43:18-25
Epistle 2 Corinthians 1:18-22
Gospel Mark 2:1-12

If one googles the term "Persian Miniatures", he or she gets information about a type of exquisite artwork created in Persia and Turkey in the 15th and 16th centuries. These tiny paintings are like jewels in their vivid colors and fine details. Notable also is the subject matter, because they often deal with scenes from the life of the Prophet Mohammed. He is shown as a regular man, sometimes with a veil over his face but sometimes not. These paintings are considered masterpieces of Islamic art, painted by non-Arab Moslems for non-Arab Moslems, and they quite obviously show the figure of Mohammed and while unusual, are not considered blasphemous. At least until now.

The reason for my sharing this fact with you is my response to the insanity of recent events throughout the world as Moslems, particularly in the Middle East, have run amok, threatening death and destruction upon those who drew, published or supported the recent political drawings (hardly cartoons in the usual sense) that first appeared in the local Danish newspaper *Jyllandsposten*, on September 30 of last year. Since that time, these images have become the infamous rallying point for anti-Danish, anti-European and anti-Western and anti-Christian passions.

I have seen the drawings. I have seen much worse examples of religious-themed political illustrations and art. I have seen in person the famous "Christa" crucifix with Jesus as a woman that startled people in the 70's at our cathedral in New York City. I have more recently seen photos of the so-called "artwork" with another crucifix displayed in a jar of urine. The Muhammad drawings are no-where near as controversial, at least to this Western but ethnically sensitive observer, even though I recognize that some, but not all Moslems would be offended by them.

There have been several points at which the passion could have been defused by the Danes and other Europeans who became just as defensive as their opponents. But it is significant, I think, that nothing much was made of the drawings until November 19 of last year when a group of Danish Moslems took them to Cairo to publicize the issue, including other drawings that were never even published. Now it has become a crisis, escalating wildly until it has finally hit us here in the Philippines with our first Moslem protests against the Danes, and God-knows-who else. It is, let us be clear, a political issue as much as a religious one, well stoked by those who can profit from stirring up hatred. But the crisis also demands that Christians in turn understand the dangers of becoming passionate and hateful about extremely narrow interpretations of religious teachings, especially in the context of modern, integrated societies.

Moslems, for example, might be offended by the Danish drawings because of the implications of some of these illustrations that the Prophet condones terrorism, but as I have already pointed out, Iranians themselves used to make images of him. The fine points of interpretation depend on the historical period, the culture of the people involved- a whole list of things that must be taken into consideration before potentially offensive religious statements are made.

As we watch the insanity unfold, we Christians need to be aware of the dangers of our own extremisms claiming to have a Christian base. I'm not only talking about ancient history, about crusades and witch-hunts and slavery. Today, our Holy Scriptures are used to incite hatred of other religions, other attitudes, and other personalities. We let other, louder spokesmen tell us what our religion teaches instead of learning about it ourselves. Today's readings provide a good example.

In today's Gospel reading, a low-ranking religious official thinks that Jesus is blaspheming. Why? It's not because he has drawn a picture of Moses or advocated eating pork. No- Jesus has said to a paralyzed man, "Your sins are forgiven." That's all. And that's enough. Jesus realizes this opinion and counters, "Why do you have these thoughts in your hearts? Which is easier: to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up, pick up your stretcher and walk?' In the event, Jesus both forgives the man and heals him. We are told that the people were happy about this, but this isn't always the case. In many Gospel passages, such examples of compassion in the face of extreme religious conservatism (such as healing people on the Day of Rest) made them plot his eventual death. [And he wasn't even *Danish!*]

I am not saying that the old rules of our religious tradition are no longer to be observed. Jesus himself said that he did not come to abolish the Torah, but to fulfill it. But we also teach that Christ's purpose was to write the Law of God in our hearts, enabling us to think new thoughts and show love in new ways as we live out the Gospel life today, not just enshrine other's choices from the past. It is simply too easy to say: "I just follow the Bible." Everyone says they're doing that, and no one has ever done it without being selective about which part is used.

Is it a hateful, vengeful God who speaks in today's 1st reading? "No need to recall the past, no need to think about what was done before. See, I am doing a new deed, even now it comes to light; can you not see it? Yes, I am making a road in the wilderness, paths in the wilds... I it is, I it is, who must blot out everything and not remember your sins." And yet how many hear and accept this today?

There is not much we can do to calm the waves of this current typhoon. But there are things we can do to insure that we do not contribute to another storm someday, and closer to home. Being sensitive to the religious sensitivities of others should go without saying by now, but knowing what our own religion and its Sacred Scriptures really say is paramount. Study your Bible with an enlightened mind and a compassionate heart. Know what it really says, not what some of the bigoted and hateful claim. Forgive slights and offences when at all possible, especially when they

come from ignorance. And be yourself a living witness to what Christianity teaches and represents. That is the best way to be faithful to our God who is always doing "a new deed." He will not be served by hatred. "How can this man talk like that?" asks the bigoted scribe to himself in today's Gospel as Jesus heals the paralytic. And the answer is because Jesus spoke with compassion and he spoke with love. Presuming anything else in the name of God, my friends, is the real blasphemy.