



Response to Rabbi Dovid Freilich Speech

By the Most Rev Timothy Costelloe SDB
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Gordon Bloomfield Hall, Yokine
Monday 19 June, 2017

I would like to begin these few words tonight by saying how glad and how humbled I am to be here and to be invited to respond to Rabbi David's address. I do so as the Catholic Archbishop of Perth, as one of the joint honorary presidents of the Council of Christian and Jews of Western Australia, and in my own name as an admirer and friend of Rabbi David. Thank you for this special privilege and opportunity.

It is always something of a challenge to respond to an occasional address: you are never quite sure what the speaker is going to say and whether or not you will be able to do justice to his or her thought. Those of you who know Rabbi David well will know that it is an even bigger challenge where the Rabbi is concerned: he speaks with so much enthusiasm, so much depth and so much passion that it is not easy to keep up with him. Tonight has been no different! Perhaps our abiding memory of tonight will be exactly that: the Rabbi's passion and sensitivity, his courage and sincerity, and the love of life, the love of his people, and the love of the Almighty, which fills his life. For people of religious faith, as most of us here tonight are, it is exhilarating and exciting to listen to a man whose faith is so central to his life that we simply cannot imagine Rabbi David without his passionate love for the Almighty and for his Jewish faith. For those of us here who are Christians it gives us a deeper insight into what it actually means to speak of the Jewish people as our elder brothers and sisters in faith, as Pope John Paul 11 did, and as our fathers in the faith, as Pope Benedict did. As Christians, so much of who and what we are, or at least are trying to be, comes to us from you, God's chosen People, to whom and through whom God first revealed himself to humanity as the one God and Father of us all.

Tonight Rabbi David has spoken to us on the topic: **Religion – Tolerance or Respect?** As I was listening to the Rabbi it occurred to me that if children do no more than tolerate their parents it can hardly be said that they are being faithful to the commandment of God as we find it in Exodus: *honour your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you* (Ex 20:12). Certainly in terms of Christianity, tolerance would be a very poor and inadequate response to Judaism, and to our shame often we have not even managed that much. Mere tolerance, as the Rabbi has suggested, while it is certainly better than intolerance, is in many ways a dismissive and even patronising approach towards those who see things differently – and in fact it might even be seen as a way to keep difference at bay so that we do not have to encounter it, be challenged by it, and learn from it. It reminds me of the way an elderly priest I know used to deal with theological arguments he realised he was not going to win. "Well," he used to say as he walked away, "you can be wrong if you want to."

Because what is sometimes described as the virtue of tolerance can in fact quickly deteriorate into a way of avoiding engagement with the other it can very quickly lead to the demeaning of



those who hold views, religious or otherwise, different from ours. In other words, tolerance can quickly degenerate into intolerance.

Tolerance is, or can easily become, that approach which says, *You can do, or believe, whatever you like, as long as you keep it to yourselves and don't bring it out in public.* In religious terms it implies that Christians should keep to their churches, Jews to their synagogues, Muslims to their mosques and Buddhists to their temples. "We will tolerate you," society seems to be saying, "as long as you don't encroach on our secular space." In such a view religion is often understood to be some exotic and quaint relic from the past, or an outdated and childish way of looking at the world, which a tolerant society is prepared to accommodate as long as it remains contained, compliant, personal and private.

Such an approach it seems to me is a manifestation of an immature and even infantile approach to the complexities of life. It does not want to engage with difference and it certainly does not conceive of the possibility that we can learn from each other.

Respect is very different – and I would say a sign of a much more mature society and culture. Respect begins I think from a presumption of goodness in the other, sincerity in the other, integrity in the other and the possibility of discovering truth in the other. None of these attitudes is incompatible with a passionate commitment to one's own religious tradition and convictions. In biblical terms I think respect is grounded in the fundamental insight expressed so powerfully in the opening pages of the Book of Genesis where we are told that *"in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth God said, 'Let us make man in our own image, in the likeness of ourselves So God created man in the image of himself, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them'"* (Gen 1:1; 26-27).

The Bible says nothing about only the wise, or the wealthy, or the courageous, or the perfect, or the strong being created in the divine image. The Bible says nothing about only the Jews, or the Christians, or the Muslims, being created in the divine image. The Bible says that human beings, all human beings, are created in the divine image. No one person is of more value than another, or more loved by God than another, or more worthy of respect than another. We are all children of the one God, endowed with the incredible dignity of imaging the Almighty simply by virtue of our humanity – and surely this is enough and more than enough for us to give, generously and warmly, the respect and honour which is due to God's living images in the world.

Generosity and warmth – these are the very words which capture perfectly every one of my encounters with Rabbi David in my time here in Perth as the Catholic archbishop. I am sure I am not alone. Every time I meet him I go home both encouraged and joy-filled. His friendship has been an unexpected and undeserved gift to me. I am very grateful to him as I am sure you all are too.

In another passage from the Book of Genesis we are told that *"God fashioned man from the dust of the soil and God breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and thus man became a living being"* (Gen 2:7). Whenever we meet Rabbi David we know that we are in the presence of man who has had the breath of life breathed into him. The joy of life which is so much the hallmark of Rabbi David, coupled with an extraordinary sensitivity to the suffering and pain of so many people in our own time, brings alive, at least for me, what I think the psalmist was trying to capture when he wrote: *"Happy the man who fears the Lord, who takes delight in all his commands ... he is a*



light in the darkness for the upright, he is generous, merciful and just He has no fear of evil news; with a firm heart he trusts in the Lord” (Ps 111).

Rabbi David, thank you for being such a man. Thank you for the friendship and support you have shown to me personally and to our Catholic community. Thank you for your commitment to the work of the Council for Christian and Jews here in Western Australia. Thank you for your presence as a witness in our society to the power and beauty and potential of religious faith in our troubled world.

May the Lord bless you and keep you. May the Lord let his face shine on you and be gracious to you. May the Lord uncover his face to you and bring you peace (Numbers 6:23-26).