



## **Abraham Day Speech**

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The University of Notre Dame Australia, Fremantle  
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*'Welcoming and Standing up for the Other'*

As we begin our time together today, I would like to offer a few very brief words to get us thinking about the theme which has been chosen for this afternoon's gathering. I want quite simply to say something about the idea of "welcome", the idea of standing up for something or somebody, and the idea of who the "Other" might be.

We all know what it is like to receive a warm and genuine welcome – we know how it makes our heart leap and grow warm, how it immediately puts us at ease, even how it can dispel very real fears if we were unsure beforehand just how we would be received. And equally we know how it feels when the welcome we receive is understood not to be sincere but a mere formality; when it has, we might say, no heart in it, and how it can make us uncomfortable, wary, and wondering why we came in the first place. And it is even worse of course when there is no welcome on offer at all.

A real welcome, a sincere welcome, comes from the heart – we might say it is all about one heart meeting another. It is about a real human connection being established between two (or more) people – and it becomes the basis for a real, respectful, life-giving encounter which leaves all those involved acknowledged, affirmed, and uplifted.

And for such an encounter to take place, we might say that people's hearts have to be in the right place to start off with – and so we might reflect this afternoon on whether or not our hearts are really in this project of welcoming – if they are those compassionate hearts that our three religions, which all look to Abraham as our common father and ancestor in our faith, seek to form within us.

Standing up for something or somebody is a little more dynamic and proactive than offering a sincere and heartfelt welcome. Standing up requires - in addition to compassion - courage and conviction, and often quite a lot of it. It also requires a keen sense of that mutual responsibility which as human beings we owe to each other, and especially to those who are in any way vulnerable or unable to stand up for themselves. To welcome someone is one thing – to stand up for and defend someone is another thing all together.

So today, it seems to me, is an invitation to all of us to think about how we, calling on the resources of our own religious traditions, and learning from the wisdom of each other's religious traditions, can contribute to a society which is able to form warm, hospitable, compassionate and courageous individuals and communities.



And that leads me to the last point: who is the “Other” for whom we need to be both welcoming and willing to stand up for? I think the simplest way in which I, calling on my own Christian tradition, can respond to this question, is to remind people of the parable of the Good Samaritan which Jesus once told when someone asked him, “Who is my neighbor?”

I won’t retell the parable here: many of you, from all three religious traditions, would be aware of it. But in the parable a traveller is attacked by thieves, robbed, beaten and left for dead. Some religious figures pass by but for a variety of reasons they turn their heads, pretend they haven’t seen the injured man, and walk on. A Samaritan, a foreigner, comes along and, in the words of Jesus, “was moved with compassion”. He stopped, he tended as best he could to the man’s wounds, he lifted him up on his donkey and brought him to an inn where he gave the innkeeper money to make sure that the man was well-cared for, and once he was satisfied that the man would be OK he went on with his journey.

This Samaritan welcomed the injured man into his life, even though they were not just strangers to each other but actually regarded each other as foreigners. His heart was moved with compassion, and he had the courage to stop and care for the injured man, even though it was quite possible that the thieves were still lurking nearby in the bushes; in other words he stood up for him even in the midst of danger, and he followed through until he was sure that the man would be well looked after.

This Samaritan answers our question for us: who is the “Other”? The “Other” is anyone who is in need of help, anyone who is downtrodden, anyone who is rejected or ill-used – and I want to suggest this afternoon that our three religious traditions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, have a vital role to play, and precious resources to bring to bear, in helping our society to become worthy of the gift of human life we have received from our creator, the one all-merciful God from whom we all come and to whom we will all return.