

WEEK 2

The Remembrance of God's name



Such remembrance is not confined to the Judeo-Christian traditions but has been an inherent part of the spirituality of the Indian sub-continent for millennia. This week we explore how the followers of the newest of the Indian faiths, the Sikhs, have searched for unity with the one whom we call God and how their exploration may cause us to reconsider our understanding.

Three Biblical passages

I remember your name at night, O Lord, and obey your teaching. (Psalm 119:55)

The context is one in which the Psalmist finds comfort in the presence of God, but not only that. Peace of mind and assurance comes through following the will of God. The Psalmist continues: Teach me good sense and knowledge for I have put my trust in your commandments (Psalm 119:66). Such assurance and trust, however, is gained through remembering not simply the being of God, but the history of God's dealings with God's people.

I will be what I will be... my [God's] name for all generations. (Exodus 3: 13,15)

The Jewish community acknowledges the saving power of God by recalling the Exodus in the sanctification of the wine meals on the Sabbath. It was at the Exodus that

God's name is revealed to Moses, probably indicating 'My nature will become evident through my actions'.

Do this in remembrance of me. (1 Corinthians 11:24)

For Christians perhaps the most significant form of remembering is that which takes place in the Lord's Supper. We are reminded that as Jesus broke the bread and took wine he encouraged his disciples and, by implication us, that 'this' takes the form of four actions: taking, blessing, breaking and sharing. So remembering becomes not just a matter of memory, but also a matter of self-giving activity.

We move to a scriptural encounter with the Sikhs

At the heart of Sikhism is the Guru Granth Sahib. It is both scripture and Guru, a guide to life and 'eternal life' in 'God'. It comprises a series of poems, prayers and theological reflections written by the Sikh Gurus and others who had philosophies in keeping with Sikh thought. It is highly revered; the Sikh way of life revolves around its teachings. Whilst we use a similar vocabulary, the word meanings are subtly different and it is that subtlety that makes for challenging theological dialogue. The outcome of this dialogue is not necessarily a change in faith for the participants

but a reconsideration of what we understand in our own belief and how we express it – hence the inverted commas around the words 'eternal life' and 'God'.

Take love as your pen and with reason as scribe enquire of the Guru (God) and list his commands.

Write on that paper the Name with your praises; write of the infinite power!

They who have treasured your Name in their hearts bear the marks of your grace on their brows.

For grace is the means to obtaining the Name; all other is bluster and wind.

For Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism, there is one central message, that it is only through love of the divine name (Naam) that spiritual liberation is to be found. For someone coming from the Reformed traditions, when I talked of faith with my Sikh colleagues it was significant that the way of love for God was a gift of God's grace. Two words abound in the Sikh scriptures: gur prasadi – by the grace of God. Nothing we do as human beings brings us to union with God's being; only through God's grace can we live in harmony with our fellow human beings.

*From Guru Arjan's Sukhmani,
Guru Granth Sahib (p.262f)*

Remember, remember the One whose remembrance brings peace
And dispels pain and sorrow from the body.
Remember the One who alone upholds the universe,
Whose Name is contemplated by millions.
The auspicious words of the scriptures
Arise from a single Word of the divine Name.
They who possess even one jot of Your Name
Are great beyond telling.
They who yearn only for a vision of You,
Says Nanak, I seek liberation in their company.
Divine contemplation is the highest deed,
Divine contemplation liberates multitudes,
Divine contemplation quenches out thirst,
Divine contemplation deciphers all things,
Divine contemplation dispels fear of death,
Divine contemplation fulfils our hopes,
Divine contemplation purifies our mind.
Thus does the ambrosial Name resonate in the heart.
The divine dwells on the tongue of the faithful.
Says Nanak, I enslave myself to those who serve You.

Naam is not simply a name. In effect it is synonymous with that being we would call God, an object of love, yet the very means of attachment to the beloved. If we use such language, love, beloved, we speak not in impersonal terms but personal terms. That may help our understanding but it will never suffice. But why would one use such a seemingly impersonal word? In a country of many faiths the names of God are prolific. Hindus may call God Ram or Krishna, to name but two. Muslims would use the term Allah, Christians perhaps, Ishwar. As soon as we use such a name a particular concept of God is formulated and as soon as that happens we have confined God, maybe even to our own imaginations or understanding. 'How can finite human beings understand the nature of an infinite God?' asks the Sikh. Naam the immaculate is unfathomable, how can it be known? Naam is within us, how can it be reached?... It is by the grace of God that one meets such an enlightenment. (Guru Granth Sahib –GGS - p.1242)

Sikhs speak of nam simran – remembering the Name. For many it becomes an inherent part of daily life and prayers – the humble servant sings the songs of God, by God's grace, O Nanak, one receives the fruit of God's rewards. (GGS, p.284) Singing the praises of God 'by the tongue' is the first step. That, however, is an external activity. The second stage is the remembrance of God with every breath. In effect this is a two-way process for 'God' remembers 'God's' servants with every breath, they are beloved of 'God'. (GGS p.276). A third stage is possible. It is known as ajapa jap. In effect it is not simply spiritual recitation but meditation where simran, remembering, is performed with mind and soul, not simply the tongue. The whole body is attuned to 'God'. The devotee is completely absorbed in the praise of 'God'. Sikhs speak of a fourth stage – liv jap which is a continuous feeling of unity with the divine. It is unbreakable and secure. The soul is so attuned to the divine that one sees the divine light through 'inner eyes'. Such rare people who reach this stage are said to be jivan mukt. They live the 'eternal life' now, to use Christian vocabulary. The fifth Guru, Guru Arjan, writes:

The mind and body are imbued with the love of Naam, the Word of the Wonderful Lord. The devotees live forever with the Supreme God. As water comes to blend with water, their light blends into the Light. Reincarnation is ended, and eternal peace is found. (GGS p.278)

My Sikh friends, however, remind me that Naam simran, is only one of three equally important pillars of Sikh practice. It may enable one to overcome the 'five evils':

lust, anger, greed, attachment to material things, ego/pride, but one's life-style must reflect one's union with the divine. Kirit karo – working diligently - is also vital. One must make an honest living avoiding exploitation and fraud. The third pillar is regularly seen in the life of Sikh Gurdwaras throughout the world: vand chacko – sharing with others who have need. In a somewhat enigmatic way Guru Nanak indicates that righteousness in conduct and practical life are as important as realising the truth. Truth is highest, he says, but higher still is truthful living. Those divine qualities of love, equality and justice must prevail over inequality, injustice, oppression and exploitation.

One Christian's questions

I am always struck by the concept of Naam and the question, 'How can finite human beings understand the nature of an infinite God?' While on the one hand, as a Christian, I want to affirm that one sees that of God within the figure of Jesus Christ, I am also aware of the danger of projecting our understanding of the divine upon the figure we call God. So is there not a place for theological modesty, implied by the Sikhs through the use of Naam and that question posed by Guru Nanak? Are we sometimes in danger of a theological arrogance that undermines our own spirituality?

That leads to the affirmation that Sikhs, and we, live by: that our spiritual life is essentially a God given experience of grace, and nothing less. Christians of the Reformed traditions speak in terms of sola gratia, by grace alone, yet how often do human beings attempt to live our lives shorn of the grace of God? We respond in faith (sola fide) to God's grace. That's no easy task. From a Sikh perspective, those who are jivan mukt, liberated whilst in this life, are few and far between. What is the Christian equivalent?

Such people have managed one of the most difficult of matters, but one which is vital from a Sikh perspective, that is the elimination of haumai – self-centredness. The issue is that the more self-centred you are, the less God-centred you will be. I've always been struck by this recognition but it also opens up an understanding of finding one's self in the selfhood of others. The elimination of self-centredness is not self-negation but a self-affirmation in the service of others, seen so often in the lives of the Sikhs as they involve themselves in seva, service, both as individuals and together through the work of the Gurdwara, the place of worship, in the community.

Questions for discussion

1. We Christians may say that in Jesus Christ we see something of the nature of God. How do we acknowledge that this is not an exhaustive revelation whilst at the same time affirming our faith?
2. If you have been moved by the theological challenges made by the Sikh community, is this the work of the Holy Spirit? Do you think the Holy Spirit can work through other faiths as well as Christianity?
3. How does your life and that of your congregation reflect the remembrance of God's name?
4. One suggested interpretation of the name of God revealed to Moses in Exodus is: '...while I graciously reveal my name to you, I will not be bound or defined by it.' Is this faith enhancing or undermining?

Prayer

Gracious God, whose ways are beyond our understanding but who presides within our hearts, make us aware of your presence within our lives to the extent that we become a sign of your grace in the lives of others. May we reflect that which is worthy of you in all we are and in all we do. We ask this in Jesus' name and for his sake. Amen.