

Blessed are those who have set their hearts on pilgrimage

by Paul-Gordon Chandler



Today's climate of increasing prejudice and stereotyping has led to a sharp rise in Antisemitism and Anti-Muslim sentiment in the West. It is vital that this escalation of misunderstanding and misrepresentation not become the new norm.

It is in this context that the patriarch Abraham comes to our rescue, the common ancestor of distinct spiritual significance to Jews, Christians and Muslims, who self-identify as “children of Abraham”. Abraham, born in what was known as Ur of the Chaldees (in today's Iraq), left his homeland and journeyed throughout the Middle East for the rest of his life. Abraham has forever since been known as having lived a life of pilgrimage, laying the foundation for the importance of pilgrimage as a spiritual discipline in all three Abrahamic faith traditions.

The contemporary Iraqi artist, Qais Al Sindy, a member of the ancient Chaldean Christian community, highlights the importance of living as a pilgrim in his recent work that is part of CARAVAN's peacebuilding exhibition titled “ABRAHAM: Out of One, Many”. On a 24-month tour in Europe and throughout the USA, the exhibition is a timely artistic exploration on living harmoniously, featuring three celebrated Middle Eastern contemporary artists from Jewish, Christian and Muslim traditions.

Providing context to his oil and collage on canvas work, Qais says, “Abraham begins his pilgrimage from Ur of the Chaldees, which is now called Nasiriyah in southern Iraq. This is where the Great Ziggurat of Ur was built by the Sumerian king. And most importantly, as Abraham traveled throughout foreign lands, he lived harmoniously among their peoples.”

Qais reminds the viewer that Abraham is seen as a model of welcoming the “stranger” and embracing the “other” in all three monotheistic faiths. His multi-layered work highlights for us that Abraham's story is not just one of leaving his geographic homeland and journeying to a foreign place. Rather, he also left behind a narrow-minded and parochial worldview, as his call was as much an inner call to journey as an outer one – providing a universal example for us all. Living a life of pilgrimage requires a journey in the geography of the heart.

Qais' work reminds us that when relating to the “other”, we should see ourselves first and foremost as “pilgrims”, journeying in life and toward God – and not having arrived. So often our religious traditions



Qais Al Sindy, *Living as a Pilgrim*, 2019,
Oil and collage on canvas, 60 x 45cm

teach us that we “arrive”, thereby putting borders around beliefs and worldviews, giving it a sense of finality. However, a pilgrim is someone always journeying, exploring and discovering. Having a “pilgrim’s worldview” requires meeting new people and learning from others who are different from ourselves. Living as a pilgrim requires an attitude of openness to receiving from the “other”, regardless of where or from whom it comes.

To illustrate Abraham’s life of pilgrimage, Qais explains, “I painted Abraham carrying a sheep on his shoulders, because I see him as a shepherd leading his people to the land God promised him. In Iraq, I bought an old Nasiriyah shepherd’s cloak made of sheep’s wool, cut it into pieces and pasted some of them on the canvas to give shape to Abraham’s clothes. I wanted to bring the spirit and soul of this great prophet through the material of his native land.”

To further illustrate Abraham’s life of pilgrimage, Qais explains, “I also depict the Ziggurat as a burden on his shoulders because he carries his land with him in his heart as he journeys. The white pyramid on his left is a foreshadowing of his journey into Egypt and of what will happen to his offspring.”

Living as a Pilgrim is a poignant visual lesson in how Abraham mirrors for us God’s universal embrace for all humanity, reminding us that Abraham’s example of welcoming the stranger and embracing the other still speaks to the needs of our contemporary context thousands of years later. It is in this way that the extraordinary promise from God to Abraham, “that all the families of the earth would be blessed through him,” comes true.

There is a poem in the Book of Psalms known as the Pilgrim Psalm (Ps. 84) that Jews, Christians and Muslims love. Right in the middle of the psalm is a beautiful promise: “Blessed are those who have set their hearts on pilgrimage.”

Qais Al Sindy was born in Baghdad, Iraq, in 1967 and has a BSc degree in Engineering (1989) as well as a BFA (2000) and an MFA (2004) from the Academy of Fine Arts at Baghdad University. In Amman, Jordan, where he lived for four years, Qais taught "Art in Architectural Engineering" at the University of Applied Science. Beginning with his first major exhibition in 2007 titled *Letters Don't Burn*, which was about the burning of the Iraqi library, he has exhibited around the world on themes related to humanity, culture and civilization. Qais is of Chaldean Christian heritage and now lives in San Diego, California. Al Sindy's work is currently on exhibition at the American Cathedral in Paris. For more information, see: www.oncaravan.org/qais-al-sindy and <http://www.qaissindy.com>.

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