

This transcript accompanies the *Cambridge in your Classroom* video on 'What is a mosque for?'

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# What is a mosque for?

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Hello, my name is Dr Tim Winter and I teach Islam at the University of Cambridge.

Islam is a religion which, like Judaism and Christianity, teaches that the entire world — in fact, all of space and time — is created by one God. Muslims are monotheists and monotheism, in Arabic, is called tawhid.

I'm standing in the main Cambridge mosque. Everything in it is designed to lead worshippers, mind and heart, to the single idea of God's oneness and also to remind them of His presence and closeness.

Men and women who come to pray in a mosque feel that closeness very strongly. Mosques around the world take many different forms, but they all try to remind worshippers of tawhid, and of God's closeness.

How do Muslims know about God? Firstly, by looking at the beauty and order which they see around them in nature. Secondly, by listening to perfect human beings sent by God. These people are

known as prophets. The Muslim scripture, the Qur'an tells how they often risk their lives to tell people about God and about the need for justice.

Muslims believe that there have been very many prophets sent to the peoples of the earth. Some, however, are especially honoured. Some have had a huge impact on human history. I'm standing right at the front of the mosque where the imam stands to lead the worshippers in prayer.

On either side, in this mosque, the builders have included two beautiful tiles. These are from the Dome of the Rock, in Jerusalem. Muslims believe that the Prophet Muhammad, the last of the prophets, miraculously met many earlier prophets in Jerusalem.

Muslims respect and honour Jesus, Moses, David, Solomon and other prophets. So these tiles remind us of Islam's love for those figures. Muslims don't worship Jesus, and don't believe he was God. But Muslims believe that he was a perfect human being, who will

return at the end of time to put an end to injustice on earth.

If we look up, we can see some Arabic writing. It says, *fa-walli wajhaka shatr al-masjid al-haram*, which means 'turn your face towards the Holy Mosque'. The Holy Mosque means the sanctuary, the safe and holy place in Mecca.

This tapestry is from the Ka'ba, the black cube which is in the middle of the mosque in Mecca. It's covered with golden Arabic letters from the Qur'an, and these ones mean: '*the first house of worship set up for mankind was in Mecca, blessed, as a guidance for the worlds*'. This refers to Ibrahim, or Abraham in English, with his firstborn son Ishmael, who is believed to have built the Ka'ba as the world's first place of worship.

To this day, Muslim men and women remember Abraham and Ishmael when they performed the obligatory pilgrimage, the *hajj*, to the Mecca mosque.

Abraham had two sons, Ishmael and Isaac. Islam believes that they were both perfect prophets of God. Isaac's descendants included Jacob, Joseph, Moses, David and Jesus.

Muslims honour them all as God's true prophets. The Prophet Muhammad, who established the rituals which Muslims perform today in Mecca, was a descendant of Ishmael. So Abraham becomes a symbol of unity and respect. Jerusalem and Mecca are both holy places.

By following the Prophet Muhammad — last of the prophets — Muslims maintain the ancient tradition of following the prophets.

What does this do for Muslims? Why follow a prophet?

The Qur'an, chapter 3 verse 31, says this '*qul in kuntum tuhibbuna'Llaha fa'ttabi'uni yuhbibkumn'Llah*'.

This means, 'Say: if you love God, then follow me, and God will love you'.

Muslims love to imitate the Prophet Muhammad in everything he did. By following him, they believe that they grow in holiness and feel God's love and closeness.

That closeness, God's immanence, it's not very easy for our minds to understand. But Muslims feel that when they follow the Prophet, especially when they copy his form of prayer in a mosque like this, that they feel God's closeness in their hearts.