

Craig's Sermon October 2022

Some of you will have read the late Hilary Mantel's trilogy 'Wolf Hall'. If you enjoy historical novels these are a good read.

Very recently I read the 2nd and 3rd books – 'Bring Up the Bodies' and 'The Mirror and the Light'.

They are set in the early 16th century and tell of the rise of Thomas Cromwell, from very humble beginnings, to become the top advisor to Henry VIII.

Thomas Cromwell became wealthy, was given titles but was never accepted by the aristocracy.

He dealt with traitors and heretics according to the King's wishes.

He organised to annul marriages so the Henry could remarry.

He broke up the monasteries, abbeys and convents that had become very wealthy in order to strengthen the King's treasury.

He was executed when he fell out of favour with Henry. They were turbulent times battling with the Papacy in Rome with Henry wanting control to create his own church.

Heretics from Archbishops down to ordinary people were being executed for heresy – tortured and burnt at the stake.

The novels got me thinking about heretics and heresy – the reason for this reflection.

The dictionary definition of a heretic is someone who challenges, or differs in opinion from, traditional religious belief or dogma or (the one I like) someone who chooses their own path.

When you look back over church history, almost from the beginning, there were those in leadership who wanted orthodoxy or right belief. It was those in power that determined what was the right or wrong belief.

Those who disagreed were seen as heretics and dealt with harshly.

Think of the Crusades, the Inquisition, the Protestant Huguenot Massacre, the hatred generated between Catholics and Protestants.

Some branches of the Christian Church have claimed that their church has been the only true one, yet even a child would know that with all the divisions, different denominations, sects no **one** has the only truth.

In the late 19th century there arose in America a group called the Fundamentalists. They believed that to be a Christian you needed to believe in the fundamentals of the faith.

For them that included;

- # the historical accuracy and inerrancy of the Bible
- # the imminent and physical 2nd coming of Christ
- # belief in the Virgin birth
- # the physical bodily resurrection of Jesus
- # atonement

Fundamentalism arose because some felt threatened by what was happening in society.

Science was stating that the earth was much older than a literal understanding of Genesis.

There was Charles Darwin and the theory of evolution.

Theological colleges were adopting a critical and historical approach to the Bible. This is how I was taught at Knox – when was the passage of scripture written, why was it written, to whom was it written?

What about our own church, the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand? What are our core beliefs?

They centre on God, Jesus and the scriptures but, as stated on the web site, the problem with core beliefs is that they can be interpreted in different ways.

Quite a lot of wriggle room there! Ministers have freedom of conscience.

The scriptures have many ways of understanding God, the one that resonates with me is that God is love – where love is found God is there.

The scriptures have many ways of understanding Jesus – rabbi, teacher, healer, Son of God.

Even the scriptures contain different viewpoints, contradictions.

Just because it's in the Bible doesn't make it true. I was thinking we are not people of the Book but people of the way.

Now I imagine that many of you will remember when Lloyd Geering was charged with heresy in 1967?

In a sermon he challenged the idea of an immortal soul, questioned the Bible's literal truth, doubted the bodily resurrection of Jesus.

And all hell broke loose!

Most of the country were captivated by it, it was the talk of the town.

Geering was acquitted and continued in his role as Professor of Old Testament at Knox Theological College. I have great admiration for the man.

Three years after the trial for heresy I began training at Knox. Geering was Principal and he was by far the best lecturer I had! I think of him as a real, educated person, some one who can make complex issues understandable.

What I remember about the heresy trial was the vitriol and hatred that was heaped on him and his family by many who claimed to be Christians.

I was wondering if Geering was to be charged today of heresy would he be acquitted or convicted? I think he would be convicted.

As an aside to this - when I was minister at St Ninian's Karori, Wellington in the 1980s -early 90s, a couple living in Karori, Professor Rollo Arnold and his wife Betty, who worshipped at St John's in the city decided to join our congregation. Rollo had been one of the lay people that had put Geering on trial for heresy. The couple often disagreed with me but felt comfortable in St Ninian's because I grappled with the scriptures.
I think everyone has mellowed.

Are we a bunch of heretics and do we choose our own path?

I imagine some would think of me as a heretic, especially when I stated in a sermon that I didn't believe in a heaven.

I would like to clarify that a little.

One of the reasons I don't believe in heaven is – who gets in? What is the criteria?

Some Christians believe that only a select group get in. That creates a them and us.

I have no trouble believing in heaven and hell in this life.

Take hell. The ancients who wrote in the Bible about hell had a real life image – the rubbish dump outside the walls of Jerusalem that was perpetually in flames, easy to add the gnashing of teeth.

Hell is being caught up in the unjust war in Ukraine.

Hell is languishing in a refugee camp with no where to go.

To me hell is a divorce.

Heaven for me is being in a warm, loving relationship.

Being transported by an orchestra on stage, by my first ballet – Giselle

Being overwhelmed by the beauty of nature

It's getting into bed on a cold winter's night when the electric blanket has been on a couple of hours!

As someone said to me “How can you be a minister and not believe in heaven?”

No trouble at all.
But you will all have your own idea of heaven.

I recall an incident from my last parish. A young woman, a university graduate with a young family, active in the life of St Andrew's wanted to talk to me about a concern she had.

We got together and she said she didn't feel she could remain in the congregation because there were several things she no longer believed in.

I said tell me what they are and she did. I gave it some thought before I answered and then said most of what you are questioning is the same for me.

I've never believed that.

She stayed active in the life of the congregation because she had been given permission to question, disregard and interpret differently the Christian faith for her.

Are we a bunch of heretics choosing our own paths? You'll have to decide for your self.

I think we might be, but be comfortable with that. You are still part of the Christian family