

Craig's Sermon 28 August

I set you some homework a couple of Sundays back suggesting you read Songs of Solomon, Ecclesiastics, Job and James, books in the Bible that make it more interesting but problematic to the church. Did anyone do some reading?

These reflections come out of a couple of books I've recently read. Karen Armstrong's "The Lost Art of Scripture" and Elaine Pagel's "I Believe". Two very good Biblical students.

Certainly Karen Armstrong's book about how we should read the Bible again highlights how it shapes our lives.

Knox Theological College was a liberal college when I trained, the church was more liberal then too. Now it's become more conservative.

I've never read the Bible literally but as a metaphor.

Armstrong suggests all scriptures should be read as myths, as works of imagination, just as the writers of scripture used their imaginations, intended to achieve the moral and spiritual transformation of the individual. To change our lives not only for ourselves and one another but for the world. Instead we treat them as historical documents recording facts that are set in concrete. Proof texts to be read as literal endorsements of certainty and intolerance. We read them cold on the page like studying an opera libretto without the music, often forgetting that we take our own assumptions and read them into the texts we read.

Another New Testament scholar, John Dominic Crossan, put it evenly more sharply: "My point, once again is not that those ancient people told literal stories and we are now smart enough to take them symbolically but that they told them symbolically and we are now dumb enough to take them literally!"

But back to Karen Armstrong: Common to all religions is the idea of transcendence. Something bigger than ourselves. All have a common thread or focus on empathy, justice and compassion. But do we really show compassion – it is not building my own little nest in heaven if there is one.

You and I are supposed to go back into society and work for a better and more just world. It is about equality and justice (that's why I'm against royalty and inherited privilege). Yet we are living in a world that is utterly inequitable. Massive disparity of wealth – the top few percent control most of the wealth.

A new Oxfam report on global inequality revealed that 162 billionaires have the same wealth as the poorest half of the world. Extreme wealth is the sign of a failing economic system. Homelessness is a major problem in most countries. Record numbers of homeless living in the streets of London and no words from the Archbishop of Canterbury or the Chief Rabbi.

She suggests if we forget that religion is about the imagination and moral striving rather than the strict observance of unwavering doctrinal truths, we are going to hell in a handbasket.

Each religion has its own insights. None is superior. Even religions scriptures read literally can be taken to endorse suspicion of strangers, intolerance of those who believe differently. Rather our Christianity should emphasise kinship to the stranger, empathy with the outsider, extend a hand across boundaries of estrangement or hostility.

We are one world. We can't afford to be tribal peoples now.

Our faith is bigger than our individual selves. It is about loving our neighbours as ourselves.

I chose the Sermon on The Mount because it sums up the teaching of Jesus. It is not about what to believe but rather how you live and treat one another. It's about humility, gentleness, being merciful peacemakers and so on.

If we live that way we will be blessed, we will be happy and content.

Elaine Pagel in "I Believe" says the true gospel is joy, thanksgiving and that is all about relationships. How we come to know ourselves and God.

She fell in love in America and then got a year to study at Oxford University in the UK. She thought he would say "Stay! Don't go" but he said "I don't know much about love, but I know it doesn't tie people down". That's not a bad definition of love.

How we read the Bible I believe is crucial in how we live our lives.

Contrast that with what is happening today. I was reading about the Happiness Project at Yale University in America. It is the most popular class at the University, run by Laurie Santos, professor of Psychology. She said our minds are filled with atoms of little glitches that make it hard to enjoy the great things we have. We are living in a mental health crisis.

They have found that over the last 10 years student anxiety levels have doubled. Levels of loneliness rising. We smile 30% less when our phones are out!

Young people especially are trapped and imprisoned by their cell phones – that's why they're called cell phones!

I've been in restaurants and watched parents and their children all on their phones. When you travel overseas I get the impression that everyone is on their cell phones.

This Happiness Project at Yale University found that the key to happiness was – and wait for it – social connection with other people in our lives.

One reason I go to St Columba is the people. I like them. I enjoy their company.

Just make eye contact and smile. Get out of Facebook and get face to face.

- Happiness is not to be focused on self.*
- Spend money on experiences rather than things*
- Be grateful for what you have – the blessings are the people who love and care for you*
- We are much more resilient than we think*

How much more basic can that get?

Read the Scriptures with your imagination. Following Jesus is bigger than ourselves – it's about our neighbour and world we live in. It's about empathy and compassion. It's about recognising how blessed we are.

Be a blessing to others.

Smile at one another

Be joyful