

Craig's Sermon 25 September

One of the advantages of lock down was having ample time to read. Probably one of the most challenging reads I've undertaken for many years was Karen Armstrong's 'The Lost Art of Scripture'.

Karen Armstrong had been a nun and academic of comparative religions and one of the leading writers in her field. In this book she looks at the scriptures of all the great faiths – Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism etc and she identifies certain themes running through each one of them, I will share these with you this morning.

One of the first books I read of hers was 'The History of God' where she traces the growth from local tribal Gods to the universal God of Christianity, Islam and Judaism. The underlying unity of all things is a deep sealed yearning for transformation. People want to get beyond suffering and mortality – an enhanced humanity, a better self lurks beneath. We want to be kinder, braver. Each one of us can become Christlike or Buddha-like. Then life acquires a new depth and purpose.

Do you and I come to worship Sunday by Sunday to become better people? God does not exist in any way we can understand. All scriptures express divine discontent with the inequality of their society.

There has always been disparities to wealth.

New Zealand Wealth Gap

In NZ 1% are worth 68 times more than the typical New Zealander. Nearly 200,000 have \$260 bn stashed away in trusts. The poorer half have assets of \$46,000 and debts of \$33,000. The middle class – 40% average a net worth of \$350,000 – mostly in housing. When I thought about that I realised I'm well off!

Biblical Archaeology

When they dug down into the ruins of ancient Israel, they found periods of time when the houses were more or less the same size and the artefacts show relative equality between the people with no great disparities. In such times usually, the prophets were silent.

Other periods show remains of huge luxurious homes surrounded by slums and shacks. When there was great gaps between rich and poor, prophets rose up. Like Amos bringing judgement on those who lie on a bed inlaid with ivory and lounge on their couches. "You dine on choice lambs and fatted calves. You drink wine by the bowlful and use the finest linen." "Cows of Bashan – you women who oppress the poor and crush the needy and say to your husbands "bring us some drinks"

Emptying of Self

All religions (regarding egotism) cultivate habits of empathy and compassion and must honour the stranger, and even the enemy, rather than place ourselves at the centre of the world. Focus on the cosmos, socially align with the rhythms of nature. Re justice and equality – can't be a private quest – but to make scripture speak directly to the suffering, rage and hatred that is rife in the world today.

Scripture is a work in progress – inventive, imaginative and creative. Faith in the divine - potential of all human beings.

Scripture is a human artefact. It does not fall directly from heaven.

Even though the Agrarian economy depended upon the suppression of 90% of the population, the protection of the weak and vulnerable was a common preoccupation of the ancient near east. Justice for the poor, orphans and widows – the need to hear their cry for help. Truth, fairness and justice, individuals to think of others and adhere to the golden rule to treat others as we ourselves wish to be treated.

This did not come naturally to human beings.

From the start the religion of Israel was focused on the state of society with a mandate of care for the weak and needy. Social justice. Land must remain in the possession of the extended family (not appropriated by the aristocracy) Interest free loans to Israelites in need were obligatory. Wages should be paid promptly, contract servitude restricted, special provision for the socially vulnerable, orphans, widows and foreigners.

God had called Israel out of Egypt because he was a champion of the oppressed peasant class – exodus from oppression. Prophets like Amos promote justice – a summons to practical compassion.

Prophets like today's political commentators.

Burning Bush / Moses

“I am who I am” – vagueness. Never mind who I am, mind your own business. If a stranger should live with you in your land, do not molest him. You must treat him like one of your own people and love him as yourselves. For you were strangers in Egypt.

Constant practice of kindness and consideration – not solitary. In order to enlarge oneself, one must try to enlarge others.

First Golden Rule

Do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire.

Reciprocity – doing one's best for others.

Early Jesus Movement

Followers of Jesus of Nazareth were taking the Jewish tradition in a different direction. Originally this was a party of the little people. While the rabbis belonged to the elite, Jesus and his followers came from the peasantry.

Despite extensive historical research into the historical Jesus, we know little about him. He seemed to have founded a popular movement of preachers and healers who ministered to the economically marginalised people of Galilee during the late 20s CE.

In an agrarian state the aristocracy lived separately from the masses, whose religion thus tended to be rather different. Although they could not read, write nor study the scriptures they were like rabbinical students – Jesus and his disciples would have been familiar with Psalms sung at Passover and on pilgrimages to Jerusalem. They certainly knew the story of the Exodus and some of the prophetic teachings but the prophets they honoured the most were the men of the people like Moses – delivered from slavery, and Elijah – expected one day to restore Israel.

Jesus was born into a society traumatised by state violence and brought up in Nazareth, a hamlet near Sepphoris, which had been destroyed by Roman troops after King Herod's death. Galilee was now governed by Herod's son Antipas who imposed heavy taxes to fund his own exclusive building projects. Failure to pay was punished by confiscation of land so many peasants were forced into banditry while others, like Jesus's father Joseph, possibly among them, turned to carpentry – manual labour.

The crowds who thronged around Jesus for healing were hungry, distressed and sick, many afflicted with neurological and psychological disorders attributed to demons.

In Jesus' parable we see a society split between the very rich and the very poor. People who were desperate for loans, heavily indebted and forced to hire themselves out as day labourers.

It seems Jesus called for a renewal of the original covenant with Yahweh, champion of the little people. The Kingdom of God, he proclaimed, was based on justice and equality and his followers should behave as if it had already arrived. In God's Kingdom the poor would be first and the rich and powerful last.

But Jesus taught those who feared indebtedness that they must themselves release those indebted to them and they must love even their enemies. Instead of responding with violent reprisals to wrongdoing like the Romans, they must turn the other cheek, give help to everyone who asks and refrain from asking a robber to return what he had stolen.

Jesus' followers should live compassionately and observe the Golden Rule – treating others as they would wish to be treated.

Jesus is said to have told his followers to give all their possessions to the poor. Practical, expressed compassion was essential to his message. He predicted that the people admitted to the Kingdom of God would not be those who had the correct beliefs but those who had given food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, who made a stranger welcome, clothed the naked, cared for the sick and visited those in prison.

This was an inherently political message. Jesus was not preaching armed resistance but his teaching of the Kingdom of God was an implicit critique of imperial power. When asked if it was permissible to pay taxes to Caesar, he answered equivocally “give back to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God”. That statement was in fact more provocative and politically dangerous than it sounds today. Here Jesus is not advocating a neat separation of church and state. Nearly all the uprisings in Palestine against Rome during the first century had been sparked by Roman taxation which was deemed illegal since the Holy Land and its produce belonged to God. There was, Jesus implied, thus precious little to give back to Caesar.

2000 plus years later, here we are followers of Jesus, reminded that his Gospel was for the little people. That the common theme running through all scriptures was about becoming better human beings, more Christlike, kinder, more compassionate, more empathetic, suppress our egos – it’s not all about you or me. You and I are no longer little ones. We lead comfortable and secure lives. Many of us are wealthy.

Do we as a church centre our thoughts on the little ones? No, I’m going to leave the church leadership out of it – they have disappointed me on many levels. Do we as individual followers of Jesus stand with those that are seen of little worth, speak for those whose cries for recognition are not heard? Do we stand up to those who make racist comments, those who are homophobic? Do we stand with immigrants of all races and welcome them?

Do we stand for reason, truth, justice and, above all, compassion.

AMEN