## Reflection “Conscientious Reformers”

This will be a ramble through my experiences and thoughts about peace. Not just absence of war, but Shalom, justice and relationships as they should be.

I don’t have anything like a pacifist heritage; the opposite actually. The uncle whom I lived with as a teenager had been in an essential industry during WW2 working for Westland Aircraft as a sheet metal worker presumably on Westland Lysanders.

I don’t know who my father was but a DNA test indicated that he was probably East European and at the time I was conceived 307 squadron of Polish airmen was stationed near where my mother lived. I read this about them:

Polish fighter pilots became instant celebrities with all classes of British society. International journalists flocked to airfields to write about their exploits, waiters refused to take payments for their meals in restaurants, bar owners paid for their drinks and bus conductors allowed them free journeys. Quentin Reynolds, one of the war’s most well-known American war correspondents, dubbed Polish airmen 'the real Glamor Boys of England' in *Collier's Weekly*, an apt reflection of the 'hero worship' attitude the British had towards them.

These Polish airmen were apparently successful romantically with the local girls. So I like to think that my father was one of those magnificent men in their flying machines who flew Bristol Beaufighters and later De. Havilland Mosquitos. Being a romantic man, it’s nice to be able to think that anyway.

When I was at secondary school we had to be in the Cadets and so I wasted a lot of time marching around, learning how to crawl keeping my heals down and staying in dead ground. Also many hours taking apart and cleaning a Lee Enfield 303. I got to fire it once but was a lousy shot because the gun was so heavy and I am a bit short sighted in my right eye, and it does help to see the target. I do remember the enormous kick in the shoulder when it went off; that was one of the few exciting events in my school days. Not a hint of being concerned for peace.

In my first few years of being a parish minister I conducted the funerals for a lot of ex-servicemen and got to have the highest regard for those men. They had something that subsequent generations like mine were missing. Something like a mixture of being able to cope with whatever life flung at them and enormous worldly wisdom.

When I was training to be a minister Evan Pollard was one of the lecturers, I admired him greatly, he had been a gunner on bombers in WW2.

All those men were in the war business and I can’t condemn any of them for they acted with integrity and did what they thought was right.

I have distant ancestors who were early settlers in the Nelson area and some of them were very respectable pillars of society, an M.P. and a mayor, and may well have supported what the troops did at Parihaka and maybe some were even soldiers who did it.

So I don’t condemn those people who take part in warfare. They were ordinary people doing what seemed right to them at the time. Yet the destruction of Parihaka, then later WW1 and WW2 were surely events of enormous wrong, hurt and to use that dreaded word Sin.

So if we cannot lay the blame for these terrible events on the heads of the people who actually took part in them. What to blame? What needs to change? For it is certain that those violent actions were utterly wrong and we need to stop more of them happening.

I am suggesting that the fault lies in our beliefs and standards, the culture of our societies.

Culture matters! Over the last few years I have developed the subjective opinion that people by and large are getting nicer. Children are valued more, people have higher standards in the way they treat animals for example, rainbow people are now accepted as just part of being human and to be treated no differently than others. There is some political correctness that tends to rear its head concerning racism, but I think it is better to wince at being politically correct rather than let racial prejudice run free.

Anyway when were in Zurich a few weeks ago I heard about one of the city’s great men, a man of the Reformation, Zwingli. He got condemned as a heretic and was hung drawn and quartered for it. Even if Lloyd had been found guilty of heresy 50 years ago, that wouldn’t have been his fate. We no longer find our entertainment witnessing a hanging or gawping at people in lunatic asylums. By and large, we humans most definitely have become nicer and I put this down to our cultural values changing and becoming more loving and compassionate.

So why and how can we advance the niceness even further? To put it in somewhat repellent religious language, there seems to be less sin around, and how do we reduce the influence of sin even more.

One cause of the problem that we can deal with is that the Church has been misusing the idea of sin.

The Church over the ages has focussed on what individual people get up to because they are human. The Church had a recipe for success. It was the Ten Commandments.

When the Church got away with selling indulgences, if a diligent accountant had been curious enough to keep records, I would guess that he would have noted that St. Peter’s in Rome could have been built many times over on what men had paid for breaking Commandment number 7 alone.

I’m not saying that the 10 Commandments don’t matter, they do, but attitudes and culture can do huge harm.

If you look at the words of the ancient prophets and the things that annoyed Jesus, they were rarely the actions of individual people. They got wound up against what society in general got up to and accepted as its norms. They did not get so much at the sins of individuals but the standards of their communities.

God may have been referred to as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob but in general he was referred to as the God of the Hebrews, not of any individual person.

The two things that the Gospels isolate as bugging Jesus was first the pedantic Sabbath laws. Healing on the Sabbath was what seemed to cause the most tension in his ministry. Rarely did Jesus have a go at a particular religious leader personally, but it was always over the general principle. The second was the way people were ripped off by the Temple authorities who had a monopoly on sacrificial animals and cashed in on it.

Things like Sabbath Laws and concerning what happened in the Temple, religious beliefs that led to animal sacrifices, and the existence of money itself are example of the imagined entities that Harari was getting at in our secular reading. I have coins in my pocket, they are real bits of metal. But the concept of money and them having something called purchasing power is just in our minds, it is an imagined entity.

Incidentally Hariri also makes a lot of what many of us are coming to know and that is that being able to have these imagined entities is the only intellectual difference that separates us from other more intelligent creatures. Chimpanzees don’t appear to have a concept of universal chimpanzee rights or a concept of a nation state, or their own occupational health and safety regulations nor religion, there is no hint of a Presbyterian Chimpanzee Church. – all imagined entities.

However as Jesus and the prophets found out, to have a go at general principles or imagined entities is dangerous. It is safe to pick on some man - who to quote Hillary Clinton was a hard dog to keep on the porch, but it is a completely different and dangerous thing to do to criticise society’s values as conscientious objectors found out.

It has been safe for a minister to thunder from the pulpit condemning people for their supposed sinful ways. It wouldn’t be safe here and now I am pleased to say, but it used to be the stock in trade of our profession.

However suppose the minister had thundered from the pulpit the sin of waging war and condemned the political leadership of the country in 1914 or 1939 for example. Conscientious objectors and the people of Parihaka experienced what it means to be true prophets or to follow the way taught by Jesus.

The Church by and large has fought shy from going head to head with the state or people’s strongly held attitudes on moral grounds. The Church has been salt that has lost it saltiness and all too often has been a gutless organisation whose main priority is its own survival and hopefully prosperity.

This unfortunate twisting of the meaning of sin has done a lot of damage to people. I met an old lady many years ago who had given up on the Church when she was young. However the malignant influence of the Church was still powerful with her under the surface. Later when she was dying, apparently she was terrified that because she had turned her back on the Church that she was therefore going to Hell. Really!

Of course people are hurt by individuals behaving badly but that is absolutely nothing compared to the huge hurt that has been caused by the imagined entities of prejudice, ethnic and religious; the nationalism that causes wars; the materialistic culture that fuels dissatisfaction and greed.

So as I come to the end of this ramble, what are a couple of society’s values that could do with a challenge to change. What are specific examples of conscientious reformation? After all, it’s pretty pointless to say that the Church’s job is to challenge the society it is in to adopt new attitudes and not have specific examples.

While we were overseas I stood and looked at a war memorial in Vienna. These were soldiers who had died fighting for the Axis powers. I also saw a plaque in the cathedral remembering the Austrian soldiers who had died in the siege of Stalingrad.

I had the obvious thought of when we remember our fallen soldiers on those national days of remembrance why don’t we also remember those who died fighting on the other side. The message is usually something like no more war, we want peace. It seems to me that if we truly were looking towards a more peaceful world and honouring the memory of those who had died fighting for what they believed was right, then we should remember all those who died; not just the ones wearing our uniform. I would like something like twinning of war memorials to be done so we had representatives from that town in Austria, Italy or Germany at our memorial commemorations and vice versa.

In terms of peace in its widest meaning, Shalom, that peace surely must include equally all of our ecosystem. If we want true, real and complete peace then it must extend to the all living things. Are we really living in peace when pigs are kept in sow crates, chicken in battery cages, wild animals are driven to extinction?

Forests cut down and species lost?

This is not just for our own advantage, so we can use them for medicines, or eat them, or even look at them when on Safari or admire the huge trees in the forest.

Those countless species, some magnificent and noble to us, some we never notice, some we find a nuisance, and some we find a use for. They are all integral parts of the great webs of life. We are actually no more important than any of the others. The ecosystem is a democracy where all are equally important; it isn’t a hierarchy with us at the top.

I am suggesting that truly moral humanity will look at the other species of living things as our partner species. We have disproportionate power over the other species but humanity should as a matter of course always consider the effects of what we do on other species of living things.

So I have said what I think is fairly obvious, that the Church has lost its way by focussing on the sins of individuals and not being a critic of the values that are entrenched in its society; probably because that is too dangerous.

Then to try to do the impossible, I have imagined what may lie over the horizon in the future direction our values should move. Those ideas might be completely wide of the mark in terms of reality, but they are just to illustrate the principle that I believe is the right one, and that is that the Church must accept that we individuals may mess up but generally we do the best we can, but instead be on the lookout for what could and should be changed in the attitudes that prevail in the society all around it.