**St Andrews on The Terrace Sunday 10 February 2019 Epiphany 5 Faith Trust - Belief – Which?**

**Readings for the Gathering**

|  |
| --- |
| ***Hebrew Bible Isaiah 6: 1-8***  ***The ancient story of the prophet Isaiah’s commissioning gives us a picture of how lofty and exalted Isaiah believed God to be, many hundreds of years before Jesus’ time***  **6**In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of his robe filled the temple. **2**Above him were seraphim, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. **3**And they were calling to one another: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty;     the whole earth is full of his glory.”**4**At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke.**5**“Woe to me!” I cried. “I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty.” **6**Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar.**7**With it he touched my mouth and said, “See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.” **8**Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?” And I said, “Here am I. Send me!” |
| **The Epistle 1 Corinthians 15:1-11**  ***In the early days of the Christian Church, it was important for them to define what was different about their belief from Jewish and other religions. This is how the writer to the Corinth church defined that difference. There was much riding for him on their acceptance of it.***  **15**Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. **2**By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. **3**For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, **4**that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, **5**and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. **6**After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. **7**Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, **8**and last of all he appeared to me also… |
| **Gospel Luke 5:1-11**  ***In this account of Jesus calling his first disciples, he does not require them to sign up to a set of beliefs. He asks them to trust him as a reliable leader and his goal as a worthwhile goal to follow.***  **5**One day as Jesus was standing by the Lake of Gennesaret, the people were crowding around him and listening to the word of God. **2**He saw at the water’s edge two boats, left there by the fishermen, who were washing their nets.**3**He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little from shore. Then he sat down and taught the people from the boat. **4**When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, “Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch.” **5**Simon answered, “Master, we’ve worked hard all night and haven’t caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets.” **6**When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break. **7**So they signalled their partners in the other boat to come and help them, and they came and filled both boats so full that they began to sink. **8**When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus’ knees and said, “Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!” **9**For he and all his companions were astonished at the catch of fish they had taken, **10**and so were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, Simon’s partners. Then Jesus said to Simon, “Don’t be afraid; from now on you will fish for people.” **11**So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him.  **Contemporary reading by Brian D. McLaren, from The Great Spiritual Migration: How the World’s Largest Religion Is Seeking a Better Way to Be Christian (Convergent: 2016), 2-3.** |

For centuries Christianity has been presented as a system of beliefs. That system of beliefs has supported a wide range of unintended consequences, from colonialism to environmental destruction, subordination of women to stigmatization of LGBT people, anti-Semitism to Islamophobia, clergy paedophilia to white privilege. What would it mean for Christians to rediscover their faith not as a problematic system of beliefs, but as a just and generous way of life, rooted in contemplation and expressed in compassion, that makes amends for its mistakes and is dedicated to beloved community for all? Could Christians migrate from defining their faith as a system of beliefs to expressing it as a loving way of life?

For centuries, Christians have presented God as a Supreme Being who showers blessings upon insiders who share certain beliefs and proper institutional affiliation, but who punishes outsiders with eternal conscious torment. Yet Jesus revealed God as one who “eats with sinners,” welcomes outsiders in, and forgives even while being rejected, tortured, and killed. . . . He preached that God was to be found in self-giving service rather than self-asserting domination. . . . What would it mean for Christians to understand, experience, and embody God as the loving, healing, reconciling Spirit in whom all creatures live, move, and have their being?

For centuries, Christianity has presented itself as an “organized religion”—a change-averse institution . . . that protects and promotes a timeless system of beliefs that were handed down fully formed in the past. Yet Christianity’s actual history is a story of change and adaptation. . . . What might happen if we understood the core Christian ethos as creative, constructive, and forward-leaning—as an “organizing religion” that challenges all institutions (including its own) to learn, grow, and mature toward a deepening, enduring vision of reconciliation with God, self, neighbour, enemy, and creation?

**Reflection for the Gathering**

Some human needs never change. *The need for security* is basic. *We all need to feel we belong*, this takes knowing who we are and where we belong; We all need *to mix with people whose ideas are like our own*.For most, we *need to know there is more to our lives* than only the physical and the material.

Over the millennia religions have met those human needs.

Years before Jesus, the account of the prophet Isaiah’s call shows how the need for something more was imaged then. Here God, enthroned, is attended by heavenly beings. The singing rivals Kings College, Cambridge. Isaiah is awed. When the call comes, he volunteers fervently and sincerely. This illustrates another human need -to be needed, And Isaiah’s need to be secure means he obeys the Holy One he saw as in charge of the world at an insecure time when Israel was at the mercy of the greatest empire in the known world. Isaiah trusts in this Almighty God rather than the leaders of his tribal nation or the Babylonian empire.

In the Epistle reading we see another need being satisfied by a change in the shape of religion. The writer to the church in Corinth checks the congregation understands what is now important to believe. They’re taken through the elements – the purpose of Jesus’ death, his burial, his rising again and subsequent appearances. In this very early letter, written years before the Gospels, is the beginning of the build up of a series of propositions and beliefs which will form the new religion of Christianity. The new group of Christians is forming within, at first, the existing Jewish system. Eventually, differences between their beliefs will cause a split between the two. Two religious systems will emerge each based on a monotheistic God with a promised Messiah on the one hand and an incarnated Son on the other. Right now for the writer to Corinth, the need to distinguish between Judaism and this new belief in the Christ is very important.

Sixteen centuries later in the Reformation it became a matter of life and death to distinguish oneself as Protestant or not. Different belief systems were defined. A variety of confessions of faith were produced, defining belief in geographical territories. Key questions became litmus tests for whether or not one was ‘in’ – are you born again, do you believe in the virgin birth, the resurrection, the second coming of Christ?...

Sometimes lost amongst this proliferation of belief statements, was that original gratitude, trust and love which those early Corinthians Christians may well have felt towards Jesus; some knew him personally, others by reputation through his reported actions and the theology growing around his martyr’s death. Think about it. When persecuted by the Romans, you didn’t give your life for only a set of beliefs, you gave it up because you trusted in, had faith in, loved and even adored the God who had rescued you from yourself; the God-man who had helped you find out who you were and where you belonged. Someone who could do that deserved in return, if necessary, the gift of your own life.

Human beings have other needs better described as wants or desires. There’s the desire for power and control. There’s the corresponding desire to have a really, really secure world where you know your belief system will endure forever; that you will not be required to take risks by questioning and debate; that you will know for sure what you believe will be true till the end of time. In some ways this gives us the perfect storm – on the one hand those wanting to control and perfect (in their view) the system and institution, preserving it at all costs; and on the other a large group only too pleased to have security and comfort and predictability in their religious system. None of this initially requires a conspiracy of any sorts, it is simply a common human desire to be comfortable, to know what will happen next and to be approved in the group in which you arrived by birth or choice.

Unfortunately, once a group forms that automatically puts everyone else in the Other group. If one belief system is right then too often automatically this makes others wrong. There is no room for several systems which are also right according to their own understanding and context. How many of you were in a gang or group at primary school that had an ongoing feud with another gang – my brother’s were in the Broughton St gang in Gore and they and the Crewe St gang engaged in what was euphemistically called ‘Happy Valley’ - a wonderful area of gorse and long grass in a gully between these two streets. Trolleys, shanghais and much, much more happened in that “happy” place. Humans beings haven’t lost that animal instinct for territoriality. It affects religious groupings and practices too.

In contrast, on the beach that day Jesus does not require the disciples to sign up to any creed, confession of faith or membership commitment when he calls them. No username or password to login or register. No deposit required or membership subscription. What *is* required is more difficult - trust. It is not that they are without fear. Jesus tells them they do not need to be afraid, indicating, in fact, they are scared witless!

This is something they’d never experienced before. They know Jesus, they’d’ve have grown up with him playing as boys in and out of boats and up hills, maybe even in their own ‘happy’ valley. But he’s different today. Though a carpenter and not a fisherman, for some reason he spots a shoal of fish they’d missed. That’s unusual enough to spook you a little or a lot. Then follow? Leave their jobs? Leave their families? Even if there’s more background this shorthand version doesn’t give us, this is a watershed. A watershed that would only happen with trust; trust that there is a spiritual journey to be taken, trust that this man will show them where it is and how long the path. Trust that this is the most important thing they can do with their lives right now. Trust they will find out more if they take this first step.

In any organisation there’s a founding moment. It’s often just a few people on a beach, in a room, a coffeeshop or garage. It may begin with a handshake, group hug or a high five, because the small number of people in the room trust each other. Usually the leader, at least, understands what they are doing, even if not everything is yet revealed.

Inevitably if a group grows, its organisation must too. Communication gets complicated, it helps if you develop groundrules. It may, in difficult times, be a matter of life and death that you can identify who is in your group and who’s not. So we get what Brian McLaren describes: belief systems, organisational complexity, fear of the original founder and his allegedly inflexible judgments. We call this having faith. Actually it is *believing* in a set of propositions. As those propositions become unbelievable as the world changes, people think they have lost their *faith.*

However, a conversation might reveal they still *trust* there is a spiritual journey to be taken, *trust* this man Jesus can show them where it is and how long the path; *Trust* that this is the most important thing they can do with their lives; *trust* they will find out more if they take this first step.

These days, we don’t fish in small wooden boats anymore. We are not the down trodden inhabitants of a country occupied by an Imperial power. We are not happy to be compliant while those in power dictate what we can and can’t believe. If we want to find a shoal of fish we will use radar. If we want to be listened to politically we make submissions, vote in elections and stand for parliament. If we feel we are being dictated to, we protest.

I believe however, that a spiritual journey is still what we need to be fully human. I believe that the stories, trophes, memes and narratives in this ancient book still are vital clues to what it is we need now. It is just that they are dressed in 2000 year old clothes and need a makeover.

What does a spiritual journey look like in 2019? And, what is it like for us in 2019 to trust the spiritual journey? It is *we who live in this world now* hold the clues as to how we might express that in 2019 and for as long as this context remains. Then those living in the next context which comes along will work out how their human needs for spiritual journeying can be met in their time.

There is a Buddhist saying: “A bird sitting in a tree is not afraid of the branch breaking because her trust is not in the branch but in her own wings.” If we cannot believe the words in creeds or old hymns anymore, we may have lost the traditional faith as expressed in those beliefs. The branch for us may have broken. But, we do not need to lose our trust that we are spiritual people needing to be on the spiritual journey. We have 21st century wings which will help us find new meanings and metaphors for ‘trust’ and ‘love’ and ‘hope’ and even ‘belief’. What we need is enough trust to mine the ancient scriptures for what these old stories *mean,* then find how that meaning can be expressed in our context today. We have the wings to do that task.

I think this is the most important thing the church should be doing for its community at the moment – I could talk about this for hours – talk to me about that sometime!

Just a final illustration ... then because sooner or later we all need lunch!

My mother came to NZ in 1946. It was important to her that she could travel back home for visits and could still communicate with her family.

When Mum revisited England in the late 40s/early 50s, she and my brothers (aged 4 and 2) took a Sunderland flying boat to Sydney then flew the kangaroo route with stopovers at Singapore, Calcutta and Cairo. In 1970, Mum and Dad flew home on a jet plane with only one stopover. Now, you can fly non-stop from Perth on Quantas. The methods change, but it’s still travel. You can still get home.

Another fear for her was that something big would happen in her family without her knowing for months. As a small child I gathered with the family around the black Bakelite phone in the hallway for the booked call to England. It seemed the middle of the night but was probably only 9 o’clock. Sometimes we got through. I was always a bit confused about who I was talking to at the other end with no speaker phone facility and crackly lines due to a mysterious thing called atmospherics. When her father was ill, Mum was the second to hear after their neighbour that he had died, because they booked a call just at the right time. Mum herself died before she was really comfortable with cell phones or email but had she lived, she would have used them to communicate with her English family. The *need* is to communicate. The instruments and methods change, but we still communicate. With practical things we make transitions almost seamlessly and painlessly. If I tried to use that bakelite phone to book a call to England that system would now fail me. What are we doing in the church if we still try to use old, now inadequate systems?

We are all on a spiritual journey simply because we are human beings.

We can still trust that there is still a spiritual journey to be travelled.

The ancient faith and beliefs give us clues to the journey’s shape in 2019.

The journey will still bring us home to ourselves if we walk in ways our twenty-first century selves understand.

Trust the journey and it will unfold before you

Susan Jones 027 321 4870 04 909 9612 minister@standrews.org.nz