

St Nicholas Parish Church, Prestwick

The Thought for the Week

Sunday 4th October 2020

Someone laughed the other day when I said that I had been listening to the wireless!

“Gosh, Fraser!” she exclaimed, “that gives your age away!”

And she is right! I have lived through history!

We didn't have a television set until I was five, so it was the radio that brought us the news and entertained us.

I have vague memories of my Mother listening to “Mrs Dale's Diary” and I can still vividly recall the dulcet tones of Alvar Lidell reading the News.

To this day one, I still enjoy the radio, and thanks to Alexa, I can tune in immediately to a whole variety of stations.

Apart from Classic FM, my favourite is Radio 4 - such programmes like The Archers, Poetry Please, Any Questions, Just A Minute and a programme that I have appreciated for a very long time is called “Desert Island Discs” – it is the second longest running programme on the radio, having been first broadcast away back in 1942, with its wonderfully atmospheric opening music of “By a Sleepy Lagoon” by Eric Coates. Now, believe it or not, despite appearances to the contrary, I have not been a listener since its inception, but only much later!

Originally devised and presented by a man called Roy Plomley, who one night in November 1941 at his digs in Hertfordshire, his fire had gone out and he was in his pyjamas ready for bed, and the idea for the programme came into his head; he wrote to the BBC, got an favourable reply and the programme was born. Each week a guest, who is known as a “castaway”, is invited to choose eight pieces of music, a book and a luxury item for their imaginary stay on a desert island. And during the programme they discuss their lives and the reason for their choices.

There have been only five presenters in the programme's history and after Roy Plomley's death in 1985, having presented the programme for 43 years, it was introduced by Michael Parkinson, then Sue Lawley, Kirsty Young, and for the past two years, Lauren Laverne.

The guests over the years have included famous authors, politicians, actors, and musician – J. K. Rowling of “Harry Potter” fame; the comedian, Michael MacIntyre; the doyenne of stage and screen, Dame Judi Dench; and the footballer, David Beckham.

Over the years, the list of luxury items which have been chosen has been fascinating – Princess Michael of Kent chose an oriental cat; Alex Salmond, a sandwedge and a supply of golf balls; Morrissey and Duncan Bannatyne chose a pillow; and Baroness Margaret Thatcher opted for a photograph album of her children.

When it comes to guests' choice of books – well, the actor George Clooney chose “War and Peace” because in his words, “There may not be toilet paper and it is a huge book...”; The Prime Minister, David

Cameron, chose “The River Cottage Cookbook” by Hugh Fearnley-Whitingstall; and Princess Margaret chose “War and Peace” as well, but I don’t know whether it was for the same reason as George Clooney!

In addition to their luxury item and their selection of book, each of the castaways is given to take with them to their island, The Complete Works of Shakespeare and a copy of the Bible.

Well, there would be plenty of time on the desert island to get to grips with all the characters and the plots of Shakespeare’s plays. Many folk regard the plays of William Shakespeare as the finest works in the English language.

The Bible too has plenty of pages in the Old and the New Testaments – 66 different books from Genesis through to the Book of the Revelation. 66 Books coming to us from a culture and a people far remote from us here in 21st century Britain. 66 Books written originally in Hebrew and in Greek and yet 66 books, made up of history, poetry, letters, and still a best seller today.

As Presbyterians, we are a “People of the Book” – that is why, as worship begins on Sunday mornings, the Beadle, precedes the preacher into Church, and with due dignity, places the Bible on the Pulpit bookboard. It is around its sacred pages that we gather as God’s people to hear God’s Word for us.

Having studied the Scriptures for three years at Glasgow University, pulling my hair out (yes, that accounts for it!) as I wrestled with both Testaments in their original languages, and after forty years in Ministry, I am still discovering the vastness of its riches and the depths of its eternal truths.

For the Christian, the Bible is, first and foremost, the principle source of our knowledge of the life and cultural background of our Lord Jesus Christ, God in human flesh.

We must remind ourselves whenever we read the Scriptures that Christianity is an historically based religion – it is NOT an abstract, even if admirable, philosophical system. It is NOT a code of rules and regulations.

We must remind ourselves too that the Bible isn’t hard fact history – and it is certainly not a detailed manual of instruction.

There are devout Christians to whom talking snakes, a donkey speaking in a man’s voice, the universality of the Flood, a rocketing Ascension of our Lord, and the audibly spoken words of a very personal Devil and of God Himself are nothing but literal history.

Unless you believe that, they argue, unless you believe in a literal acceptance of the Bible, divinely dictated by God, Christianity must fall to pieces.

Mankind’s knowledge and understanding of our world has changed throughout the centuries – and never more so in the scientific and technological revolutions of modern times. We begin to realise how little we really know.

And change, as we all know, is far from being a comfortable process- it would be so much easier to sit back and say,

“This is what I believe,” they say, “and nothing, no new knowledge, no new understanding, no new perspective, is going to alter it, or unsettle it, or deepen it.”

I believe it cannot be like that – those eternal truths within the pages of Holy Writ cannot be imprisoned in closed minds.

Remember Jesus Himself said to His disciples, “I have many things to say to you, but you cannot hear them now.”

It is vital that we have to step decisively out of the thought processes of the Ancient World. The duty of the Christian Church is to proclaim the Risen, Glorified, Triumphant, and Living Christ – not to box Him up in the intellectual language of two thousand years ago.

If we are going to win others for Christ, we ourselves cannot be imprisoned in antiquarian religion.

The writers of the Gospels, and St Paul, were marvellous men – their love of the Lord Jesus shines timelessly through their writings, but their world view was totally different from ours.

As the Church faces untold hurdles in these days, we are committed to following the truth wherever it leads, helping each generation, coping with the changes of the world, to see God afresh, from a new perspective.

Bishop Charles Gore, who successively was Bishop of Worcester, Bishop of Birmingham and Bishop of Oxford, used to say to his Clergy that it was their duty to preach “the new theology, but the old religion.”

For me, that sums it up so magnificently.

My Granny used to love to sing a hymn which she knew from her teenage years growing up in the village of Pollokshaws before the First World War, and involved in the life of the Methodist Church there,

“Sing them over again to me, wonderful words of life;

Let me more of their beauty see, wonderful words of life;

all so freely given, wooing us to heaven...”

She knew her Bible, but better than that, she knew her Saviour.

What is the use of using our critical faculties with integrity during the week, and abandoning them in the Church vestibule when we come to Church on Sunday?

Our troubled world is in desperate need of the love and compassion and inexhaustible hope that is in Christ.

And it is our imperative to preach The Word for His glory.

The Revd Fraser R Aitken

Locum Minister