

St Nicholas Church, Prestwick

The Thought for the Week Sunday 21st February 2021

Many years ago, as a young Minister, I used to spend a week in late February at Crieff Hydro Hotel, along with two other ministerial colleagues and their families – thanks to the very generous trust established by a certain Dr Meikle away back in the early years of the 20th century. “Protestant Ministers and full time Christian workers” have the chance to take holidays at reduced rates in this splendid place, set amongst the glories of Perthshire. In those days in the late 70s and early 80s we availed ourselves of the opportunity, and always made sure that we raised a Toast to Dr Meikle during our stay for he was paying for a good part of our stay!

Often Ash Wednesday would fall during our time there, and on that day, after breakfast I would take myself off to the local Episcopal Church for morning prayers. During the course of worship, the rector would invite us to come forward to the altar and he would smear ashes on our foreheads, ashes that came from the burned palm cross from the previous year’s Palm Sunday’s celebrations, the ashes that symbolized Jesus’ suffering and death and our own mortality. As he placed the ashes on our foreheads, in the image of the cross, he would say to each of us, “Dust thou art and to dust thou shalt return.”

Sobering, to say the least. You don’t hear much of that in many Church of Scotland churches!

And when I went back to the Hydro, my friends’ young children would shout, “Uncle Fraser, you have a big dirty mark on your forehead! It was obvious that they were Presbyterian weans!

Lent is, of course, the forty days before Easter when many Christians fast, an opportunity to deprive the body as Jesus fasted in the wilderness before He set out on His earthly ministry. Some Christians I know give up drinking wine for Lent; others give up chocolate; some go on a strict diet; some go even as far as giving up Facebook!

So are you planning to give something up in these weeks leading up to Easter?

I wonder if you have ever thought of giving up religion? And I certainly don’t mean stopping attending Church and giving up sharing in the worship and service of God’s people! That is not religion – that is true Christianity, one of the pillars of our Faith.

Religion is like smoking in that it can seriously damage your health – in this case, your spiritual health. If you are a religious person, then I strongly advise you to reconsider your ways and if you’ve never tried religion, then my recommendation is that you should never begin. Never ever take that first puff of the opium of religion or ever get a whiff of the hypocrisy that constitutes most religions, including our own supreme faith of Christianity.

And so, what you may ask, are the symptoms that you have caught religion? Check these out, and see if any of them apply to you:

1. Thinking that only you are right, and that everyone else is wrong.
2. Petty mindedness
3. A holier than thou attitude and pointing the finger at everyone else but never at yourself
4. Believing that you are a “good” person when, in actual fact, you are a seething mass of frustration, anger, jealousy and bitterness
5. A lack of compassion and of accepting others as they are
6. An arrogance that knows no bounds.

Religion has done more harm in the world than anything else, and it has claimed millions of innocent lives through the centuries. More wars have been fought in the name of religion than anything else, and quite frankly, false religion stinks. Good examples are:

1. The Spanish Inquisition and witch hunts across Europe and America
2. Protestants and Roman Catholics blowing themselves apart in Northern Ireland.
3. The Zionist Jews who have claimed Palestinian soil that they have no right to occupy
4. The extreme Muslim fundamentalists who turn viciously on their own people on the “religious” assumption that everybody has to be like them and seek to blow up the whole world in order to create a true worldwide Islamic State, and to ensure themselves a place in Paradise!
5. The Christian fundamentalists who draw narrow boundaries around themselves, and think that anyone else who does not believe what they believe, is beyond the pale and eternally lost. The only religion, as far as I am aware, in whose name war has not been fought is Buddhism.

The list goes on and on, and you could fill volumes with the infamies and the atrocities that have been, and still are being, committed in the name of religion and the God it seeks to serve. A “Holy War” inevitably ends up in an un-holy mess, and tragedy and suffering for millions of innocent people.

If this is religion, then I can state quite emphatically as a Minister in the Church of Scotland that I want no part of it and quite frankly, I am deeply ashamed of what has been done in the name of Jesus Christ over the centuries and in our own day. I do not want to invite anyone to a church which in any way represents such misguided values, and is based on human pride and arrogance, prejudice and bigotry.

Nothing could be further from the true Spirit of Jesus than man-made religion.

Read the Gospels and you see that Jesus was a person of total and absolute humility, a man of compassion and forgiveness, who accepted people as they were, whilst offering them an opportunity to become all that they were meant to be; a kind man, a gentle man, and one of unbelievable love that flowed out of Him like a river and reflected the very nature of God Himself. Jesus Himself could not stand the false religion of His own day, and we see Him often in open conflict with those who were its practitioners.

The Jesus I see in the pages of Scripture has nothing to do with a religion such as we have misused and abused, in order to serve our own ends rather than the true purposes of our all-embracing, all-loving Heavenly Father.

There is a prayer I use at Lent which reads, “The sacrifice of God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart God will not despise.”

If you are still unsure about what to give up for Lent, then may I humbly advise you to give religion for good, and embrace Jesus instead!

The Revd Fraser R Aitken, Locum Minister