

## Reflection: “Religion’s only future is agnosticism”

Rev Norman Wilkins for St Ronan’s - May 20<sup>th</sup> 2018

Something really good about being a retired minister is that week after week I get to sit and listen to the insights of my regular minister; Susan Jones. In this case she has done a lot of the hard work and given me the idea to base this reflection on. I have also been reading a book titled “Sapiens” written by Yuval Harari and he has given me the other idea that I have woven into this reflection.

This time of the Church year is when we remember the handover of the work of Jesus to his followers who became the early church. It is restructuring time; the CEO leaves and the rest of the Board has to step up and work with his vision.

First of all, there is what is called the Ascension when the CEO finally picks up his laptop and walks out the door (in this case flies off). Then there is what we call Pentecost when the Board are inspired to step up and keep the show on the road. Then comes Trinity Sunday when we remember the outcome of them coming to grips with who the CEO really was in the big scheme of things.

So this is the time of the Church year when we can remember that restructuring that led to the founding of the Church.

The Church that grew out of that beginning has been divided in many ways by many things. If we are into church history, we will think of the split between the Roman and the Orthodox churches almost 1000 years ago. As we have been thinking recently about the Reformation we can think of the division between the Protestant and Catholic churches. The words “high” and “low” can come to mind (though I am not clear in my mind what those terms actually mean). Or there is Evangelical or Mainline, conservative or liberal.

Someone called Brian McLaren whom Rev. Susan quoted said that the deepest difference in Christianity is the chasm between imperial and original Christianity.

He said that imperial Christianity had its origin in Constantine’s fourth century sponsoring the Church. I suspect that Constantine only latched onto and took advantage of and nurtured something that was already there.

It was the Church with political power in the community, respectability, and with its own internal power struggles. That Church is the one that has built those magnificent cathedrals, that has sent crusading armies to spread Christendom and the power of the Christian nations into places that they colonised and so called civilized.

McLaren is very hard on the imperial gospel, he says it lives by the sword, the gun and the bomb of violence, it loves money, pleasure and power. It pacifies the masses and makes them compliant with elites.

Looking back over history and what has gone on as empires have grown and religiously based wars have been fought, there is a lot of truth in what McLaren says.

He says that the original gospel is the Jesus Way, the way Jesus lived and taught. He said it lives by the basin and towel of service, it loves God, loves self, neighbour and creation. It equips people to promote justice, joy, and peace for all.

Unlike the imperial gospel that follows violent men who rule with an iron fist, the original gospel follows a non-violent man who touches and heals with his nail-scarred hands.

The original gospel welcomes all saying, "Come to me", but the imperial gospel judges and rejects those who are different.

The imperial gospel he says is a forgiveness racket, sparing you from eternal torture if you play, pray and pay by the rules. The original gospel is a journey into freedom, inviting everyone to be transformed by the one rule of love. The imperial gospel suits those who love to be right and to have rights. The original Gospel makes sense to those who make the Gospel the point, not themselves.

That is what I am suggesting are the two main branches of the Church that grew out of that hand over of the business, that restructuring that happened almost 2000 years ago.

The imperial church has gone largely unchallenged until fairly recently. But over the last century or so a worldwide empire has been steadily established. It is represented by organisations like the United Nations, by the World Bank, the worldwide economic system. Like the Church, all the older empires are losing power to this humanity-wide power or empire. Even Donald Trump resorts to the universal and modern outfit called Twitter to get his message over. The United Nations has an overarching influence because it is regarded in general as a legitimate worldwide body.

All national economies and those of the great corporations are subject to the worldwide economic system. Any nation that breaches human rights does so with the risk that there will be consequences from the rest of the world.

The Church has found that it has to live by the rules of the community in which it lives, as priests and others have experienced over the sexual abuse they have thought they could get away with.

We are looked at by society in a critical way, not as it would have been a couple of generations ago when the church and ministers received automatic respect and even awe.

We can no longer think we are above the rest of society, as a lot of the church has experienced over its reluctance to fully accept the rights of gay people. There is no future for the imperial church. That age and that time and that environment has passed. A church that lives in that past is being left behind as an irrelevance.

The imperial branch of the church has become a diseased branch. There is only a living future in that branch that is the original church, that is firmly rooted back to the vision of Jesus, our CEO.

When I first started my career as a Presbyterian minister I realised the writing was on the wall for the church as it was. I took a study leave and interviewed a selection of the civic leaders, authors, commentators in the city and asked them what they thought the Church should be doing, what was the role they saw that we should have?

Everyone said in their different words that we should be a practically helping and morally good influence. Nobody was in the least concerned actually about what went on in our church services. All that mattered to them was all what we did during the rest of the week. That led me to describe our church services as our staff training time when we are closed to the public but get prepared for the real work which we do in the other 167 hours of the week.

It all comes down to actually following the Way of Jesus as he actually lived it. The Church seems by and large to accept that it needs to act lovingly and serve its community, but I think there is one other way in which the Church needs to change in order not to be pushed into irrelevance by the world all around it, and this suggestion will not go down very well with a lot in the Church.

It is illustrated by an opening comment in a booklet Linda and I wrote for family and friends. The chapter I wrote was entitled "Is this all chance?" and it related some key events in my life. My opening paragraph said "Like lots of people I wonder how much of how life works out is just chance or whether there is such a thing as one's destiny? Of course I don't know. I guess a related conundrum is whether there is a god, or some supernatural influence. Logic and many of my friends tell me there is nothing more than what goes on in our marvellous and mysterious brains, but I am agnostic. I wonder."

We were asked for a copy by some very traditional Christian friends, who are lovely people with hearts of gold so to speak. The man emailed me back saying he was shocked that I would not know, that I was agnostic. How could I be a Christian minister when I did not know.

I think there was a misunderstanding here. It was me using the word “agnostic”. It can mean to some people something like “hanging loose” or “not really caring” or not committed. Its real meaning is simply “not knowing”. For me, this “not knowing” meant struggling to understand and always accepting that I may have got it wrong. It actually means being every bit as committed to my Christian faith as someone who takes the whole thing literally. The only difference is a huge one; I stick to my faith, but I accept what is reality, that it all may be a fiction.

Actually, I think being agnostic, not knowing has helped me as a minister enormously to walk with those honest and mature people in my congregations who were also struggling to make sense of their lives and their faith.

This is my specific issue, probably just one actually, in which religion can be offside with today’s society, the dominant way of thinking, the culture in which we are in. The culture outside of the church walls is one that is agnostic, that doesn’t know.

In the past if someone wanted to know something, or a government wanted to know something, they would consult the old writings or scriptures, or a priest or shaman, because they believed that the answer was there in the wisdom of the past. But if something happens in our society, an investigation and a report is asked for. We admit we do not know and we need to find out.

The old way to establish truth was to do what some in the Church still do, they quote from our scriptures; there is the authoritative answer. That is the way of the past imperial church. But that past is still very influential. My emphasis on the importance of recognising our uncertainty being rather offside with where the Church is, has been illustrated by the difficulty I had in finding hymns that suited this theme.

Today’s way is to consider, research, and then say that it appears the truth is so and so, maybe even with a fairly specific measure of probability.

It’s not fair to single out the Church over this. The Church is not the only institution out of step with the real world. One fairly topical example of how the old way and the new way to establish the truth is the controversy over gun control in the U.S. The old way points to the Constitution and the right of Americans to bear arms. The fact that it is there in the Constitution puts it above challenge for some people. It is truth for all time. The new way is to look at how modern society is and how bearing arms fits into that and say, “we have to make it a whole lot harder for people to have guns”.

Actually, if the writers of the American Constitution could see the reality of today I believe they would have been wise enough to have said something rather different than they did then.

Likewise, of course, there are many in the Church who recognise that the Biblical writers were writing in a very different context than today and they try to tease out the principles that underlie what they wrote and try to guide the Church in a direction that is more true to the intention of the founders of our faith.

That way is the way that recognises reality. Our whole scientific enterprise is based on the fundamental principle that we do not know, we probe and ask and carry out experiments and come to conclusions that are never more than probable. We used to think that Newton had got things summed up, then along came Einstein. Since Einstein we have the conundrum of reconciling relativity with quantum theory. It is theory, and that word alone sums it up. The future humble church needs to completely let go of certainty, to give up finding and quoting from our Bible as if that is the authoritative answer but understand it in its context and let it contribute to the search for what is right, and so humbly accept that we do not know and have to work to establish the truth, accept that we are struggling to make sense of life just like the rest of humanity and share in the quest to find the way forward.