

4th March 2018

Imagination Library

This week our text from the Hebrew Scriptures is the *Ten Commandments*. It was by chance that I came across a story about Dolly Parton, and discovered it had a link to the Ten Commandments. That story went like this ...

“Dolly Parton is many things. She can sing with the voice of Heaven’s sweetest angel. She can navigate the contours of the human heart through her masterful song writing, with hits that run from ‘Jolene’ to ‘I Will Always Love You’. She runs Dollywood, a theme park near her childhood home of which the theme is herself. She’s the most decorated female country performer of all time, by a comfortable margin. But to millions of children, Dolly Parton is the ‘book lady’, and this week, she celebrates giving away 100 million books to children in need.

It’s all part of her Dolly Parton’s ‘Imagination Library’, a venture that started in 1995 (2013 in Australia) and continues to this day. The Library sends a book a month to an enrolled child from the time of their birth until they turn five years old, meaning these kids enter kindergarten with a sizable private library on their hands.

In her address at the Library of Congress, Parton revealed that she started the Library to honour her father, Robert Lee Parton Sr., who had never learned to read. “I had the idea to do something special for him,” she said. “You know, in the Bible where it talks about honouring your father and your mother. I don’t think that necessarily means just to obey them. I think it means to bring honour to their names.”

Clearly for Dolly, these commandments are not antiquated laws etched in stone of millennia long gone. Rather, that commandment to honour her father inspired her to make an amazing contribution to emerging lives of countless children. That is an immeasurable investment in the future of the world



The Imagination Library runs in four countries:

Australia

Canada

United Kingdom

United States of America

Read more at <https://imaginationlibrary.com>

11th March 2018

The church in today’s society

Earlier this week I had cause to reread a section from a book that I have found very formative in terms of how I understand the role of the church in contemporary society. I was taken again by these paragraphs:

Regardless of the nature of change, the church affirms that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is the God who has been active in history and who will be active in the future. Faced with a strange, new world, the church is challenged to be true to its purpose and attuned to its context. I believe the paradigm shift of rapid change constitutes a rich opportunity for the church. God has set the door open to the future. God’s future arrives in the person of Jesus Christ. The Church’s response to God’s restoration of the whole creation through Jesus is the vocation to which we are called.

N.T. Wright, a New Testament scholar, states it eloquently: “But new creation has already begun. The sun has begun to rise. Christians are called to leave behind, in the tomb of Jesus, all that belongs to the brokenness and incompleteness of the present world. It is time, in the power of the Spirit, to take up our proper role, our fully human role, as agents, heralds, and stewards of the new day that is dawning. That, quite simply, is what it means to be Christian: to follow Jesus Christ into the new world, God’s new world, which he has thrown open before us.”

And just a few sentences further on he adds:

“We are living in a new context where old certainties are disappearing, old institutions are less dependable, old assumptions are questionable, and old neighbourhoods are less cohesive. ... Logically, if not spiritually, we may even have to allow for the possibility that these dislocations could be part of God’s new creation. It may be God

working through the unknown that contributes to the destabilization of the world. ... God can be surprising, mysterious, taking history into unexpected turns."

Peter L. Steinke, A Door Set Open: grounding change in mission and hope

I can't say that makes me feel comfortable. But in another way it does fill me with excitement, even as we accept the challenge of discerning God's activity in the rapidly changing missional context that we are living in. And I wait with anticipation to recognise how the church might flourish in new and exciting ways in this new setting.

But, of course, that is something we need to engage together, as a discerning community of faith.

18th March 2018

Stephen Hawking

This week the world mourns the loss of one of its greatest ever minds in Prof. Stephen Hawking. He has made an unquestionably huge contribution to our understanding of the world we inhabit. Not surprisingly one of my greatest interests in Hawking's thinking has been the interface between religious thought and scientific thought. This is too easily reduced to a science versus religion debate.

One quote that has taken my attention is the following:

"There are about 100 million stars in our galaxy and at least 100 billion other galaxies in the universe. I find it hard to believe that it was all created just for us."

In another place he said:

"We are just an advanced breed of monkeys on a minor planet of a very average star. But we can understand the Universe. That makes us something very special."

It reminded me of Psalm 8:3-4:

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?

Hawking looked at the magnitude of space and figured a God who created all that, couldn't possibly care about us, and was in awe of the human mind's capacity, whereas the Psalmist's response to the same observation was of being overwhelmed with awe that the Creator did indeed know him/her and sought relationship with us.

Two people, looking at the same phenomenon, coming to very different conclusions. Hawking stated clearly that he believed there is a design in creation, but could not associate that with God. This is a great example of the different question each brings to the same observation. Science and faith ask different questions of the same phenomena. The same juxtaposition played out between the church and Karl Jung, a master in the world of psychology.

Perhaps Hawking's observations of religion conditioned his response. He once said: *"There is a fundamental difference between religion, which is based on authority, and science, which is based on observation and reason. Science will win, because it works."*

How we present to the world does, indeed, condition our thoughts. I wonder if the world sees in me something that works?

What question do you ask as you look at the stars on a beautiful clear night? Is it the question of faith or of science, or both? I actually hope we are asking both questions. The world would be a better place if the theologians (us among them) and the scientists engaged in dialogue, rather than adopting simplistic assertions.

I've been pondering the painful subject of farewells this week, for obvious reasons. At the same time as we gathered in Sunbury to farewell a young life that was cut off prematurely, my daughter was gathered with others in Ringwood farewelling an elderly woman whose life had run its full course and was equally special to many people. At the end of this coming week we will be remembering again that the disciples of Jesus also had to endure a farewell from another life that was tragically ended. That loss was so tragic they felt their world had collapsed around them. Their whole sense of their own wellbeing was so heavily invested in him. They could imagine no future of value and meaning without him being part of it.

I'm acutely aware that in such times of farewell we desperately strive to cement our memories into our psyche. We fear we will forget the one we have loved but are now separated from. We don't mind being separated from things of no consequence to us. There may be things in our lives that we would like to bid farewell to but when it is a life that is precious to us the emotions are naturally strong.

As we approach another Easter, it is tempting to quickly move on from the uncomfortable Good Friday part of the story and focus on the resurrection bit that comes on Sunday morning. We don't like sitting in that uncomfortable space of pain and emptiness. And so we all too often rush to resurrection too quickly. But it is necessary for us to linger on Good Friday, and throughout the Saturday, before we celebrate resurrection on the Sunday. The Sunday morning story means nothing without the preceding chapter. In so many ways it is the intensity of what we experience on Good Friday that makes Easter morning pulsate with such joy.

Easter morning is the ultimate statement that when all seems over and done with, that there is yet more for us to live into, by the grace of God. And whereas Good Friday tended to scatter Jesus' friends into separated holes of grief and fear, Easter morning was the beginning of gathering them back together into a life-celebrating community that changed the world – for them, and ever since.

Even so, when Jesus joined two of his followers as they trudged the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus on the afternoon of the resurrection, he didn't hurry them. Not until they had fully unpacked their grief and how they understood what that meant for their lives, did Jesus begin to speak words of life, and ultimately broke bread with them.



And the world hasn't been the same since.
