

St Nicholas Parish Church, Prestwick

The Thought for the Week

Sunday 22nd August 2021

An expression which I now throw into conversations, when I am trying to sound pretentious and very learned, is “catalogue raisonne”! I learned it in one of my favourite TV programmes, “Fake or Fortune” and it is quite simply the descriptive catalogue of the works of famous artists with explanations and scholarly comments.

Have you seen the series on BBC 1? The presenters are the lovely Fiona Bruce and the very knowledgeable art expert, Philip Mould. The whole premise behind the programme is that, in conjunction with art experts, they investigate mysteries behind paintings brought to them by the general public and try to ascertain if they are originals or not.

It is really fascinating as the works of art are scientifically examined and scrutinised. The provenance of each painting is researched; forensic tests are undertaken at the Courtauld Institute of Art; pigments are analysed; characteristic quirks of the artist are sought.

Then the painting is sent to the leading light on the artist who gives his or her verdict and the result announced to the owner.

I was devastated last week when I was quite sure, after hearing all the evidence, that the work entitled “War” by the Victorian artist, Sir Edward Landseer, was the real thing, but how wrong I was! I actually think the expert was having a bad hair day!

It was fake, so he said, but a very good one at that.

Do you remember under the Trump administration, we all encountered what was termed “fake news”? False stories that were deliberately published in the media to make people believe something untrue; stories that have a modicum of truth in them, but they are not entirely accurate.

Again and again, down the years, fake religions have gained a lot of ground. Scam systems of belief that take a hold of folk and can produce real harmful effects in the real world – think of the Unification Church, the cult of the Moonies, which was so prevalent a number of years ago, with millions of followers and in which many young folk were indoctrinated in unorthodox teachings.

There are some, of course, who argue that all religions are sham, ways of exercising power of people, that Christianity itself is a baseless religion, a hoax perpetrated by the followers of Jesus.

Now, I cannot prove to you that what you and I believe about God and His Son, Jesus Christ, is true. It is a matter of faith. We read the Scriptures, we weigh up the evidence, we come to the conclusion that in the Carpenter of Nazareth, we see and hear the Creator of the Universe. We see in Him that it is Love that beats at the very heart of the cosmos.

And, so often, it is the followers of Jesus who are themselves evidence for the truth of the faith – by their love, their forgiveness, their sense of justice, their selfless lifestyles. They

“walk the talk” – their lives mirror their beliefs. There is no dichotomy between what they say and how they live.

Jesus Himself often spoke about counterfeit religion – think of those occasions when He castigated the Jewish leaders, the professional ecclesiastics of His day, in their fine robes, making sure they were seen saying their prayers. Yet, said Jesus, “they were like whitened sepulchres” – fine on the outside, rotten to the core inside. They said the right things but did not put their religion into practice.

All of us can be hypocritical, I know, and we are aware of how far short we fall in trying to put Jesus’ teachings and His lifestyle into practice.

These past days, the news bulletins have been full of the horrific events of what has been happening in Afghanistan as the American and British forces have all withdrawn. We have seen the melee as cities, including the capital, Kabul, have fallen to the Taliban as they have taken over the country once again, and those horrific scenes at Kabul airport as hundreds of Afghans tried to board a US military plane as it was about to take off, some of them clinging to the sides and falling thousands of feet to their deaths.

No wonder so many ordinary people in both the UK and the USA, and so many politicians on both sides of the Pond, have been asking if the sacrifice of the lives of hundreds of British troops and thousands of American military personnel, has all been in vain. After all, they had been deployed to ensure that Afghanistan was restored to a democratic country, with the defeat of the Taliban, who decreed that women must not take part in public life or work or study, but remain in the home; who banned western dress and books and films; who exercised Sharia law, stoning adulterers, and executing those who flout the law and who provided a safe haven for terrorists who view the West as infidels, but now it has all crashed down in such a short space of time.

The Taliban are nothing more than religiously inspired killers, ready to sacrifice themselves for that elusive, yet often promised eternal glory.

Religion for them is a cover up, a hoax. It is the golden shoe with which they have been beating everyone blue thus far.

The Taliban are a group of people who revere the gods of death, murder and vengeance, and indeed, I am sure that some do not trouble themselves with worshipping anything beyond their own ability to cause mayhem and butchery.

For the Taliban, killing is not just a business tool but also a construct with which to spread terror and perpetuate chaos and to preach their dark gospel.

Their religion believes that theirs is the only straight path to enlightenment and all other thoughts, faith and sects are wrong and wicked. They fervently believe that their god will prevail over all others and those who do not welcome the “true” faith will be punished, either by them now or by their god in the hereafter.

There is an absolute belief in the holy nature of the carnage which they inflict.

Perhaps no one has ever explained better than the French philosopher, Voltaire, the dangers inherent in extremist ideologies of any kind. He once said, “Those who can make you believe absurdities, can make you commit atrocities.”

He hit the nail on the head.

False religion is a danger beyond words.

Let us pray fervently for the ordinary folk of Afghanistan in their fear of the unknown future, and for the international community as we respond to the crisis.

The Revd Fraser R Aitken, Locum Minister