

WELCOME 18 March 2018 5 Lent '18 B

Mark 11:12-19 & Isaiah 53:2-12 & Jeremiah 31:31-34

Good morning! Welcome to worship today! It is great to have you here this morning. Please stay for morning tea after worship so we can get to know one another better...

As a child you were probably told to never discuss religion or politics in polite company or among strangers. Why? No topic was more likely start an argument & spoil a pleasant evening than one of those two.

Here's the thing...like opinions and bellybuttons everybody has a "religion." Humanity loves religion because religion is a fast-track to power, control & the ability to manipulate or dominate in "the name of the god."

Humanity's love of religion is like my love of eating...it's pretty indiscriminate. A pinch of Buddhism. A dash of astrology. A cup of cultural theology sprinkled over a bed of mixed Sunday School memories & voila! I'm spiritual but not religious. Or am I?

Religion will break your heart & pile upon you a burden of what you must do in the face of all that you fail to do. Religion will kill your spirit, drain your hopes & stifle your joy. Jesus came to put religion to death. He was killed by the most sophisticated religion the world had ever seen but lives today in victory to offer life & hope & love & joy & peace found only in a relationship not in religion.

Religion puts you at the centre of your universe; it's you doing your best for your god Jesus comes to put you in the centre of Father's love close to the Father's heart where your heart can be healed forever. God made this promise...

"I will put my instructions deep within them, & I will write them on their hearts. I will be their God, & they will be my people. They will not need to teach their neighbors, nor will they need to teach their relatives, saying, 'You should know the Lord.' For everyone, from the least to the greatest, will know me already," says the Lord. "And I will forgive their wickedness, & I will never again remember their sins." Jeremiah 31:33-34

We'll experience & explore that together today.

LWKids is ON! Tamaris will lead our youngest disciples out to the verandah during the next song medley.

If you'd like to be part of that team leading our kids...see me today!

5 Lent '18 B – CREATE IN ME A CLEAN HEART: HEARTBROKEN BY RELIGION

FAITH CHAT: 1. What might you say to someone who says:

“There’s only one way to make the world a better place: get rid of religion!”?

2. How can ‘religion’ obscure your view of God as he really is?

“Man, so long as he remains free, has no more constant & agonizing anxiety than to find as quickly as possible someone to worship.” Dostoevsky wasn’t quoting the NT writer Paul, but he knew Paul knew the truth: *For ever since the world was created, people have seen the earth & sky. Through everything God made, they can clearly see his invisible qualities—his eternal power & divine nature. So they have no excuse for not knowing God. Yes, they knew God, but they wouldn’t worship him as God or even give him thanks. And they began to think up foolish ideas of what God was like. As a result, their minds became dark & confused. Claiming to be wise, they instead became utter fools. And instead of worshiping the glorious, ever-living God, they worshiped idols made to look like mere people & birds & animals & reptiles.* From the moment humans 1st cast our eyes about us & discerned our smallness against the universe’s bigness...we became religious. We devoted ourselves to the task of understanding, organizing, placating & manipulating the forces (gods) that oversaw the majestic, orderly & sometimes ferocious world in which we live. Humans could see there was more than what our eyes could behold, but we turned to our own ideas, concepts & competence & came up empty.

I was saddened to hear that the great mind/man of science Stephen Hawking died. Hawking probably as much as any other human spent his life pondering the smallness of human existence against the backdrop of the bigness of the universe... His science is unsurpassed...may never be. His conclusions...

"God may exist, but science can explain the universe without the need for a creator...The scientific account is complete. Theology is unnecessary."

"The human race is just a chemical scum on a moderate-sized planet, orbiting around a very average star in the outer suburb of one among a hundred billion galaxies. We are so insignificant that I can't believe the whole universe exists for our benefit."

"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's obvious Hawking's religion was the scientific quest...the explorable & at some level explainable laws of what science has discovered or will discover. But he's no different from the professional tennis player who steps onto the court right foot first or the person who checks the star charts or the serious practitioner of yoga complete with the brass bowls or who keeps an inspirational calendar on their wall along with a set of daily affirmations about their power within or honours deceased ancestors...like opinions & bellybuttons "religion" is everywhere...

Hawking also said, "God is the name people give to the reason we are here. But I think that reason is the laws of physics rather than someone with whom one can have a personal relationship. An impersonal God." This isn't bash Dr Hawking day...I think he speaks for tons of folks & I think he gets it. We all desperately want our lives to make sense... have meaning...serve some purpose...leave some impact ...matter We want folks to know we were here. Some years ago there was graffiti train trestle in Europe: "It's better to be wanted for Murder than not to be wanted at all." became the title of low-budget Euro film. Today folks just go on The Bachelor or One night with my Ex...viral video...

Here's the thing: Religion by its very definition begins with the question of "What must I do to reach some desired goal?" & then I pursue it with all my might. Religion demands our very best efforts, our greatest sacrifices, our highest & deepest devotions...toward some desired goal...In that sense Dr. Hawking is right...that's the realm of religion...to give life meaning, purpose, achieve happiness, inner peace, freedom from fear/worry/stress...significance to my existence...& we convince ourselves that if I just DO enough I will achieve that end.

Olympic swimmer Cate Campbell (w/ sister Bronte a formidable Aussie swimming force & a Christian) had performed less than admirably b/t some medal winning performances & the last Summer Games. During post-race interview she said: "I have always said I didn't need a gold medal to have self-worth. That's being put to the test at the moment. I love you all. I hope it doesn't change how you feel about me. Please love me back." We are all vulnerable to the worship/pursuit/devotion/religion of something we have to do/get/achieve/acquire...BIBLES...Jesus sees it in the temple – the very place where God had told his people he would reside & from which they would experience his presence & his care & provision. Back up a bit...

Jesus is on the way to Jerusalem...his final earthly trip there b/4 he is arrested, tried, convicted, tortured, crucified, buried & raised again. As they leave Bethany, they pass a fig tree in full leaf. Now it's not the time for ripe fruit yet, but there are supposed to be fruit buds with the leaves that will eventually become pickable fruit. But there are none...the tree appears to be fruit-bearing – it looks like a perfectly fine tree – it seems to be doing the right thing but there is no fruit...Worthless because once the leaves are there, the bud-stage is over. Scholars tell me, travellers depended on the bud-fruit for travelling snacks. Like Chicken Crimpies in the car to keep the driver happy. Jesus curses the fake fruit tree & we later discover it withers & dies.

What follows in the temple is another enacted parable of what Jesus has just done. The selling of sacrificial animals & the exchanging of Roman currency for Temple shekels seemed/appeared/looked like an expedient helpful faithful thing for those who had travelled long distances to worship in Jerusalem. But it had become a tidy profit-maker for the Temple hierarchy. To make matters worse this market-driven stuff was in the Temple Courts; the area set aside for Gentile God-seekers. It was where non-Jews could hear the prayers & songs & Scriptures & be blessed by the covenant love of God that they were seeking to be part of. It was the only place they were welcome in the Temple area & they had been pushed out by a business-model that had no real relationship to worship or to the relationship God established with his people & sought to establish with all people. So Jesus goes in & curses it. He overturns the religious behaviour that persists w/o faith. He overturned this casual idolatry, religion of convenience this religion disguised as faithfulness.

Remember...Humanity loves religion because religion is a fast-track to power, control & the ability to manipulate or dominate in "the name of the god." That's what's afoot in the Temple & that's what Jesus overturned. L. Ron Hubbard...founder of Scientology said it best, "If you want to make real \$\$ in America you have to start your own religion." So he did. He looked at what the Mormons had done by inventing a religion out of nothing (don't be confused Mormons are not Christians) & he did what they did...less overhead & therefore more direct profit.

Religion is about "DO." Religion will break your heart & pile upon you a burden of what you must do in the face of all that you fail to do. Religion will kill your spirit, drain your hopes & stifle your joy. Religion by its very definition always begins asking "What must I do?" & leaves you with an unending answer...well there's this & this & this & this & when's enough? Jesus would warn his followers against the trap of their former Jewish practice & especially as demanded by the religious hierarchy: *Mt 23:4-5 – "They crush people with unbearable religious demands & never lift a finger to ease the burden. Everything they do is for show."*

Luther would later write... *All those who do not in all their works...trust in God's favor, grace & good-will, but rather seek His favor in other things or in themselves, do not keep the [1st] Commandment, & practice real idolatry, even if they were to do the works of all the other Commandments. If we doubt or do not believe that God is gracious & pleased with us, or if we presumptuously expect to please Him through our works, then all [our compliance with the law] is pure deception, outwardly honoring God, but inwardly setting up self as a false [savior]..."* ("Treatise on Good Works")

The good news is: Jesus came to put religion to death. Jesus came to put to death our religious striving & our heartbreaking doing that's never done. Jesus was killed by the most sophisticated religion the world had ever seen but rose again & lives today in victory to offer life & hope & love & joy & peace found only in a relationship not in religion. Jesus never offered anything other than himself...He never asked anything other than "Come follow me." He freely offers life in him in the presence of the Father indwelt by the transforming power of the Holy Spirit...all in the bonds of love

Being a follower of Jesus is not a religious pursuit. Being a Christian is not being part of a religion. Here's the thing: Religion begins with the question of "What must I do to reach some desired goal?" Christianity/Discipleship to Jesus begins with the joyful realization that Christ has already "DONE" for me all that is necessary for me to enjoy fullness of life with him & the Father now & forever. Jesus has already "DONE" for me everything necessary for me to live in joyful community with others.

Jesus has already freed you of the burden of religion...His death & resurrection have already marked you with God's eternal love & he stands ready to welcome you into eternal life that begins here & lasts beyond the end of your earthly existence. His death & resurrection make real the promise: *"I will put my instructions deep within them, & I will write them on their hearts. I will be their God, & they will be my people. They will not need to teach their neighbors, nor will they need to teach their relatives, saying, 'You should know the Lord.' For everyone, from the least to the greatest, will know me already," says the Lord. "And I will forgive their wickedness, & I will never again remember their sins."* Jeremiah 31:33-34

The Father says...I am the God who has done something for you that is real & true. I freed you. I love you. All these other gods have never done anything & have no power to do anything. The only thing they can do is demand to be worshipped. But I love you. I forgive you. I heal you & make you whole.

Let's pray for abundant life lived fully now in the arms of Christ who blesses beyond our wildest dreams...Heavenly Father, bring our ceaseless striving to an end by the death and resurrection of your Son. In your love and by your Spirit draw our hearts to trust you alone for the completeness we seek and the wholeness we lack. Multiply in us your hope and the boldness to offer to others what you give freely to all; saving love and transforming joy through Jesus Christ...Amen.