

Anyway, here we are at the start of another year together. Next Saturday Parish Council will be reflecting on our vision and values and goals for this year. It looks to me like a good year ahead. My hope and prayer for our year here at Cashmere is that we will have a sense of gliding along in the flow of the Holy Spirit, just like Ben and I bobbing downstream at the mouth of the Heathcote, the tide carrying us along. I'm excited about the year ahead because I know that God is at work; God is drawing us as a community in fellowship and worship and service and mission. God is drawing others into friendship with us.

The task for us is not to make it all happen. It's not our goals and projects or effort that will grow the church. It's God's Spirit alive and active in our hearts and in our midst. It's not all about us, isn't that a relief! We don't have to be perfect. We don't have to get everything right. I'll be who I am and you be who you are and together we'll be a family of Jesus Christ. We'll do our best to love each other and to love those that God brings us to love.

We don't even have to agree on everything all the time. I must say, I did not agree with Ivan's sermon last week. For those of you who were not here last Sunday, Ivan wrote a sermon, which was ably presented by Elisabeth, opening up the possibility that we human beings might live more than one life-time; that our souls may be born and reborn in a long journey of personal growth as we move towards our eternal destiny in heaven. It was certainly interesting. And reincarnation is certainly a common belief these days. If you ask your grandchildren you may well find that they are very open to ideas about reincarnation. It's a good challenge to us to think through what we actually do believe about life, and life after death, maybe even life before birth.

If you were here last week, what did you think about Ivan's sermon?

If you weren't here, what do you think about the suggestion that human souls might have some existence before and beyond one lifetime?

My personal belief starts from the notion that God is the only immortal being. I am really monotheistic in my theology. I honestly do not think that the Bible teaches that human beings have immortal souls – though I know that this is a controversial issue in Christian thought. It is controversial because the Bible does not present one unified view on the question. The Old Testament world view was that, with a few notable exceptions, people die when they die – the Old Testament described death as a dark shadowy pit where people went when they died - Death as a nothing nowhere place with no way out. By the time Jesus was born different groups within Judaism were exploring other ideas, including the possibility of a future resurrection at the end of time. Jesus himself taught this, but he gave it a unique angle – the Gospel writers report Jesus claiming that Jesus himself, in himself, through faith in himself, through his suffering and death, opened a new eternal future.

There is one verse that encapsulates for many Christians the essence of the Christian claim about life and death:

John 3:16 (Good News) For God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not die but have eternal life.

I take this at face value. I read John 3:16 as saying that because of Jesus Christ we have a choice between life or death. Without Jesus our lives end with the death of our physical bodies, and with Jesus the essence of who we are continues to live in a whole new amazing way, sharing in the immortality of God.

But that's just my personal opinion. My job is to encourage you to think for yourself, to read the Bible, to pray, to come to your own considered opinion on the subject. Or it's OK to just throw up your hands and say I've no idea and we'll find out in due course! I'm totally with Paul when he writes to the Corinthians about the importance of mystery ... God's hidden wisdom,
"No eye has seen ... what God has prepared for those who love Him."
Questions of life beyond this life will always be mostly obscured, for now.

What does really matter to me, that I will preach passionately, is that whatever view you take about the human soul and its eternal destiny, Jesus Christ is at the heart of the question. The life and death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth 2000 years ago changed everything.
Again, I'm with Paul when he writes about his own ministry and teaching to the church in Corinth: verse 2: *"I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified."*
My ideas and fancy words don't matter. My talents at strategy and mission planning don't really matter. Christ and Christ alone is the author and perfecter of our faith, Christ alone holds our eternal destiny.

And this gets to my biggest issue with the idea of reincarnation. Ivan suggested that perhaps we needed more than one lifetime to do enough personal growth in order to enter heaven. At least, that's what I heard him saying, please correct me if I'm wrong, Ivan. But can we earn our way to heaven? Can we ever do enough to deserve it?
In Hindu theology the soul cycles through lifetimes trapped in an endless test governed by the merciless rule of Karma, as people are punished for the wrong they do and rewarded for the good they do.
Most religions focus on what humans need to do to earn salvation. I'm afraid that the Christian religion also slips very easily into a focus on human effort and human ethics. Yes we are called to high standards for our time, talents, sexuality and personal integrity but don't think for a minute that any of this gives you any credit with God. Yes God cares about how we live our lives, especially about how we care for the poor and the little ones, but ultimately we're all a mess. No matter how hard we try we cannot earn eternal life. Ultimately faith is gift, life is gift, salvation is gift, heaven is gift ... the free gift of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Ultimately all that is required of us is our 'yes' to God. To me it's quite simple, and reincarnation sounds far too complicated.

I look forward to sharing this year with you. I look forward to all the things that we will agree on, and also to the things that we disagree about. I look forward to how we will learn more of God in the process, for I know that God is with us and God is going ahead of us and God is leading and enabling us. I look forward to being friends this year, and to making new friends through the year. I honour and celebrate each one of you and look forward to gliding along together in the flow of the Spirit in all that we do in 2018 here at Cashmere Presbyterian Church.