

An email showed up in my in-box this week from the LCA IT department. It encouraged me to do the SCAM Fundamentals course. I would be happy to do the course, except the email asked me to click on the link to start the course . . . and I know that SCAM Fundamental rule #1 is: do not click on any suspect links!

So, I didn't.

I suspect there's not many of us here who haven't been the target of scammers. And, apparently most people who get fooled by scammers never report it. I guess they're too embarrassed . . . too ashamed of being taken in . . . it makes you feel silly . . . stupid . . . less of a person . . . so best not to tell anyone. But, the research shows that falling for a scam has nothing to do with a lack of intelligence, or your age, or where you come from . . . those taken in by scammers range across all demographics. Any one of us could well be taken in by a scam . . . all it takes is a moment's inattention.

So, in the interests of community service I have devised my own SCAM Fundamental questionnaire. You get to be the guinea pigs. So, here's the first question . . .

1. You receive an email from myGov asking you to click on a link to verify your account within 3 days or your payments will be suspended. The email looks genuine but you notice the sender's email address is 'no-reply@trustme.com'.

Do you

- a) click the link because, well it seems genuine enough and you're in a hurry, or
- b) delete the email immediately.

2. Which of the following are signs that your online love interest is a fake?

- a) They tell you that they love you very quickly.
- b) They're working overseas and an emergency has occurred and they need money.
- c) They want to send you a parcel and ask for a copy of your driver's license, your full legal name and your date of birth for paperwork.
- d) All of the above.

3. You hear of wars and rumours of wars, you see nation rising against nation . . . there are earthquakes and famines and Jesus turns up in your neighbourhood offering you a space in the bunker . . . for a small fee.

Do you:

- a) Get all upset and panicked and immediately take him up on the offer . . . after all, wasn't there something in the Bible about all this stuff?

b) Smile politely at 'Jesus' and go on your way.

Did you like that segue into the text? You see, scams are as old as the hills . . . even Jesus knew about scams and scammers. "Don't get led astray", he counsels his disciples . . . the scammers are out there. But the scams Jesus is concerned about are not ones that hurt our wallets, they are scams that cut us off from God.

Take the 'Magnificent Stones Scam' for instance . . . that one's been around forever. It's an insidious little scam that cuts right across demographics . . . no one is immune really from being sucked in. "Look, teacher, what large stones and what large buildings". We're impressed by the biggest and the greatest and the strongest and the most able, and the smartest and the wealthiest and the most powerful . . . and we're seduced into thinking that's what we have to strive for . . . and, if we can't be the smartest, or the richest, or the strongest, or the greatest, or the most faithful, at least I can be richer, or smarter, or stronger, or greater, or more faithful than someone else . . . and then I am somebody. And, perhaps if I attach myself in some way to what is impressive and worthy and powerful . . . dare I say, if I trust in what is impressive and worthy and powerful . . . then I am somebody.

It's a subtle little con, isn't it? For even if I was to try to escape from all that . . . even if I was to make a conscious effort to live simply . . . strive for humility, it's hard to escape that nagging voice that says, "You need to be more humble", or, "Thank God I am more humble than her"! To be somebody I have to be somebody always over and against somebody else . . . and the con is that I can be. But, it's a scam . . . because eventually . . . eventually I run up against God . . . and God says, "This far you shall come and no further . . . see all those stones . . . see all those magnificent, impressive things you think they will make you somebody . . . think again . . . no, they'll all come to an end."

The end. Religious people get a bit obsessed about that . . . Christians mostly! The end of the world. It's like we think if the God has something to do with the end of the world then we've got the inside running . . . we've got the inside knowledge. Look at how Peter, James, John and Andrew pull Jesus aside for a little private talk . . . to get the inside goss . . . "Tell us, Lord, when's all this going to happen?" If we know then at least we've got it better than some of those other no-hopers . . . maybe we can work out a way of being in the right place at the right time!

But, that's a scam too . . . trying to work out the ending. "Beware that no one leads you astray", Jesus warns. When you hear of wars . . . when you see on the TV news nation rising against nation and kingdom against kingdom . . . that's not the end . . . that's not God's doing! That's just people . . . you people . . . being sucked into the scam . . . the scam of thinking you have to be powerful and in control to be somebody . . . thinking you can only be somebody over and against somebody else . . . hasn't it always being that way since Adam and Eve?

And, earthquakes and famines . . . and floods and cyclones? Acts of God, you say! I don't think so. Aren't these things just part of how our world is? These are not God's punishments . . . these are not God showing how powerful God is . . . these are not God bringing the world to an end! The tragedy is that the destruction and loss of life is so often exacerbated not by an act of God, but by the acts of selfish, greedy, power-hungry human beings . . . human beings who flout building codes for an extra dollar . . . who push

the poor to the margins . . . who siphon off aid money! No, this is not God's doing . . . this is not how it will all end . . . don't be led astray . . . don't be taken in by the Magnificent Stones Scam . . . don't think this is the way it has to be . . . don't think this is the way it is . . . don't think this is the way you are!

All those things . . . all those magnificent stones . . . tumbling down . . . they'll all just birth pangs. God is at work with something different . . . a new way. And, what is this new way? God's way?

Well, I don't want to give too many spoilers for the sermon I'll preach in six weeks time, but let's just say, after the birth pangs comes the birth . . . a particular birth . . . a birth that marks both a beginning and an end for the world. You see, the world doesn't end in cataclysm . . . it ends in Jesus . . . and that's where we begin.

If you were to observe a birth from afar . . . objectively . . . it's likely you'd say it's messy and bloody and noisy and painful . . . and perhaps not very appealing! But if you're actually there . . . actually experiencing it . . . birth can be all those things, but it is also magnificent and amazing and incredible and a miracle.

And, when that new born baby . . . that weak, helpless, vulnerable human being is given to the mother or the father, themselves weak and vulnerable at that moment . . . skin to skin . . . that is the most powerful moment of intimate connection. That is God's way. Not having to be the strongest, the most powerful, the almighty one over against us . . . but in weakness seeking that powerful intimate connection . . . skin to skin . . . flesh to flesh . . . that, for God, is both the beginning and the end. God's birth . . . your birth . . . they are connected. This is who you are.

When you were born, already without even trying, you were somebody. At your baptism that was affirmed. Every time we come to the Lord's Supper we are reminded of that powerful, intimate, bodily connection. "Here I am . . . in the weakness and ordinariness of bread and wine . . . here I am for you", Jesus says, "so you can be this way for others".

Don't be led astray. Because, when it looks like the world is coming to an end . . . when it looks like your world is coming to an end, it's probably not . . . it's probably just the beginning . . . a new beginning . . . because that's God's way. God's birth . . . your birth . . . they're always connected. This is who you are.

Amen.

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