

Letter from Scotland

Scotland's Easter is a modest affair compared with other countries.

It's largely confined to formal church services and Easter egg hunts at visitor attractions. It's as if we are not sure we should be celebrating this Christian festival when there are so many non-Christian and non-religious groups around. And the Church of Scotland, being Presbyterian, is not noted for its flamboyance.

Our only outdoor Passion Play takes place in Princes Street gardens here in Edinburgh. This year the play has a new script, highlighting the role of woman in the crucifixion story. But after 20 years, it seems this might be the last production. The organisers say sponsors these days are less willing to support religious events. In particular the play has fallen victim to the cuts being made by the government's arts agency, Creative Scotland.



PHOTO Grant Bulloch

It's all part of the "culture wars" which are marring this joyful Eastertide. This week The Scottish Parliament has stirred the cauldron with two pieces of contentious legislation. The first is the Hate Crime Act which comes into effect on 1 April – which opponents unkindly point out is April Fool's Day.

This law extends the existing offence of "stirring up hatred" on the grounds of race, to include a list of new "protected characteristics" – age, religion, disability, sexual orientation and transgender identity. In this list of fashionable sensitivities, the wonder is it doesn't include misogyny. No doubt this will come at a later stage, as we dive deeper into the details of our cultural misunderstandings and intolerances.

Already, people are asking questions about the new law's practicality. How are the police to judge whether a remark or speech or an on-line comment "stirs up hatred"? Will their time be wasted investigating trivial or vexatious complaints?

The Conservative MSP Murdo Fraser says he's already had his name recorded by the police for an on-line post in which he remarked: "Choosing to identify as non-binary is as valid as choosing to identify as a cat."



Daffodils – a triumph of hope over experience. And don't the courts already exercise their wisdom in sentencing offenders brought before them for breach of the peace or assault? If any crime is "aggravated" by a nasty motivation, it will be more severely punished.

The second piece of legislation likely to stir up divisions is the Assisted Dying Bill being introduced by the Liberal Democrat MSP Liam McArthur from Orkney. He says the public mood has changed on this issue in recent years and there is now a large majority of people in favour of allowing "assisted dying". But religious groups and palliative care providers are opposed to the Bill, saying it will pressurise vulnerable people into ending their lives.

The Bill does contain safeguards: only adults diagnosed with a terminal illness would be permitted to self-administer a prescribed fatal dose of medicine and their condition and mental state would have to be verified by two doctors. But there is likely to be a soul-searching, and at times tense, national debate over the issue in the coming months.

It's worth pointing out too that these moral debates are going on at a time when there are many other divisive issues on our minds – the transition to a low carbon economy, the state of the public services, the widening gap between the rich and the poor. Then there's the big divide over "independence" – to go it alone or not. And all this in the hurly burly of an election campaign for the Westminster parliament.



To set this modern uneasiness in a historic context, we have our Stone of Destiny, which this weekend goes on permanent display in a new £27m museum in the former town house in Perth. What debates has it heard in its 1300 years as our

national talisman?

And as for Easter, that goes back to St Columba's missionary journey to Iona in the 6th century. This week we learned something new about one of his followers, St Moulag, whose monastery was lost for hundreds of years but has now been found. The Historical Society on the island of Lismore off Oban have released the results of their excavations in a soggy field next to the parish church. They've found clear evidence of a stone building dating back to the 7th century, along with a workshop making articles from metal, stone, wood, bone and antler.

The fact that Christianity is still part of mosaic of beliefs in Scotland is a story of the triumph of hope over battered experience. Perhaps we may allow ourselves to hope that our nation of 5.4 million souls will survive the cultural wars that divide us.