

Common Dreams Reflections

The Beatitudes - Lorraine Parkinson at Common Dreams 2013



Rev Dr Lorraine Parkinson commenced her interest in theology with a major in Jewish Studies as part of her Arts degree at Melbourne University. It included modern and biblical Hebrew and the Aramaic of the Dead Sea Scrolls. This interest was extended in her theology degree with a focus on biblical studies and languages, and a doctoral thesis on the historical Jesus. In 2010 Lorraine published her book *The World according to Jesus: his blueprint for the best possible world*. She has been active for 10 years at the Synod and Assembly

levels of the Uniting Church including involvement in the national dialogue between the Uniting Church and the Executive Council of Australian Jewry.

Conference Presentation

Lorraine presented a workshop on the topic: 'Who can be a midwife for change? The Answer is in the Beatitudes'.

In the workshop, Lorraine asked 'Could it be that the ultimate guide to the best possible person is the cryptic, hard to fathom, intriguing set of Jesus' sayings known as the Beatitudes? Is it possible, in following Jesus in accordance with the Beatitudes, to become the best possible human being, as the first step towards creating the best possible world?'

In the workshop, based on her book, Lorraine presented a view that the teachings of Jesus are not a loose collection of sayings but are 'integral parts of a tightly argued and consistent whole - the essential elements of what came to be Jesus' holistic vision of what he called the Kingdom of Heaven on earth'.

The Beatitudes are reproduced with her permission here on page 4, and can be found in her book, "The World According to Jesus: his blueprint for the best possible world" Spectrum Publications 2011.

PROGRESSIVE CHRISTIANITY NETWORK of SA

Mail c/- Effective Living Centre,
26 King William Rd,
Wayville 5034

Office Tues, Wed, Fri 10am-3pm

Email pcnet@effectiveliving.org

Phone 8271 0329

2013 Committee

Ros Chittleborough
Esmond Dowdy
Maureen Howland
Wes Howland
Bruce Ind

Sue Jarrad
Rob McPherson
Jana Norman
Caroline Pearce

Reflections on the *Common Dreams* Conference – Canberra 2013 - Phillip Tolliday

Phillip Tolliday is based in Adelaide at St. Barnabas' College and is a Senior Lecturer in Theology at Charles Sturt University. He is also involved in the project of research in Peace and Reconciliation studies that is sponsored by the Jena Center for Reconciliation Studies through the Friedrich Schiller University.

'The freedom and all excellence of human being is comprehended in human personhood. Therefore absolute freedom must also be thought as personhood. Hence...the idea of humanity elevated over all limitation is the idea of God, insofar as it is and can be revealed to humanity. Revelation cannot be other than pure anthropomorphism. God is the most human.' And,

'The Infinite is a component and energy of the human spirit from which religion springs eternally young.' With such words may hungry souls be fed.

There is little doubt that many people went to the *Common Dreams* conference because they hoped and indeed expected that it might be food for the hungry soul. To hear many of them talk, it seemed as if they had come from experiences of church community and Christianity that verged on fundamentalism. In some cases they had left this behind and moved to another church community or perhaps even to no community. In other cases they obviously continued to struggle on, often frustrated, and keen to sip fresh water from the oases of Progressive Christianity scattered throughout the featureless desert of what passes for mainstream Christian belief. Similarly, there is little doubt in my mind that the people who attended the conference were committed. They had to be—the cost of \$400 just covered the talks at the conference. Meals, accommodation and travel costs were all extra. In short – you had to want to be there.

On the first evening we sat in a packed lecture theatre of some 400+ people to hear a keynote



address from Marcus Borg. In a revealing demographic he asked the people to indicate their denomination of origin. Some 70% were Uniting Church. They were followed by about 20% who were Anglican, after which came another 10% divided between Roman Catholics and others, including some Baptists and members of the Salvation Army.

There were several things that piqued my interest at the conference. The first of these was a theme repeated by more than one speaker, about the need for the progressive Christian movement to look forward and to move forward. There was an acute awareness from many speakers that it would be all too easy to get stuck with the disgruntlement and disappointments of the past. Therefore the past needed to be acknowledged, but it seemed that it *had* been acknowledged, and so now it needed to be 'put to bed.' However nobody seemed to be quite sure of just how it might be 'put to bed,' or as to just where the progressive Christian Movement might go; and there was a very good reason for this. It was because, as soon became clear—and was by at least one speaker acknowledged explicitly—that it was more accurate to speak of progressive Christian Movements in the plural.

At one level a plurality of views from a range of people who have walked away from what they imagine to be creedal orthodoxy or what has been touted to them as such, is hardly surprising. Very few people at the conference were ‘just along for the ride.’ As I said before, commitment levels were high. It seems to me that when people make a fundamental choice to, in some cases, leave a community that has nurtured them and in which they have found meaning, they do so with a heavy heart and perhaps some anger, but also with a firm resolve that having made the *right choice* they will stick with it. Of course, others too, have made their *right choice* – they just happen to be different choices. Thus for some the progressive Christian Movement enables them adopt a Christology espoused by Borg and/or Crossan. For others some sort of Trinitarianism still seems possible. While for others even the word ‘god’ is ruined beyond use and the deity turns out to be something akin to nature writ large. Perhaps nowhere is this plethora of views and the latent discomfort that underwrites it more evident than in the lack of any movement toward a common liturgy. For some progressives prayer and praise would be a possibility, while for others it might not be. Equally, for some there would be something or even someone to whom one might make an address, while for others the idea of a personal or even an impersonal deity would seem to be impossible.

This leads me to a second observation. It seemed to me that attempts by some speakers were made to dig into the kernel, as it were, of the authentic Jesus tradition. History and doctrine were implicitly understood as declensions from this original authentic faith.

This original and authentic core of belief around Jesus was then distorted by successive ecclesial traditions and accretions until, miracle of miracles, the progressive Christianity movement arrived with its theological and spiritual renaissance. Admittedly there were talks that I didn’t attend, but amongst those I did attend I did not hear one positive mention of the Christian tradition. And yet 90% of us belonged to Reformed churches, which never existed in anything like their current form until more than half the history of Christianity had passed. I couldn’t help wondering whether or not there was a missing chapter (or perhaps more than one) in the narrative unfolding at *Common Dreams*. One of the issues that raised my suspicions here was the evident search for a language by which to name the divine. As I’ve noted earlier, some speakers were content to speak of God, but others were less happy to do so. Significantly, there didn’t seem to be a ready vocabulary to otherwise name the deity. I’m thinking, for example, of terms like ‘the unconditioned,’ ‘the abyss,’ ‘the sacred,’ ‘Spirit,’ ‘the Absolute,’ ‘the Idea,’ ‘the Infinite,’ ‘the Notion,’ or even ‘the *Abgrund*.’ Surely, I thought, this is the sort of language, with its accompanying ideas, that at least some of these people here are searching for. This language, while admittedly not ready-to-hand, is nevertheless to be found in the Christian tradition under the heading of German Idealism and also the Jena Romantics. Indeed the quotes with which I commenced my reflection come not from *Common Dreams* as you may have imagined but from Karl Hase. And who was he? Hase (1800-1890), a church historian at the Friedrich Schiller Universität at Jena, was Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s grandfather on his mother’s side.

The words that Hase utters are representative of an entire movement of thought – though one that apart from the English Idealists such as Bradley and Green at the beginning of the Twentieth Century never really took hold upon the preoccupations Realism and Pragmatism that grasped the English-speaking mind set.

So, in conclusion, I found the conference really interesting and was glad that I'd attended. However, I couldn't help but feel that the addition of that perspective from 18th and 19th Century German

thought could have been immensely useful to many people at the conference. I also wondered if it could have been revealing to have read out snippets of what the Idealists had to say about Jesus, about Spirit, about the sacred and about the world and to see how many folk at the conference realized these sentiments were more than two hundred years old. I guess my final reflection would be that it could be a good thing to see just what the tradition holds before going ahead to surrender it (often unwillingly and reluctantly) to those who are just so sure they know exactly what it is.

The Beatitudes Restated

The World According to Jesus, Lorraine Parkinson, *Spectrum Publications 2011*

1. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Fortunate are the humble-minded: they will live in the best possible world.
Personal characteristic: the ability to be humble in mind
2. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
Fortunate are those who mourn; they will face the future with strength
Personal characteristic: the ability to overcome adversity
3. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.
Fortunate are the non-violent; they will govern the earth.
Personal characteristic: the ability to resist oppression non-violently
4. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.
Fortunate are those whose passion is for justice; they will receive justice.
Personal characteristic: the ability to bring justice to the disadvantaged.
5. Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.
Fortunate are the compassionate; they will receive compassion.
Personal characteristic; the ability to empathise with others in need.
6. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.
Fortunate are the undivided in heart; they will commit to the way of Jesus.
Personal characteristic: the ability to make and keep a commitment.
7. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the children of God.
Fortunate are the peacemakers; they will forgive and reconcile humanity.
Personal characteristic: the ability to forgive the past.
8. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Fortunate are those in danger for living Jesus' way; they will be freed from fear to follow him.
Personal characteristic: the ability to overcome fear

THE THIRD COMMON DREAMS CONFERENCE, CANBERRA, SEPTEMBER 2013

MIDWIVES OF CHANGE: PROGRESSIVES SHAPING RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES

An Overview by Ros Chittleborough



THE CONFERENCE For me the conference was stimulating and rich with progressive principles which made it a deeply worthwhile experience. There was a feeling of cohesiveness, of having a common focus. It seemed that we were all on the same path; seeking truth and meaning within our own communities; seeking to live authentic lives; questioning with integrity. Of course, within this large group of over 400 conference attendees, there was diversity of thought which became apparent during the talks and then question time. And this sparked more ideas and added interest to the discussion.

The Speakers were excellent. They presented a smorgasbord of ideas, wisdom and challenging thoughts. This is the reason that my main focus will be on a few of them and some of their ideas. This will be just a taste, chosen by me, a lay person, from my personal notes, written during lectures, workshops and Q&A times. You will have an opportunity to find your own highlights when the conference talks are posted on the internet in about a month. Val Webb's is already "up there".

What is Progressive Christianity?

It is a Christian movement characterised by a willingness to question tradition, by an acceptance of Christian diversity, by a strong emphasis on social justice by standing up for the oppressed and the marginalised and by a commitment to environmental stewardship of the Earth.

Bob Douglas¹ clarified the differences between Progressives and Conservatives in his recent report of the Common Dreams Conference

in the Canberra Times. He wrote that **Progressives** prefer to say that Jesus was a real man on a mission to transform human society into a better world. His teachings, when understood in their context, spell out the personal characteristics that we should all seek to cultivate, to help reach that end.

By contrast, he wrote that conventional theology can be summarised in shorthand by the statement that "Jesus was God in the flesh and he died as the price for all our sins so that we could go on to heaven after our earthly death."

Here are some of the significant thoughts arising from the conference

ABOUT GOD

Val Webb² said that God is "not out there" as an interventionist being but is a presence, or personal conscience, the Sacred, the Divine Creativity from within the Universe. "God" is life, "God" is love.

For **Marcus Borg**³ "God" is grounded in the whole Universe.

Glynn Cardy⁴ named G.O.D as Sacred, not as a being.

Bruce Sanguin⁵ said, pursue "God" with intellectual integrity, honesty and critical reflection. He talked of the "Kin-dom" of God, "God, the originating mystery involved in the adventure of being".

ABOUT JESUS

Marcus Borg talked of Jesus being **about life** rather than **about the after-life**. Resurrection is radical transformation in **this** life. Salvation is in **this** life. "The cross is not about Jesus doing it for us so that we can be forgiven, but is an invitation to participate in the path and passion we see in Jesus."

Val Webb encouraged us to “find ethical ways to live like Jesus with justice and kindness.”

Lorraine Parkinson⁶ talked about Constantine and the alliance between Jesus Christ and the Roman Empire in the 4th Century AD. She said that we need to turn back to Jesus of Nazareth.

Nigel Leaves⁷ saw Jesus as a wisdom teacher, prophetic teacher, an inclusive, religious figure.

ABOUT the BIBLE

Marcus Borg urged us to put ancient texts in ancient contexts and bring texts alive for today. A metaphorical interpretation of the Bible is about meaning, not factual reports. There is no conflict between religion and science.

Val Webb – “Go to the Bible and hark back to the past for retrieval and renewal.”

Nigel Leaves – “It is important to be biblically responsible and intellectually honest.”

Margaret Mayman⁸ encouraged us to not just brush some parts of scripture away if they seem irredeemable. Rather, read, interpret and bring an ethical lens to them.

I believe that a general perception from the conference was of the need to carefully consider the traditions we value but to create new songs, liturgies and prayers through a lens that reflects life and thought in the 21st century. Here are some more impressions along those lines.

ABOUT OUR TRADITION (some examples of what to keep or adapt)

Val Webb talked about Creeds that were declared and then set in concrete. This has dampened creative thought. Our living traditions lend themselves to a wide range of interpretation.

Lorraine Parkinson provided us with some examples of creative, progressive thought. For those who find the 4th Century AD Nicene Creed difficult, she has written The Jesus Creed, based on The Beatitudes. She has written The Beatitudes in a modern context too.

Rex A. E. Hunt⁹ has rewritten and created many liturgies for use in services and celebrations and

you will find these on his website. He presented a workshop on some of these.

Steven Ogden¹⁰ – “Look at old things with new eyes.”

Bruce Sanguin reminded us of the power of the parable.

ABOUT PRAYER

Glynn Cardy discussed prayer in many non-theistic ways. God is not a “behind-the-scenes fixer.” Prayer can be self-talk and together-talk. Sometimes no words are needed. Learn to be silent, attentive and mindful. The focus can sometimes be on a candle, on something of beauty or a work of art. Discern the actions to be taken. Hold people or the situation in Love. Prayer is **living** the vision. This conflicts with the vision of a God of power.

ABOUT POWER

Steven Ogden was concerned about the power that is used to establish norms which then become encoded in society and into our heads. A misuse of power relies on compliance. A misuse of power can be seen in sovereign power, hierarchical power and patriarchal power; and also through managerial behaviour and bullying. Power should be about mutual accountability. Resistance, truth-telling and social critique are clues for a Christian Theology of Freedom. Freedom finds its voice in justice and compassion.

Glynn Cardy talked about the power of mutual love and justice rather than the power of domination and control. The latter is founded on fear.

ABOUT PROGRESSIVE CHRISTIANITY and the FUTURE

Where are we going?

Bruce Sanguin urged us to “Put the progress back in Progressive Christianity.” His important theme now, for the church and for the future of the planet is Evolutionary and Ecological Christianity. Live with joy, radical amazement and positive thinking. Believe in the enduring power of love.

Val Webb talked about the progressive future as a way of life rather than a set of beliefs. A question was asked of her. "Have we failed the next generation and the next? So many do not go to church and therefore will not be carrying Christianity forward into the future? She said "No". She passed on the view of one young woman. "You have not failed us. You have taught us how to think and have given us freedom". Her advice to grandparents was to tell their grandchildren about Jesus as a good man and to impart to them a passionate love of nature. "Tell them the history of our world through stories of the great book of nature." Children are the future custodians of our sacred planet Earth.

Nigel Leaves – Go into the future, "inspired by the possibility that one's head and one's heart can be equal partners in faith". "Radical truth-telling is part of the job prescription for those going into the future. Be biblically responsible, intellectually honest, emotionally satisfied and socially significant."

ACTION?

Go out to the Market Place of Ideas to seek the common good, not to convert, said **Margaret Mayman**. She talked about Public Theology but approach this with humility. Immerse ourselves in society, in other faiths. She reminded us of Martin Luther King. The Christian story shaped his political influence and brought forth the 1964 Civil Rights Act. His speech, "I have a dream" was powerful theology – all people are created equal. To bring about political change, one must name the evil.

Stand up for the marginalised said **Nigel Leaves**. He believes in Gay Marriage because that's what the Gospel of Jesus demands of us.

Go out and march, urged **Glynn Cardy**. It's the issue that's important and joining together, standing together.

Change language, change discourse, said **Steven Ogden**¹⁰.

Create slogans. **Val Webb**, with a wry smile, suggested, "Christians without Borders". She

came up with another one, "Progressives are Seekers of the Sacred."

Join the group, "A Progressive Christian Voice" (Australia) which stands in contrast to The Australian Christian Lobby.

Sign a petition, said our Minister, **Jana**, waving around a paper as she stood on a chair near the book sale area. We signed, to challenge the Government on issues such as lack of female ministers in Cabinet, refugees, gender equality, racism, gay issues, climate change ...

Read books on Progressive Christianity. Join Progressive Christianity discussion groups. Discuss and plan social justice action.

HOW CAN WE BE in COMMUNITY TOGETHER?

Nigel Leaves People need a sense of belonging. Community was central to early worship, practices, celebrating life and creating an alternative world. We need a place that is socially satisfying and socially significant, a place where we have the confidence to ask questions. He said that true faith is a roller coaster of exploration and doubts.

Margaret Mayman believes that we need celebrations – resistance to evil is joy – ritualise and celebrate all that is good and life-giving – dance at the rituals – "Life is worth the labour."

Bruce Sanguin would like to see us create communities of compassion and love. "Drop into awe and wonder. Bring forth hope and positivity and take it to the world with joy. Be mindful and intentional. The "Kin-dom" of God" occurs in the self, in the institution, in evolution. It evolves in all domains. Be a movement of social justice and peace."

Along with **Marcus Borg** we can be a part of the Jesus Movement, a movement that can set us free and enable us to flourish.

CONCLUSION

And so, this is My Dream: to be a part of a community of compassion and love, joy and celebration. I have not come away from the conference wearing rose-tinted glasses. And in fact, I would have appreciated more “spiritual” input of poetry and gentle meditation to “feed the soul”. I would have liked more emphasis on the contemplative, on the “Divine Mystery”, on ways “to intuit a deeper wisdom”. But, back to “My Dream of Community”; I know what difficulties there can be within communities. We are, after all, human. But, with Jesus of Nazareth as our guide, we can at least walk this path of compassion and love together.

Presenters quoted

1. Bob Douglas, Report of the Common Dreams Conference, Canberra Times, September 25, 2013.
2. Dr Val Webb, has a PhD in theology; holds a graduate degree in science. An Australian living in USA.
3. Professor Marcus Borg, Canon Theologian, Trinity Episcopal Cathedral, Portland, Oregon, USA
4. Rev Glynn Cardy, recently called to The Community of St Luke (Presbyterian), Auckland, NZ.
5. Rev Bruce Sanguin, a minister of The United Church of Canada.
6. Rev Dr Lorraine Parkinson, retired UCA minister, formerly part-time chaplain with city ministries.
7. Rev Dr Nigel Leaves, the Canon of St John's Anglican Cathedral, Brisbane.
8. Rev Dr Margaret Mayman, minister at St Andrew's on The Terrace, Wellington, NZ.
9. Rev Rex AE Hunt, retired UCA minister, Founder & Life Member, Network of Biblical Storytellers.
10. Rev Dr Stephen Ogden, Principal, St Francis Anglican Theological College Brisbane, Australia.

*Ros Chittleborough is
Chair of Pilgrim Pathways,
Pilgrim Uniting Church Adelaide,
and a Committee Member of the
Progressive Christianity Network of SA*

The PCNetSA committee would like to thank Pilgrim Uniting Church for their generous sponsorship of the printing of this special Common Dreams Edition of our newsletter

KEEPING IN TOUCH...

Would you like to be listed on the PCNet database to receive the newsletter electronically or would you like to update your details? Do you know of anyone who might like to receive the PCNet newsletter? Phone the Effective Living Centre, 8271 0329 Mon, Wed or Fri, or email pcnet@effectiveliving.org with your contact details.