

St Andrew's on The Terrace Sunday 8 April 2018 Easter 2

Readings for the Gathering

Hebrew Bible

Psalm 133: 1-3

How good and pleasant it is/ when God's people live together in unity!/ It is like precious oil poured on the head,/ running down on the beard,/ running down on Aaron's beard,/down on the collar of his robe./ It is as if the dew of Hermon were falling on Mount Zion./ For there the LORD bestows his blessing,/ even life forevermore.

Gospel

John 20: 19-31

Jesus Appears to His Disciples

On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord. Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

Jesus Appears to Thomas

Now Thomas (also known as Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!" But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe." A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" ²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe." Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!" Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

The Purpose of John's Gospel

³⁰ Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. ³¹ But these are written that you may believe^[a] that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

Contemporary reading

"The Great Emergence"

by Fr Richard Rohr, OFM <https://cac.org/the-great-emergence-2017-11-26/>

Protestants and Catholics recently honoured the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. Reformation is the perpetual process of conversion that is needed by all individuals and institutions. We appear to be in the midst of another period of significant turmoil and rebirth, thus my focus on rebuilding Christianity "from the bottom up" in this year's Daily Meditations.

... we are witnessing a dramatic increase in "Nones," people who don't identify with a particular faith tradition. While I ache for those who have been wounded by religion and no longer feel at home in church, the dissatisfaction within Christianity has sparked some necessary and healthy changes. Episcopal Bishop Mark Dyer (1930-2014) aptly called these recurring periods of upheaval giant "rummage sales" in which the church rids itself of what is no longer needed and rediscovers treasures it had forgotten.

As Phyllis Tickle (1934-2015) reflected, in the process of building necessary structure in institutions, we eventually "elaborate, encrust, and finally embalm them with the accretion of both our fervour and our silliness. At that point there is no hope for either religion or society, save only to knock the whole carapace off ourselves and start over again." [1] With each reformation, we don't need to start from scratch but return to the foundations of our Tradition. We don't throw out the baby with the bathwater, but reclaim the essential truths. And remember that truth anywhere is truth everywhere. With each rebirth, Christianity becomes more inclusive and universal, as it was always meant to be. Tickle continues, describing how we might participate in shaping our history and present:

Called the Great Emergence, this time of radical shift is, like its predecessors, one of total and all-encompassing change. It is effecting and being effected as much by shifting cultural, economic, political, and intellectual circumstances as by religious ones. Yet it is the religious shifts that ultimately will inform and interpret all the others. . . . [It] is sufficient to say that this thing is a-borning, and it is we who must faithfully and prayerfully attend to its birthing. [2]

This emergence is not something we create or invent so much as name and join. "Two or three" gathered in deep truth create a whole new level of energy, collaboration, and interdependent life.

Reflection for the Gathering

It won't be news to some of you, especially if you took biology at high school, that a carapace is the exoskeleton on animals such as crustacea – crayfish, crabs and the like. Instead of an internal bony skeleton, as we mammals have, this exoskeleton is what protects and holds the body together. If the internal body grows, however, the exoskeleton becomes constricting. The animal needs to shrug it off in a moulting process and grow a new one. The crab shells you find on the beach are discarded

carapaces. The carapace is a little like a chrysalis – once the container has passed its use by date the developing organism whether crayfish crab, or in the case of a chrysalis, butterfly, needs to discard it. But the butterfly does not develop a new chrysalis. Crayfish or crabs do develop a new carapace. The logical conclusion is of course, that the next carapace will eventually become too small also.... and the next and the next and the next...

Like us on the spiritual journey. We develop an exoskeleton of belief which does it for a while.... then we might outgrow it, meaning we need to shrug off the carapace of belief which has started to constrict us and grow another.. and another... and another... so we can keep on growing. Hold that thought as we look at today's Gospel story of Thomas and the disciples where it is as if the disciples are presented with a new carapace.

The old carapace, the scenario in which they are eager followers of a living itinerant teacher has not been shrugged off by them in a leisurely considered act of growth. No it's just been ripped off painfully and suddenly.... (well perhaps not suddenly, they must have known something was going to implode sooner rather than later.) But the carapace has been ripped off by cruel, enemy hands unfairly and painfully- like ripping off plaster from our shrinking skin.

Here they are, vulnerable as a newly moulted crayfish, huddled behind closed doors. They record, for us to read later down the line in human history, a description of the moment when the reality of the new carapace becomes evident.

From now on they will still relate to Jesus but in a completely different way. We've talked lots of times about how we might know what in these ancient holy scriptures is 'Gospel truth', as we say, or legend, myth, embellished eye witness accounts or analogy, allegory or enchanted story. We cannot say this story is factually true. We cannot either say that it is not factually true. Neither group can be categorical about this.

I believe the point of this story is the change in how the disciples relate to the living truth of Jesus post-Easter. It is different, they find, from before and different from how they had imagined it. That first Easter proves to be a massive pivot point in their lives. It changes how they believe, how they trust; in what they believe or in whom they trust.

It suddenly struck me preparing this reflection that this story reads a little like dream record. Amazing things happen in this story as they do in dreams. You calmly move your way through such a dream thinking nothing which is happening is unusual but when you awake, you realise not a lot of what you dreamed could actually happen in real life. It doesn't mean that you don't take the dream seriously. The symbols within it are rich and illuminating. If you ignore them, your psyche will ensure you simply dream the same story in a different way on another night until you get the message.

So the disciples learn that the post-Easter Jesus can move through their fears, can treat locked doors as if they were no obstacle. Fear and hiding and grief they find are to be only temporary shelters while the new post-Easter carapace life is survived. Grief and fear are our natural human responses to vulnerability. They are necessary but not for wallowing in.

Similarly Thomas' experience after his bold words, his brash request that he be able to put his finger into the deep wounds of crucifixion seems also dreamlike. Edinger writes of the way that when a person like Jesus is fully centred, fully real and fully conscious of their true Self, they have a power of influence and a wisdom which affects others without those recipients being quite sure what happened. I wonder if Jesus became like that towards the end of his ministry as his self knowledge and wisdom deepened. So this dream-like image of Thomas actually touching these wounds is a sacred numinous experience. For Thomas, his relationship with Jesus transforms in that holy moment. His brash challenge becomes a courageous encounter with the divine. The old carapace is

ripped off and in that painful, vulnerable wonderful moment, new understandings begin to grow of how it will be from now on.

When I went to Timaru in 2010, four parishes had just been put together. There was grief and reluctance among many of the people. As well, some looked forward to the new carapace. It was noticeable that while some were forward looking and even eager to try a new constellation of churches, others could only make the leap if they were forced to. So when the Christchurch earthquake damaged two of the four churches, some of that latter group were forced to get on board.

With sadness and resignation, and, for some, resentment, the two churches were closed with due ritual and ceremony. It reminded me of the difficulty with which I had led the closure process with a church just outside Dunedin years before. Even when the congregation had reduced to three 3 people, those three did not want to give up their familiar carapace. In Timaru it was the same.

I am sure some would say that the fact that Chalmers church in Timaru has not fallen in on its new congregation, a small Coptic congregation, proves that they were right and we were wrong; they could have stayed in the earthquake prone building. The point wasn't only however what changes we could make when we were forced into it. The point was what changes did we need to make to keep on growing spiritually. In what way was what we were doing before constricting how the Gospel made its way into the Timaru community, or not. In what ways was it constricting us?

Edward Edinger, whom I referred to earlier, names the style of the Great Emergence which he believes we need as a human race on the death of Christendom. Like the disciples, we have a major death on our hands. The carapace of Christendom has not been ripped suddenly off our backs, but slowly and painfully has been being removed through deaths of different sorts and different sizes. You know them – you are living through those slow deaths or have relatives living through them in small towns, city suburbs and rural settings. I am not sure that this slow death is any better than a sudden crisis, it just gives us more time to grieve and to resist.

Edinger suggests that within Christendom we all had an agreed religious system – this is throughout Christianity – it's not an Orthodox or a Catholic or a Protestant thing, it is a phenomenon over the whole Christian faith tradition. There was for hundreds of years a stable religious system which had systems and rituals which aimed to help people in times of alienation and despair and too keep our tendency to overinflated arrogance in line also.

In this religious system we looked outside of ourselves at an external deity where all the spiritual 'action' was sourced. The Church carried this external faith for us, providing ritual, ceremony, signs and symbols for us to nourish our spiritual journeys. It decided the content of the carapace of creeds and doctrine, the correctness of ritual and the shape of ceremony. That religious system has become shakier and shakier, has wobbled alarmingly and now is in danger of total collapse. A contemporary symbol of it might be Christchurch Cathedral.

It will be interesting to see what the new census figures will show us about the group Richard Rohr calls the "nones". Here in New Zealand we join Scotland in being one of the most secular countries in the world. The "nones" are the largest religious group in this land of ours, despite the God of nations being apparently the one at whose feet we meet in bonds of love and who defends our free land. If our religious system has collapsed, what then will lift us out of alienation and despair now? What will prevent us becoming so inflated we think we are God? What will keep addictions in check and ideologies restrained?

The answer lies within, suggests Edinger, in the process of spending our time becoming more and more conscious of who and what we really are. Externally focused Christendom has held us back from entering this process for ourselves. The danger is, in these vulnerable times between carapaces, we throw out external religion but fail to replace it with the internal work we all need to do.

Over the next six weeks, this series of four reflections will look at what could emerge, once we let the carapace go, if like Thomas, we are prepared to engage differently with the post Easter Jesus.

The answer to the why question? We need to shrug off the carapace of external only religion and rediscover within the Self with a capital S which Jesus supremely discovered and to which he shows the way.

We heard Jesus say to Thomas: "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." It is not only the external religious objects and ceremonies which can bring us to trusting the journey, we can trust the journey enough to walk the mystery even though we do not as yet see all clearly. We can trust the deep internal processes which the journey now calls us to since the death of Christendom, just as the disciples were called to a new path on the death of Jesus.

We read in the Gospel of Thomas:

Jesus said, "If those who lead you say to you, 'See, the kingdom is in the sky,' then the birds of the sky will precede you. If they say to you, 'It is in the sea,' then the fish will precede you. Rather, the kingdom is inside of you, and it is outside of you. When you come to know yourselves, then you will become known...But if you will not know yourselves, you dwell in poverty and it is you who are that poverty.

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