

## St Andrew's on The Terrace Sunday 27 October 2019 Reformers' Sunday Pentecost 20

### Readings for the Gathering

#### Epistle

**1 Peter 2:1-10**

Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind. Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that God is good.

#### **The Living Stone and a Chosen People**

As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him—you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.... you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

#### Gospel

#### **The Wise and Foolish Builders**

**Luke 6:46-49**

"Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say? As for everyone who comes to me and hears my words and puts them into practice, I will show you what they are like. They are like a man building a house, who dug down deep and laid the foundation on rock. When a flood came, the torrent struck that house but could not shake it, because it was well built. But the one who hears my words and does not put them into practice is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. The moment the torrent struck that house, it collapsed, and its destruction was complete."

**Contemporary reading** "Formidable thinker and writer full of paradox" by Peter Matheson in The Otago Daily Times 17 March 2017

The "tragic necessity of the Reformation" may be a useful mantra to chant. For Kiwis, though, tired of the worn-out language of much of Church life, the Reformation raises quite fascinating questions.

For Luther as a wordsmith is up there with Rabelais and Shakespeare. As a thinker, he is truly formidable and continued to fascinate generations to come; a Kierkegaard, a Bonhoeffer. Yet, he is a hard nut to crack, a "difficult hero", as has recently been said. The anti-papal ravings at the end of his life are bizarre and shameful. His anti-Judaic polemic was to be eagerly snapped up by the Nazis. So to enter his world is to be up to one's neck in paradox. Yet, he opened up so much more than he closed down. It was his lyrical devotional works that initially gained the ear of ordinary people. His 1520 treatise on freedom is quite ravishing. He could clown around like the best of us. He opened up the Bible to women as well as men. "I never knew Jesus could speak such good German," was an Augsburg artisan's reaction to his translation of the New Testament...

No, we don't find the historical Martin Luther a comfortable bedfellow. There is nothing of the blandness of much contemporary talk about spirituality. Yet, he addresses the God question in an unforgettable way, in hymns and prayers, in exegesis and polemic, in his whole life. He sought to remind the Church that it was more than an institution. That it was there to listen to God and serve humanity. If we are open to being surprised, we could do worse than bend an ear to him.

#### Reflection for the Gathering

I hope you enjoy my sense of humour on the front of the order of service. The huge stone memorial of four of the most significant reformers in Swiss eyes, (sited in Geneva) for our sensibilities contrasts greatly with the question below "What does it mean to be a progressive church?"

The four men are, from the left John Calvin, (French), (1509-1564) main reformer in Geneva; William Farel, also French, (1489-1565) who founded the reformed church in Switzerland Neuchatel and Bern; Theodore Beza, (French) (1519-1605) disciple of Calvin's in Geneva and John Knox, (Scottish),(1513-1572) key reformer in the beginning of the Church of Scotland and therefore of Presbyterianism.

They are the face of the Swiss and Scottish progressive church of the sixteenth century. They followed the work of the German reformer Martin Luther (1483-1546).

They don't look like our idea of a progressive lot do they? Though maybe what we are seeing in these pictures of them as mature men, is the debilitating effect of the stress, strain and tension they suffered as they went against the theological flow of the times.

Just over 500 years later, we are at our own crossroads. You will remember Phyllis Tickle's work on what she calls the current Great Emergence. She argues, along with others, that every half millennium or so the church has a great rummage sale and rearranges itself in major ways:

This pattern was discernible in Jewish religion before the birth of Christ, but let's take Jesus birth as the starting point of our part of this cycle. About 500 years later, the Roman Empire fell and Europe entered the dark ages, to be followed another 500 years later approximately by the Great Schism between the Catholic and Orthodox branches of the church. 500 years later it is our turn. We know there has been a decline in the Christian religion in the West but we don't know yet what will happen as a result of that.

Contrary to the doom and gloom I hear in the church, I think it is an exciting time to be Christian.

Let me remind you of another theory – that of stages of faith. In our youth we are enchanted with religion and will almost accept anything – young children confuse God with Santa Claus, and everything can be very black and white. The conventional church sits in this stage. Then, if you begin to ask questions, it may be because you have become disenchanted with religion. Your questions create another, bigger question – will the disenchanted person move on to find re-enchantment with the sacred mystery we call religion or spirituality?

This is where we begin to answer the theme question for today. What does it mean to be a progressive church? The answer is decided by what we do in the disenchantment stage. Do we move on (through struggle and difficulty) to eventual re-enchantment or do we take a side route – perhaps into social action, or humanism or another ideology? This is a crucial moment.

Many people who found that their questions were not welcomed within the church have made this sideways shift. Hence the increasing number of people ticking the census boxes to tell us they have no religion. I've mentioned before that in New Zealand this group is now greater than the whole of the Christian group combined, making them the largest religious group in New Zealand!

The question at this stage are those posed in the Gathering words: Will we be literal or mythical? Will we be logical or mystical – when is each position appropriate?

This led me to wonder what other people mean when they look for progressive churches. I am often told by visitors that they googled progressive churches in Wellington and St Andrew's on The Terrace came up. This might excite a theologian like myself, but the dictionary definition of a progressive is that they are advocates of social reform. In other words, others, especially those under 40 are attracted to St Andrew's mainly, I believe, for the values expressed on the board outside this building: that we are always striving to include people of every creed, race, class and sexual orientation.

This could mean that we have veered off to right or left of the enchantment progression into social action as a replacement for sorting out our confusing thoughts about the sacred and spirit and God. Easier to get on and 'do', as I said last week, than to wrestle with the sacred until we learn its name, just as Jacob wrestled with the angel in the dark of night.

It would follow then that as people who pride ourselves on our progressive action, we might take today's Gospel reading to heart. How shaky *are* our foundations? Are they weak and therefore in danger of allowing the house to be destroyed? Maybe in a new normal of theological seismic tremors, we might need to discover the theological equivalent of base isolators to undergird our faith communities. Foundations which can allow our church to move with the earthquake but not be destroyed.

My desire for us all is that we get to find re-enchantment with the sacred mystery. That is the truly progressive position.

Today's reading from 1 Peter reminds us we are a holy priesthood. Priests carry the sacred mystery, deal in the currency of the sacred mystery, they guard the sacred within the life of the faith community. We all have that responsibility, not just the officially ordained priest or minister. We all need to be working through our disenchantment together; seeking always that delicate, fragile state of re-enchantment so we have a firm but flexible foundation for the social reforms we seek.

One of the arguments made by the Protestant reformers of the sixteenth century was that the true church was to be found in the hearts of faithful followers. That the church was not solely its organisation or its bureaucracies. In arguing that, they joined many leaders within the medieval church who had argued for personal commitment and devotion as an antidote to the institutionalisation and sometimes corruption of the organised religion. The great religious orders were founded on movements towards greater simplicity, greater commitment in order for the church to progress as it should. We need to hear their message anew right now.

So where are you on this journey? Are you still in a state of innocent enchantment? A special part of your life may still await you - that stage when questions start to form in your mind and you wrestle with whether sacred truth is literal or mythical.

Are you lost in your disenchantment, bitter perhaps that you were led to believe certain things as a younger person, or resentful that others insisted you toed the party line? You have another stage to enter but it will take effort to get there. You need to be determined to do the work which will help you find that different kind of enchantment, this time and enchantment which is conscious and mature. Have you begun to see glimpses of that re-enchantment and a way forward out of your questioning and disillusionment?

The very Protestantism which freed up some people into a new way of being church in the sixteenth century is less helpful to us now. Younger generations are seeking engagement, interaction, energy and something which captures and satisfies both heart and mind, nurturing soul within them. A reenchanted faith will give them that, but we need to have explored it and have found it before we can show the way to others.

What does it mean to be a progressive church?

We can decide what definition we will aim for – to be progressive only in terms of social reform or to be progressively re-enchanted by our faith also.

As the American poet Robert Frost reminded us: there is a divergence of ways in the wood – will we take the path much travelled by others? Or will we take the path less travelled. If we do, we will find that choice makes all the difference.

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