

Introduction

Thank you Richard for the introduction. I want to begin by offering my thanks also to Rex Hunt and the organising committee of Common Dreams 2 and to Dick Carter and his team for the hospitality and care. Thanks to those who are presenting, and to all of you for being a community of engagement as we seek to explore the progressive religious dream. I’m having a fabulous time here and when I’m done with this talk today, I expect to enjoy myself even more.

To begin with, I want to tell you a story about what we think we see and what sees us.

A burglar is attempting to break into a house. As he climbs through the window with a torch held delicately between his teeth, he hears the words “I can see you, and Jesus can see you too.” He falls to the ground, wondering what is going on. He stands up and shines his torch around the room, but sees nothing. He decides that he must be hearing things, so he continues on, plundering the house. As he continues, he hears the voice again. “I can see you, and Jesus can see you too.” Again, he shines the torch and cannot find anyone, so he continues. A third time, he hears the voice, “I can see you, and Jesus can see you too.” This time, he shines his torch on a parrot in a cage. He breathes a huge sigh of relief, until his torch moves down below the cage, where he sees a huge German shepherd. Then the parrot says, “Get ‘em Jesus, get ‘em!”

As children many of us were taught that Jesus or God (and we weren’t really sure there was really a difference) was watching our every move. This morning I want to turn around the question of whether Jesus sees us and ask how do we see Jesus, or rather how do we see what it is to belong to Jesus’s people in the 21st century.

But first let me acknowledge that this conference is not limited to Christian perspectives of progressive faith and I acknowledge and honour those of other paths and traditions who are present today. I have decided that I will make my presentation from a specifically Christian point of view, rather than attempting to homogenise my thoughts in ways that might make them more generically religious. I am aware from my engagement with people of other faiths, that they do not want us to leave the specificity of our claims and experiences at the door of interfaith conversation or to attempt to create some universal common denominator faith. Though of course we do need to learn from, and engage in dialogue with, one another. So for those of you who are not Christian or post-Christian, I offer this as a Christian contribution to the wider conversation that Aviva and Sherene initiated so wonderfully yesterday.

I’ve been reflecting on the progressive religious dream, about the journey from my liberal beginnings (with a brief detour into teenage evangelical fervour) and then liberation Christian experience. What are the connections and where are the points of disruption with liberalism and with liberation, with where we have come from and where we are going?

My location at St Andrew’s

Currently I am a minister of a progressive Christian faith community, St Andrew’s on The Terrace. St Andrew’s is located in inner-city Wellington, the capital of New Zealand. It is the oldest Presbyterian congregation in Aotearoa New Zealand, but an utter aberration in the

theological and ecclesiastical life of the wider Presbyterian church. We are a minority, living this dream of a church re-aligned for love and justice, but it is a dream I want to celebrate and nurture.

We're 'out there' and we're relishing the freedom we have and we're thriving. It hasn't happened overnight. St Andrew's was declared a peace church in 1983 and an inclusive church in 1991. In 2002, amidst an ridiculous amount of publicity ("Lesbian minister divides congregation" was the newspaper headline when I came to St Andrew's to preach for a call), the church called me to ministry, and I have to admit that calling an out gay leader is a fairly effective way of clearing out any conservative evangelical remnant. It finished off the job begun by one of my predecessors when he sacked the choir in the early 80s and when he led opposition to the Springbok rugby tour of New Zealand in 1981. So now we have this freedom to be and to become.

In our welcome to communion we use words adapted from those used at St Mark's Episcopal Church in Washington DC, one of the birth places of progressive Christianity.

"St Andrew's is an open community and all are invited to the table. Wherever you are on your faith's journey, wherever you have come from and wherever you are going to, whatever you believe, whatever you do not believe, you are welcome to participate in the communion. This sacred meal is for all people."

Then we go on to explain, in thoroughly progressive style, and because we are so damn inclusive, that will be choices: there is bread to be broken from the loaf or there are gluten free wafers, and there is wine or there is grape juice, and you can choose to join in or choose not to. Our Easter communion liturgy located our sacred symbolic meal alongside the ancient meals of goddess worshippers, the Passover liberation meal of the followers of Yahweh, and the community meals of Jesus and his friends. In passions and in practice, we are living out the progressive religious dream.

Over forty years ago, the Presbyterian Church tried one of our most famous members, Sir Lloyd Geering, for heresy. At the time he was found not guilty. Ten years after the heresy trial, when I was a 19 year-old student at Victoria University studying religious studies with Lloyd, I set one of my life goals. When I grew up, I wanted to be tried for heresy...

I wanted to be tried for heresy because I wanted to think so freely and creatively that I would be considered a threat to the powers that be. Thankfully for me, in my naivety, the church seems to have lost its appetite for heresy trials. For I have no doubt, that the liturgy and preaching at St Andrew's would result in my being found guilty (and Lloyd would most definitely be found guilty if he was retried in 2010). Nowadays our church doesn't bother with theological debate though. We persecute people for their sexuality rather than their theology. And from that I have not been immune. After returning to New Zealand from the US, I spent the years between 1995 and 2006, fighting for the right for gay and lesbian people to be ministers and elders in our church. I no longer give that fight as much energy as I used to. I have come to believe that my energy is better spent on living the progressive religious dream, in changing the world even when we fail to change the church. But I am pleased that other members of St Andrew's, gay and straight, are continuing to work on the issue of sexual justice, because as they've told me when I've said I'm over the General Assembly battles, it's not just about me!

Prophetic and Poetic

So today I want to reflect on two of the key elements that mark progressive faith communities in the 21st century: our commitments to justice and our practice of liturgy, and the connections between them. Our liturgy is a created around post-theistic poetic imagination, words, images and music that join us to one another and anchor us. Our common life is shaped by a commitment to stand in the prophetic liberation tradition of Christianity.

Poetic in liturgy. Prophetic in a community of justice-seeking friends.

Marks of Progressive Christianity

New Testament scholar Hal Taussig in his book “A New Spiritual Home: Progressive Christianity Emerges at the Grass Roots” has identified some of the characteristics of the progressive Christian communities that he has researched in the US. He has suggested that the defining difference between progressive churches and the old liberals of the 1960s and 1970s is that they are as interested in spirituality as they are in justice.¹ I’m interested to explore the connections between spirituality and justice.

Taussig’s five characteristics of progressive Christianity are:

1. A spiritual vitality and expressiveness. The wide-range of churches and groups in this movement are not just heady social activists and intellectuals. They express themselves spiritually in meditation, prayer, artistic forms, and lively worship. There is emphasis on participatory worship, expressive and arts-infused worship and programming, a reclaiming of discarded ancient Christian practices, a wide variety of non-Christian rituals and meditation techniques, and development of small groups for spiritual growth and nurture.

2. An insistence on Christianity with intellectual integrity. This new kind of Christian expression is devoted to and nourished by a wide-ranging intellectual curiosity and critique. It interrogates Christian assumptions and traditions in order to reframe, reject, or renew them. God language, the relationship between science and religion, and postmodern consciousness are the major arenas of this intellectual rigor.

3. A transgression of traditional gender boundaries. These groups are explicitly and thoroughly committed to feminism and affirmation of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and intersex people. The boundaries are fluid. And we are continually being stretched. We have recently been joined at St Andrew’s by an opposite sex couple who have a girlfriend and who identify themselves as polyamorous.

4. In contrast to mainstream Christianity’s lukewarm “tolerance” of other religions, progressive Christianity pro-actively asserts that it is not the best or the only. Progressive Christians take pains simultaneously to stand within their own Christian faith and to support of the full validity of other religions and spiritual paths.

5. Strong ecological and social justice commitments. The longstanding Christian interest in aiding those who suffer or are poor is continued in progressive Christianity. Similarly, this new movement is committed to liberal social justice activism and peace advocacy. In addition, however, there is a passion for environmentalism, including explicit attention to changing life style and

¹ Taussig, Hal. *A New Spiritual Home: Progressive Christianity at the Grass Roots*. Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge Press. 2006.

consumer patterns which both lessens the human footprint on the Earth and leads to economic justice for those who are most disadvantaged by the machinery of global capitalism.

Connecting Life and Liturgy in Community

Yesterday, Fred Plumer asked the question, from the comfort of breakfast in bed on Sunday morning, why would anyone want to go to church? In preparation for this paper, I asked my parish council this question, albeit a little more indirectly. I was taught that Parish Council meetings should begin with a Bible reading and a prayer, which usually was a veiled attempt to guilt people into behaving themselves. I've given this up in favour of offering people a chance to talk about what is happening for them or what they think about a particular issue. Then instead of invocation to an out there God, I simply gather together what has been offered and give thanks. So at the last meeting of Parish Council, I asked them to talk about the connections between their everyday life and their participation in the liturgy and community of St Andrew's on the Terrace. Our parish councillors currently range in age from late twenties to mid-fifties.

Their responses were illuminating and encouraging to me. Several people spoke about a conversation that happened after church last Sunday. One of our newer members, a former journalist, talked about his distress on learning of the recently leaked videotape showing two Reuters journalists in Iraq being gunned down in an aerial attack by U.S. troops in 2007. From their distance of their helicopters, the soldiers thought that the cameras and sound equipment were weapons. What distressed this man so deeply, was the recorded banter of the soldiers, urging one of those on the ground to reach for the equipment so that that the soldier could be justified in killing him, under what are euphemistically called "the rules of engagement." On the video the helicopter gunners can be heard laughing and referring to the men as "dead bastards."

Those who took part in the conversation with this man after church stood with him in his distress, and I believe that he knew from sharing the liturgy over the past year, that he would be heard by people who shared his values. People are prepared to take risks to have hard conversations because they know that while their views might not be agreed with, they will be listened to with respect and with response. This man's questioning about what the church had to say about New Zealand's ongoing military involvement in Afghanistan, where so many civilians are still dying in the crossfire, is a question that those who participated in the conversation will take seriously as we think about our peace commitments as a parish.

Eleanor, the Parish Council convenor, spoke about being asked recently about why she "still" went to church (as if it was something she should have got over by now). She had reflected that she could read progressive theology but that reading on your own is lonely. Spiritual search on your own is lonely. St Andrew's is a community of searchers and seekers who care about the journeys of others. She also spoke about how, as much she appreciated being a product of late modernity, she worried about the loss of historical wisdom that is rampant in a society that lives for the moment. Being part of a Christian faith community that expresses its life in ways that connect with people across time and geography expands our world, and puts our own existence into perspective.

Five years ago, Mary returned to church, 30 years after she had left the church of her childhood and youth, when the pastor had refused to conduct her marriage service because her husband was not a Christian. For 30 years she had been seeking on her own and she felt from her experience, like Eleanor, that she did not want to do it alone. Part of the seeking was for community.

Sylvia, a younger member talked about the value of being part of an intergenerational community. Cathy is 98 and baby Vanessa is three months old, and every generation in between is

represented among those who gather on Sundays. Sylvia noted that there might be other places in her life where she could be among people of other ages, but none where such important conversations and community were happening, where we could delight in the children who climbed up into, and hung off, the seldom-used pulpit after the service on Easter Sunday. And where the vision and wisdom of the elders is freely shared. She also valued that there are opportunities for anyone in the community who wishes to, to be involved in creating liturgy with others.

Jim, my colleague, talked about the sacred space that is created by the community. Our church is beautiful aesthetically, a place of peace and centring in the midst of a busy city. Jim began his ministry in the era when churches were being built that looked like warehouses, intentionally ordinary. But the sacredness of our space is not just because it is beautiful. Jim suggested it is because it has been the place that has held a wide variety of human experiences: baptisms, civil unions, weddings, communion, funerals, beautiful music, serious reflections on justice struggles. It's almost as if the building has absorbed the spiritual energy of human community seeking the sacred through the celebration of life over the decades.

Isobel and Amelia both spoke about the poetry of the liturgy, which enables us to address the depths (Isobel's way of naming the sacred which is an interesting contrast to the traditional idea of the God up in heaven). We can never hold it, but for them we can touch the sacred most closely in community. It's uncontrollable but we can touch it and be touched by it. Isobel is a nurse and Amelia a policy analyst in the public service. They experience the liturgy as inspiring them and re-connecting them to what it is that is important about the work they do and the relationships in which they participate.

David spoke about accessing mystery in a way that is inextricably linked to how he lives. For him, the faith community gives him an alternative story to the cynicism and hopelessness of much of his world. A person who is passionate about social justice, who worked tirelessly to make Wellington a Fair trade city, who is involved in eco-justice programmes, he sometimes feels so at odds with the dominant ethos of consumerism, capitalism and militarism that he asks himself what he is doing. Participating in the liturgy, a liturgy with a strong social justice orientation and a grounding in the holiness of life and the earth, reinforced his values and the life he is choosing to live. His words have stayed with me: "It's not stupid." It's not stupid, to expect things to be different. I'm in church because I need to be reminded and reassured that "it's not stupid."

And a conversation flowed about what it is we are doing and why we are drawn to live out our commitments to justice and our hopes for joy, in the context of a practising progressive faith community. As we drew the conversation to a close and turned to the business of the Council, Sylvia remarked that one of the reasons that she was part of this church was that the minister, going off to an international conference, would expect that all of them would have something to offer, that their journeys, insights, struggles, commitments and celebrations are taken seriously. In sharing this reflection, I honour the community of St Andrew's on The Terrace, who get out of bed on Sunday morning and who shape progressive Christianity, in our time and place.

Mary wrote in a follow-up email that one of things that helped her bridge her past and present experience of church was singing new words to old tunes, but that she had also come to love the new words to new tunes as well. One of those is "All are welcome" by Marty Haugen, so I want to play you the last verse.

*Let us build a house where all are named, their songs and visions heard
And loved and treasured, taught and claimed as words within the Word.
Built of tears and cries and laughter, prayers of faith and songs of grace,*

*Let this house proclaim from floor to rafter: All are welcome in this place.*²

Not liberal Christianity

Before I explore in more depth the themes of justice and spiritual practice, I want to pay some attention to the continuity and disruption between liberal Christianity and progressive Christianity. Progressive Christianity is not simply a reaction to the conservative evangelical or fundamentalist religious right. It is also a quite distinctive departure from liberal Christianity, which was the dominant theological position of late twentieth century mainstream churches in western countries. Churches that are not thriving.

The distinction between liberal and progressive Christianity is less clear than the distinction between conservative and progressive Christian thought. Progressive Christianity shares with liberal Christianity a commitment to making the gospel relevant in every age. It shares the view that reason, science, and democracy are not in conflict with Christianity. But there are differences. Delwin Brown, author of *What does a progressive Christian believe?* has written critically of liberalism:

The liberals went wrong, from a progressive perspective, when reasoning based on (supposedly common) human experience became for them more than valued *tools and tests* to be utilized in shaping inherited Christian materials; gradually it (human experience) became also the *source* of liberal theology. As that happened, the “material” of historic Christian faith—its stories, symbols, ideas, analyses, and imperatives—moved to the dim and largely optional margins of liberal Christian reflection. Liberal theology became something more akin to a philosophy of religion.³

The liberal project was important for the deconstruction of theology that was based on pre-enlightenment world-views. It enabled people to remain within the broad Christian tradition without compromising their intellectual integrity (even when, sadly, most clergy failed to engage a post-enlightenment world in their leadership of worship). What progressive Christians are doing is recovering the material of Christian faith (stories, symbols, ideas, analyses and imperatives) as the basis for theologising in a 21st century context. Our faith communities are the bearers of memory: the dangerous memory of Jesus, and the equally important of the community that surrounded him during life and carried his story forward after his death, the memory of the movement as much as the man.

Of course, the Jesus-community story is not the only story that can illuminate human life on earth. There are other faith paths and there are secular philosophies. But in the end we all live within a story, a world-view. For those of us who grew up in Christian-shaped culture, we can choose a story or have one chosen for us. We can go with the flow of the individualistic consumerism of late capitalism, or we can choose a different story that resists the status quo. For those of us brought up in the Christian tradition, we may choose to inhabit the Christian story because it has shaped us and it offers us a community that inspires us, challenges us and calls us to account. A community that calls us to live in resistance to the powers that be. If we choose it, this story guides and shapes and challenges our contemporary life. But we must engage with the story

² “All are welcome.” Words and music by Marty Haugen. Published by GIA Publications, Inc.

³ Brown, Delwin. *What Does a Progressive Christian Believe? A Guide for the Searching, the Open, and the Curious.* (New York: Seabury Books, 2008), 4f.

in a critical way. Our lives and our justice commitments worked out in community, also test the story and determine which elements of it are life-giving and which are life-denying.

Modern/postmodern

We are always located in our history and it is very easy to be seduced by the times in which we live. Protestant liberalism internalised the values of the 18th century enlightenment with too little criticism. The Enlightenment affirmed the rights of individual against oppressive societies. Contemporary progressive Christians continue to affirm this. As a woman, I wouldn't be able to vote, let alone be a minister if it wasn't for the Enlightenment. The decriminalisation of homosexuality, the assurance of human rights for people of minority sexualities, and legal recognition of gay relationships through civil unions are all incredibly important to me and to my family.

But the Enlightenment understood societies only as aggregations of autonomous individuals and lost the historic human wisdom contained in the biblical tradition and in other religious traditions that emphasised our collectivity and our connectedness. Margaret Thatcher once famously said that there is no such thing as society. The political and economic systems that we have today continue to promulgate extreme individualism. But as community life has been eroded, we have to come to appreciate its value and regret our acquiescence to its erosion. The church, at its best, is not an aggregation of individuals. As Paul wrote, we are all part of one another, one body, dependent on one another for life. In a time of ecological crisis, individualism is killing us, our children and our planet.

Another way in which liberal Protestantism idealised the enlightenment was the understanding of human norms in terms of the experience of the Christian, European male. Enlightenment Christianity did not value the diversity of patterns of human social organisation, arrogantly assuming that all cultures should emulate western models. Enlightenment Christianity enforced that belief system with the missionary and the coloniser working hand in hand. The consequences of this imperialism continue today in global economic systems that are destroying the poor of the earth and the earth itself.

The Enlightenment heritage has been particularly harmful in its anthropocentrism and its dualistic understanding of humanity and nature, contributing as it has done to the global ecological crisis. This heritage of anthropocentrism and dualism has also shaped the social sciences and it has been deeply internalised in the liberal Protestant tradition.

Liberals were seduced by modernism and its accompanying belief that reason will reveal truth unconstrained by history. Progressives are also in danger of being seduced by this way of thinking. We may be tempted to believe that is we just have the right new thoughts and construct right new theories, then we will have arrived.

The limits of modernism have begun to be clear, especially its positing of universal theories and claims for universal truth. These have been brought into question by a postmodern era that relishes complexity, fluidity and plurality. Postmodernism it offers some useful correctives.

Firstly, postmodernism challenges the assumption that there exist universal principles, which can be discovered, and which reveal the true features of reality. Secondly, postmodernism challenges the existence of pure reason or objectivity that enables scholarship to make objective, neutral judgments independent of the historical context of the scholar. Thirdly, postmodernism denies that human beings are rational, independent subjects, capable of self-knowledge and

autonomous action and judgment. Finally, unlike modernism, postmodernism has little faith in the ability of reason to bring about progress and the perfectibility of society.

All of these undermine the assumptions of liberal Christianity.

The British postmodern theorist, Zygmunt Bauman, illustrates postmodern life in the following way:

“one can think of postmodern life as one lived in a city in which traffic is daily re-routed and street names are liable to be changed without notice... In such a city one is well advised not to plan long and time consuming journeys. The shorter the trip, the greater the chance of completing it...”⁴

Now is not the season for a new grand plan, but rather for a micro-politics that is experimental and responsive and tentative. It is not a season for systems but for stories.

The demythologising of liberal Christianity was a crucial process but liberals sometimes forgot that humans are story-shaped beings. Liberal Christianity was reduced to shared values and common beliefs indistinguishable from those of common morality. But it forgot the past: the inheritance of story and the practices of faith. Liberalism often neglected to “do theology” with the resources of faith (Christian understandings of creation, humanity, community, freedom, justice, hope, reconciliation, brokenness, healing, and the meaning of life). Likewise liberalism often neglected to observe the practices of faith that anchor our lives in the story (eg. contemplation, hospitality, discernment, pilgrimage, ritual, creating community, keeping Sabbath, and forgiveness).

Liberalism, liberation and social justice

Liberalism also had/has limits in its social justice programming. The provision of social services and assistance to the poor and the vulnerable seldom included social analysis of the causes of inequality and injustice. It failed to respond to the radical nature call to economic and social justice that is central to the Hebrew and Christian traditions.

My particular passion is that progressive Christianity take seriously liberation theology, with its passion for justice and peace, for transformation. As Gretta Vosper said in her lecture, it’s not just about what we think or believe. It’s about how we live. Liberation theology unmasked the supposed neutrality and objectivity of western systematic theology, revealing the ways that it served the powers that be and the social status quo.

Mainstream theologians believed that the texts and doctrines of the faith should be starting point of theology. Liberation theology begins with conscientization, experiencing the contradictions between the way things are and the dominant ideology. It begins with our experience of struggle for justice in the world. It involves putting my personal “story” in context with many stories of a group and illuminates public, structural dynamic. There is suspicion of ideology and the way reality is described, and this enables naming of the sources of oppression. Liberation theology insists not on the application of timeless theological truth but rather on historical socio-ethical analysis.

Liberation theology is by its nature ethical. Having unmasked the roots and dynamics of oppression, we clarify our solidarities and loyalties based on our prior commitments to the poor and the marginalised, in order to strategize effectively for actions of solidarity and resistance.

Liberation theology also includes celebration, despite the threats and dangers of the struggle. It is not utopian, but understands the struggle as a way of living. Where there is resistance to evil, there is joy. It is connected to liturgy that ritualises and celebrates our sources of hope including that which is good and redemptive in our tradition.

⁴ Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*. (Polity, 2000)

Without this celebration and unless there is dancing at the revolution, we will become depressed, cynical and burned out.

In progressive faith communities, our passion for justice is nourished, grounded and kept accountable as we engage together in spiritual practice, in what has traditionally been called worship. Liberal worship did not make these connections. Progressive ritualizing, unless it is focused on the community and justice, may not do this either. And it needs to. The prophetic and the poetic, the search for justice and the ritualisation of hope are at the core of the progressive religious project.

Having grown up in a somewhat sterile liberal protestant church, it seems me that progressive Christianity adds to the intellectual rigour of that tradition, to the treasures of late nineteenth and twentieth century theological scholarship, a deep openness to emotion and to imagination. And one of the ways that this may be expressed is in creative ritual. And that this in turn, energises and nourishes our struggles for justice.

We are gifted in Aoteaora New Zealand with some wonderful contemporary hymn writers who understand this connection between inspiration and actions for justice, people such as Shirley Murray, Bill Wallace and Colin Gibson.

* *These Hills Where the Hawk Flies Lonely* by Colin Gibson.

These hills where the hawk flies lonely,
beaches where the long surf rolls,
mountains where the snows meet heaven,
these are our care.

Pastures where the sheep graze calmly,
orchards where the apples grow,
gardens where the roses cluster,
these are our prayer.

Forests where the tree ferns tower,
rivers running strong and clear,
oceans where the great whales wander,
these are our care,
Race meeting race as equals,
justice for age old wrong,
worth for ev'ry man and woman,
these are our prayer.

Cities where the young roam restless,
lives brought to deep despair,
homeless and powerless people,
these are our care.
Places where the Word is spoken,
hands held in serving love,
faiths of our many cultures,
these are our prayer.

All that the old world gave us,
all that the new world brings,
language, ideas and customs,
these are our care,
Life finding joy and value,
faith seeking truth and light,
God heard and seen in all things,
this be our prayer.⁵

Return to theology

Progressive Christianity reorients us from sociology and philosophy of religion back to the task of doing theology and practising liturgy. Theology is exploring what is believed and why. It involves the process of making those beliefs clear to test them and to identify reasons for holding them. As a liberation ethicist, I believe that the way our beliefs must be tested is by their ethical implications and outcomes. Shaped by the Christian story, we ask of belief: Is it life-giving? Is it justice-making? Does it create right-relationship?

One of the questions that liberation theologians ask is who is participating in the conversation and who is excluded or missing? It is my belief that progressive Christians would do well not to forget the insights of liberation theologians: queers, feminists, people of colour, poor people. Not every progressive faith community will contain within it the diversity of the human family, but we can in our liturgy and our pursuit of social justice, pay attention to the voices of the dispossessed and marginalised. Those who are on what Black liberation theologian James Cone has called “the underside of history” may save us from our white, middle class, heterosexual, western assumptions, our very limited view of the world that is shaped by so much privilege.

Jesus, Justice and Community

I do not believe that we can “extract” the essential Jesus, know his wisdom, and forget about the stories told about him and by him, and about the community of faith, which has borne those stories. Clearly, Jesus no longer works as the divine Son of a theistic God. But I also question the claim that he is best understood as a wisdom teacher. Jesus belongs with his stories and with his people. I think this is particularly an issue for white, western, middle-class privileged people. If we try to take Jesus out of his political and religious context and apply “the golden rule” to our comfortable lives, we will neglect to notice that for Jesus’s people, the application of compassion came with the pursuit of justice that sought to turn the established order upside down.

The pursuit of social justice requires action that is reflected on theologically. This includes, but is not limited to, an ongoing conversation with the biblical tradition. The concepts of covenant, hospitality, and justice lie at the heart of the biblical witness and challenge the dominant

⁵ Colin Gibson, “These Hills” in *Faith Forever Singing*. NZ Hymnbook Trust. 2000.

social attitudes of power, responsibility and individual freedom. Of course there is much in the biblical tradition, which is rendered useless for us by its violence, its sexism, its homophobia. But there are riches in an understanding of the earth as creation, not in the sense of being made in seven days, but in the sense of earth as the sacred source of life, which must not be commoditised, from which the poor must not be dispossessed.

It is in research about the politics of Jesus that progressive Christians are most indebted to recent Jesus scholarship. One of the features marking the renaissance of Jesus studies is the uncovering of the social world of Jesus. Because meanings are embedded in a social world, if we are to understand and appreciate what Jesus said and did, his message and activity need to be located in his social world.

For example, Richard Horsley portrays Jesus at work in the renewal of community life at the local level, as part of his strategy for a non-violent social revolution. To this task, Horsley brings detailed knowledge about the geography and politics of Galilee, especially the imperial situation of Roman occupied Palestine.⁶ John Dominic Crossan uncovers the revolutionary nature of Jesus' programme and sets it in its contemporary background of a system of downward economic mobility where the crippling system of taxation and agrarian reforms caused peasants to lose their lands, to work as day labourers, always at risk of slipping into further vulnerability as expendables and beggars, and therefore excluded from the social life of the community as impure.⁷

It is in the context of a purity system that created an order with sharp social boundaries that we can see the socio-political significance of the ministry of Jesus. In his message and activity we see an alternative social vision: a community not shaped by the ethos and politics of purity, but by the ethos and politics of compassion. It was an inclusive movement, negating the boundaries of the purity system. It included women, untouchables, the poor, the maimed, and the marginalized, as well as some privileged people who found the vision attractive.

Favouring compassion over purity, healing by social inclusion, and the practice of open table are some of the many justice practices of Jesus and his community which must shape progressive faith communities in the 21st century. They continue to inspire us today as we shape our liturgy and orient the life of the community toward the marginalised and the vulnerable.

Having said all these good things about Jesus, and as much as the stories about Jesus continue to shape and illuminate progressive faith, I also believe that Jesus needs to be de-centered from his heroic lone-ranger status. Jesus lived and taught not as an individual wise man but as a person shaped by and shaping community. As we create something new out of the post-enlightenment appreciation of community and relationship, we can be inspired by Jesus as one in relationship. As central as Jesus is to the progressive Christian vision, he is part of a movement. He travelled with friends, women and men, he shared food with friends and strangers. The tradition tells of negotiated understandings, sometimes heated negotiations, around how the nature of the sacred and about the meaning of what they were doing together in that community and in the communities of the early church.

The Bible is one of our resources for our reflection, but it is not the only one. The literature, art and poetry of the centuries are our to engagement. And there are resources in contemporary culture in music and film. If I were to add to the canon of sacred texts, at the top of my list would be Alice Walker's book *The Color Purple*.⁸ The two characters in the clip I'm going

⁶ Richard Horsley, *Galilee: History, Politics, People*. (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1995).

⁷ John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant*. (Harper One, 1993).

⁸ Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*. (Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1982)

to play are Celie, a woman oppressed by race and gender and patriarchal religion, and Shug, a Christ character who empowers Celie to find liberation and joy. They talk about sex and God.

Celie's story is told through letters addressed to God and to her sister Nettie. Her brutal husband, Mr, has hidden years of letters from Nettie who before Shug, was the only one who loved her. Her anger at discovering the letters makes her stop writing to a God that does not answer: "I don't write to God no more, I write to you," she says. "You" is a real person, who will answer her. The God she was writing to before was a man, and a white man, she realizes suddenly. He was the oppressor: "The God I been praying and writing to is a man. And act just like all the other mens I know. Trifling, forgetful and lowdown."

Yet, Celie does not abandon the idea of God. She needs to replace it by a less oppressive figure. The new God, provided by Shug, is completely different from the "white old man": "God ain't a he or a she, but a It.

Shug says: "I believe God is everything. Everything that is or ever was or ever will be. One day when I was sitting quiet and feeling like a motherless child, which I was, it come to me: that feeling of being part of everything, not separate at all. I knew that if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed. I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it." It is a story that epitomizes the connection between justice and joy.

Spirituality, Practice and Community

One of the key marks of the progressive Christian movement compared to the old mainline liberal traditions is the nurturing of spirituality in the community of justice-seeking friends. In the liberal tradition, experience and emotion in worship, were downplayed. I think the lack of attention to these is what drew me as a young person to the charismatic movement.

Now in progressive Christianity we see a spiritual vitality and expressiveness. Progressive Christians are not just social activists and intellectuals. They are expressing themselves spiritually in meditation, prayer, artistic forms, and lively worship. Worship that is participatory, expressive, image-based and connecting.

If we attempt to extract the essence of Jesus' teaching and continue to live as atomized individuals separate from real community, we are not able to be true to Jesus' vision. We need to be called back, again and again, by the stories of the tradition which are from a culture and time so different to our own that they can in a strange way cast new light on our current dilemmas. Not because the ancient stories contain commandments about how we are to live, or even answers to our questions. The stories of those who have gone before us are bread for the journey as we move on in our time and place.

They are stories about living well. Love one another; love your neighbour; forgive one another; be as compassionate as the sacred is compassionate; seek the new communion/community that Jesus called the kingdom of God; do unto others as you would have them do unto you; put down the sword and Love your enemies. If we want to be progressive Christians, this is the mission for the rest of our lives.

This is the task of our faith, and just peace is at the heart of it.

Real religion is not about transcending life; real religion is about our transforming life. The gospel of the transfiguration calls us become enlightened, to understand the nature of religion itself; because the so-called rational has failed.

Religion calls us to works of mercy, to naming the powers, to the doing of miracles for those in need (miracles that are not supernatural but profoundly natural as we touch our strength), to the love and justice of God. That is what religion is really about, changing ourselves so we can change the world.

The role of religion is to bring us to an awareness of life. The role of religion is to transform the world, to come to see the world as it might be if the world was oriented toward Celie's God (that "it" energy of light and life, and justice and joy). What will be changed, will be changed through us. The question for progressive Christianity, is how in liturgy and liberation, in the poetic and the prophetic, can we create the communities of justice-seeking friends who will bring it to be.

There are many ways of systematising our search for meaning. If we only use our heads, we can make it more complicated than it needs to be. If we also use our senses and our hearts we may participate in the dream of justice, justice and joy.