CROSS Purposes

Issue 14

July 2008

Areopagus Hill

in service

through a glass

PETER BLACKWOOD

and others consider
"What is the church to preach?"
in response to this issue's Progressive Christian Movement contributions

KATHARINE MASSAM

KIM GROOT

CROSS Purposes

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A forum for theological dialogue

AS REMARKED in a previous editorial, "change" is the theme of the age, and it shows no signs of going away. Neither then, it seems, does the church's need to deal with change—indeed, sometimes, its fixation on doing so.

This month our main article comes from David Merritt, secretary of Victoria's Progressive Christian Network. Merritt reflects on the difference our changing knowledge of the world might make for our re-appropriation, or rejection, of traditional dimensions of Christian faith. He proposes adopting change as a condition of believing: recognizing that "beliefs are always partial and temporary and to be changed as our knowledge and experience and circumstances change". Specific examples of the doctrines of sin and salvation, and the church's traditional belief that "no one comes to the Father but by [Jesus]", are identified as being out of

In this Issue

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step with our changed perception of religious truth and human being. Stripped of such strange and unbelievable encumbrances, Jesus is freed to become an inspiration and invitation to deeper living.

Responding to Brad Harris' piece in our last issue, Adrian Pyle of the VicTas Synod's Mission Participation Resource Unit takes up the challenge of evangelism. Interest in evangelism is growing in churches like the UCA, not least because of another dimension of change in our churches' lives—the continuing decline in membership and the obvious conclusion that this can only be turned around by "evangelism". Pyle suggests, however, that the appropriate response to this crisis is not frenetic evangelistic activity but a development of practices in personal relationships, prayer, education and stewardship which themselves are or create good news, rather than activities seeking simply to *deliver* it.

The reflection on ministry and mission in this issue is from John H. Smith of North Melbourne's Congregation of Mark the Evangelist. Somewhat in contradiction of David Merritt's conclusions, Smith draws on historical examples to propose that the work of the church in times of upheaval is to remember its story, for the church's own well-being and for the well-being of all around it. Remembering and re-enacting this story, the church may become "a place of peace in a sea of darkness".

Change in the relationship between the church and the nation has led to the controversies which have a couple of times hit the media concerning come ministers' refusal to allow coffins to be draped with na-

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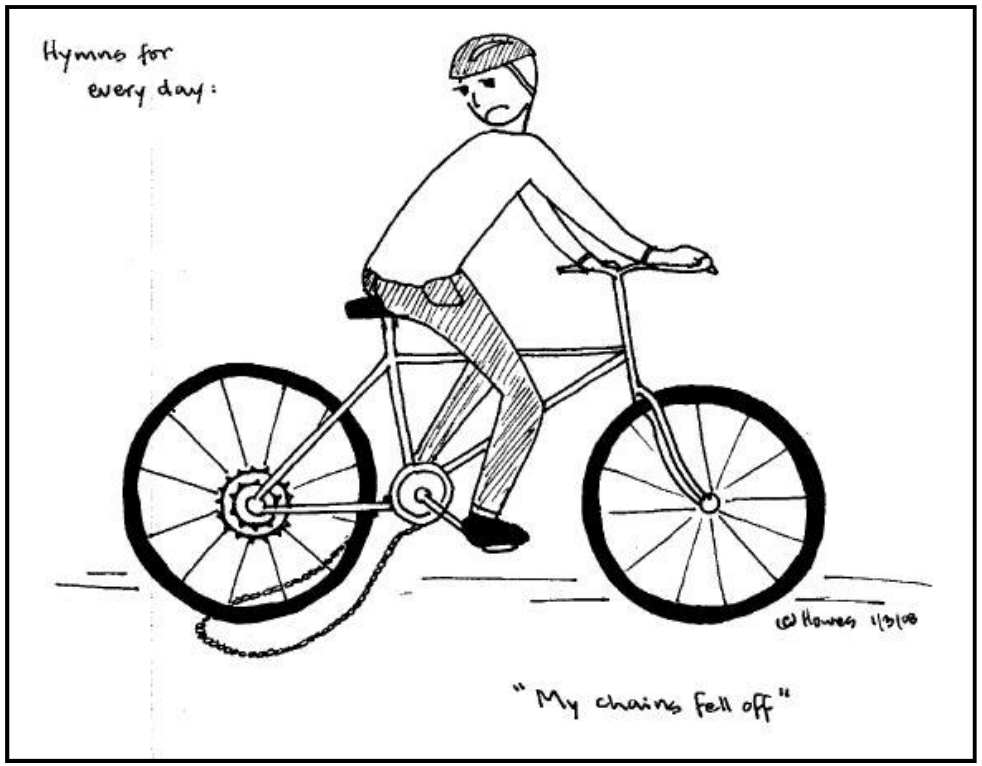
reflections of the early Jesus movement.

What I have written in this article may not seem like the usual reflections on the subject of evangelism. After all isn't evangelism something you "do" to spread the message? Shouldn't we get cracking with it? But if we are going to attempt to spread the Good News, then I first want to see us authentically "being an experience of Good News." It's time to re-learn the tradition.

ADRIAN PYLE is Director of the Synod's Mission Participation Resource Unit.



to evangelism—being an experience of "Good News"—will require such creativity in our practices. Here are some simple suggestions for where to start:

Knowing ourselves and one another more deeply: If you are currently a member of a Christian faith community, what is the depth of post-worship-service conversation? From the conversations I've heard I suspect we need to re-teach the art of conversation. Think of it as a starting point for learning the practice of spiritual friendship. If I can't create the place to ask "but how are you really", I can't begin to create the type of community where we help each other with ego moderation—a community of evangelists.

Making space: Soren Kierkegaard famously noted that the true person of prayer "simply attends".* Like or loathe such a provocation, it is true that ninety percent of corporate prayer I see offered in UCA settings "speaks to God". If there are forty different prayer instances at a yearly Synod meeting might they offer forty different ways of being transparent to God? Might not different people appreciate different ways of placing themselves in the humility of the divine dance?

Connecting the Christian story to our lives: Our primary practice vehicle in this area is the offering of a sermon. I am not anti-sermon. Front-and centre delivery has its uses. Yet I estimate that about 1000 person hours a week is expended on sermon preparation within the Uniting Church in Victoria and Tasmania alone at a cost of approximately $38,000 per week. At the same time educators tell us that extended verbal presentation is one of the least successful engagement techniques. What are the new ways of merging scholarly reflection with input of personal experience from greater numbers of people, for the ebb (ego advancement) and flow (ego moderation) that is evident in scripture is our story too!

Acting justly in the world: The Uniting Church's substantive work in social justice is essential and the people of the Uniting Church are held up as "generous" and "concerned." If I offer a comment in this area I am most often confronted with "what more can we do?" Yet I am not looking for more—"more concern" or "more charity". What I want us to do is rediscover the practice of stewardship. Our UCA squabbles about "holding on" to material possessions suggest we need to relearn this practice. True custodianship is the goal—the sense of "take what you really need and pass on the rest", as is so evident in the (ego moderating)

Prayer: Whatever Comes to Thee, Papirer, X, A, 229.

tional flags during funeral services. Ross Carter responds to Ken Dempsey's article in our last issue, "Profaning the Sacred Soldier", which had argued for a more accommodating stance. Carter notes that the discussion about flags and funerals has probably reached an impasse, but nevertheless restates the critical point held by those who would "ban" the flag: such objects as flags and other personal memorabilia are to be understood as indicators of penultimate aspects of our identity when considered in relation to the declaration of the deceased's deepest identity, as a justified sinner. In that change which is death, the constant remains the Christ in whom we live and die, justified, and not those things which other markers would point to.

Caro Field, a Uniting Church ministry candidate, provides the sermon in this issue. Reflecting in part a theme from Adrian Pyle's article, change does not so much precipitate this piece as seek to arise from it: a change of heart, where it is needed, in our use of the resources we have at our disposal, for the benefit of those who have less than they need.

Finally, we are pleased to be able to include our first "letters to the editor" for some time! Your feedback and contributions to the Letters section of *CP* is encouraged. We hope you continue to find *CP* a stimulating read!

Letters

Whose Sacredness?

Ken Dempsey's careful attention to the events in Essendon concerning the flag and funeral, as far as I recall, is a fair recollection of those events, including the heat of those who objected to my actions. As Ken makes clear, the funeral was never refused. The question was whether both the display of the Australian flag and *the RSL rite would be part of the church's funeral service. The placing of the RSL rite in the church is, of course, a recent phenomenon, as it would previously have taken place at the graveside or in the crematorium.*

I appreciated Ken Dempsey's exploration of the Australian soldier and the draped flag as "sacred". I believe he has rightly identified a key element in the place of the "digger". Strangely, now, perhaps, as we are dealing with the deaths of those who have grown old. However, I believe he has misread the issue when he argues that my actions were designed to protect the church's sacred *space. If I were inclined to use that sort of language, it could be said, at best, that here is a clash of two "sacreds".*

Let me say clearly: this is not about creating a sacred space "in the church building". *I do not accept that there are sacred and secular/profane spaces. Bonhoeffer taught me that. What I do think, however, (as Ken seems to accept, too) is that there are contending "stories" or narratives which claim to articulate the reality of human life. This will be acted out in ceremony and symbol. In refusing to import the national flag into a Christian ceremony, I was distinguishing the symbols which may be displayed and the story which may rightly be told at the point of death—concerning the nature and purpose of life.*

Clearly, the vehemence with which this was received testifies to the power of the "digger" myth and the character of that "sacrifice". That the church has the right to tell another story is, of course, contended. This has been so from the beginning—over against Pax Romana *and the claim of the Empire over a citizen's whole life. It is also contested in the modern state, where nation claims the same "right" to ask soldiers to "sacrifice" themselves. (The German Confessing Church struggle remains a touch point in my attempts to be clear about these issues: that struggle was initiated by the Nazi demand that the Swastika flag and the picture of the Führer be displayed in the church, including in worship the "Heil Hitler". This was not about sacred versus profane space; it was the church's confession of another as Lord.)*

In the disputed funeral these matters were implicit. In fact, I would have allowed the flag to be folded, held, &c., and then, following the church service, displayed for the RSL rite in the forecourt of the church. Whatever ministers and congregations decide to do around funerals, I am sure this dispute takes us to the heart of the church's response to the nations' way of war. My own hope is that eventually we will disentangle the story of the nation from the story of the church and, acknowledging the pain and grief and waste, will be able to apply the sacrifice of Jesus Christ to the life which includes brutal acts of war, with the lifetime of guilt and trauma it visited on the soldier and the family. Ken Dempsey rightly says this is an incarnational *matter. I add, however, that it is (primarily) an* eschatological *matter, in which the present church confesses the crucified Lord to whom, finally, all will "bend the knee" (Philippians 2:11), knowing it makes that confession in company with the great crowd of martyrs (Book of Revelation) who bear witness by their own martyred—and non-violent—deaths, to the "slaughtered Lamb"—not the beast of war—who sits on the Throne of God.*

I thank Ken for his careful reading of the Essendon event and, more, for his personal interest in and care of

the role of "that nobody". She was so fundamentally humble that she seemed always to be getting herself out of the way so that you saw her "through God's lens" or "on the other side of God" or "transparent to the light of God" or as "God acting through". To experience her was to experience Christian Good News—to experience pure evangelism. This article is about our opportunity to "experience evangelism" within the Uniting Church in Australia.

Brad Harris's article explores the concept of evangelism and some of the difficulties we (the UCA) appear to have with the concept. As always it is an insightful and provocative piece of writing by Brad. However, in the call to action on evangelism I notice that there is typically a frenetic sense evident: "It needs action"; "What do we do?"; "Five years to respond". I want to relieve myself of such a frenetic burden, so this article is less about avoiding a perceived institutional meltdown and more about being authentic transmitters of God's light.

To further my argument (and because we know evangelism and "Good News" are etymologically the same) it will help to offer a definition of "Good News". There is neither scope nor space to develop this definition or the support for it, so I offer it with some frustration that may be shared by the reader. Nevertheless, I see "Good News" as the realization—made known to Christians in the event of Jesus of Nazareth's life and death and carried on from that point through the body of Christ—that the human urging towards separateness and selfhood (necessary, in part for evolution but ultimately leading to spiritual and physical death) can be moderated through participation in a divine dance towards wholeness. Simple, more psychological language might be that it is possible, by moderating the ego, to enter a spiritual realm.

Like all concepts that are difficult to master, however, such moderation requires practice—just as my friend practised individually and in community. Whilst the subject of Christian practices is a large one, here I only want to start the conversation with a few basic points about Christian practices. And I want to suggest that to be authentic ego moderators (or evangelists) we need some "fluid re-traditioning" of the practices. What fluid re-traditioning realizes is that tradition is a "why" word and not a "how" word. This means that tradition is about a practical effect (why we do it) rather than a particular way of producing that effect (how we do it). Knowing this opens great scope for creativity that can be applied to our practised traditions. Reshaping our approach

Practice Makes Whole

a response to Brad Harris

Adrian Pyle

I RECENTLY EXPERIENCED the funeral of my longest lived friend. We shared many things including a Christian faith and the day of our birth—even though our birth years were at opposite ends of the twentieth century. But equally at "different ends" were some of our core understandings of the Christian faith as well. If labels were appropriate I might have called her faith "rigid". Her rejoinder might have been that mine was "loose". But for all of the perceived truth in such labels it was impossible to have an argument about faith understanding with my friend. I don't mean that "she was a dear, sweet old lady and you didn't want to argue with her". I mean that something in her told you—right at the point of engagement—that she understood that surface understandings and human arguments weren't, ultimately, what faith was all about. It was an amazing paradox to see someone so deeply convinced about their surface level understandings and yet equally convinced that there was something deeper—something more important.

According to one of her eulogists, my friend thought she was not much good at "spreading her faith." Now the faith sharing she wasn't good at was the sharing of strictures, prescriptions, checklists and definitives of the surface level. Yet she *was* expert at sharing how her radical (that is, deep-rooted) trust in God led her beyond her own agenda—led her to be an agent of hospitality to families on post-war farms across the Mallee; led her to engage faithfully in prayer as a connection to God; led her to use the Bible as a guidebook to personal humility; and led her to put aside a comfortable eastern Melbourne lifestyle to practice midwifery in Papua New Guinea.

There is a Sufi parable about a banquet where the king is yet to take his place at the table. A dishevelled man walks in to the banquet hall and takes a place in the king's seat. The prime minister, incensed, asks who the dishevelled man thinks he is. To questions of whether he is a cabinet minister or king the man says "No. Higher."

"Are you then God?" asks the prime minister.

"No. Higher", says the man.

"That is impossible", says the prime minister, "nobody is higher than God".

"That nobody", says the man, "is me".

My friend seemed also to take

me in this conversation. While there may be points of difference, we are agreed that, in a culture that has few opportunities to hear of it, and the death of a loved member of the family is reason to make contact with the church, the task before us is to declare the good news of God's grace.

Wes Campbell

Radical Prophecy

*Peter Sellick's piece on management in the church (*CP *12) resonates with those of us in the laity exposed to the many passing fads of management in businesses, agencies and universities.*

But I was left uneasy by Peter's analysis of "liberal protestantism" and his advocacy of "radical orthodoxy". The quest for truth seemed to be less than central in his analysis. I think the truth dimension is at the root of problems for both "liberal protestantism" and "radical orthodoxy", despite Pilate's seemingly dismissive question to Jesus.

Critical enquiry into the nature of scripture and our traditions has been a long quest for truth in religion. But it has modified faith in the immediacy of divine intervention. As a consequence mainline churches seem to have turned their efforts to achieving the kingdom of God here and now, the "social gospel".

Unfortunately the critical thinking out of the academy that underpins this shift has been judged to be too radical and disturbing to unleash on an unsuspecting laity. So benign and comforting (and even throw-back) preaching becomes the norm, those in the pews being urged to give themselves to the social gospel, because "that's what Jesus wants". Small wonder there is little taste for intensive study of the bible or theology among the laity of liberal churches. The members have not been told how exciting and disturbing that can be. And when occasionally they are, they more often than not shun the messengers. We have an intellectual and theological disconnection over the truth dimension!

Another outworking of pursuing this "social gospel" has been that the wider community now looks on the church as a pale reflection of secular agencies and do-good NGOs. Small wonder again that the laity's belief is confused and weakened at its foundations. Small wonder that the liberal social gospel has little popular appeal in 2008.

Peter suggests that continuing mainline Christians will not be at ease in their religious life among evangelicals/fundamentalists or the Pentecostals, however favourably God smiles on growth in those parts of the vineyard. The former are rigorously disciplined in "Bible" and preach a neat doctrinal package with

reassuring and clear-cut answers for the anxious. But they rely on scholarship that is distinctly blinkered, for all its trappings of learning. The latter run primarily on the adrenalin of full-bodied worship and heightened emotion coupled with a '"success" gospel. Those seem to be the facts, to whatever theological origins we may attribute them.

Peter advocates an alternative way that he calls "radical orthodoxy", citing Rowan Williams approvingly. He sees a long road ahead before there is any turning, with further decline to be endured in patience and faithfulness, all in God's good time.

But the truth dimension surely poses a serious disconnection for this model too? By definition orthodoxy holds to set propositions and practices, the traditional way to "truth". The modern, radical approach to "truth" puts all propositions and practices to the test—introducing real tension into belief.

Another model worth considering may be "radical prophecy", coupled with a "social gospel" and drawing on both the Hebrew and Christian biblical traditions. Proponents such as Walter Brueggemann, Sally McFague, Thomas Berry and Jim Wallis in the North American scene come to mind as offering several possible approaches for emergent radical prophecy. But this does not make for "comfortable church". Either way, through orthodoxy or prophecy, radicalization does not promise wide popular appeal or crowded pews.

Whatever the road ahead, it seems likely that God is going to give us a rough ride. So we should buckle up or get out. Unfortunately we will probably do the typical Aussie thing and stay in the parking lot.

John Court

Watering the Seed

An Irish joke: A man buys a house with a large garden untended for years. A year later the village priest pauses to admire the now showpiece garden:

"Surely Paddy, you and God have transformed this garden in to a wonderful testimony to the beauty of his creation."

"'Me and God!' Pardon me; don't you remember this garden when God had charge of it all by himself!"

I commend Peter Sellick for his article and I agree with most of his analysis but I wish to comment on his conclusion that "we must give up the idea that we are responsible for the future of the church". Did the discoverers and colonizers of the New World come upon a single extant Christian? No, God works through people. "Salvation comes from the Jews." God chose a particular people and established the first covenant. Later, he sent his son who issued the

Because our history is redeemed in Christ to whom I live, and to whom she has died, I can treasure that history. Somehow letting go of what was hurtful, and being forgiven for doing that which was hurtful, allows me to realistically treasure the memory of our lives together as truly human.

I indicated earlier that this identification of the dead person and the congregation in the funeral liturgy convince me that objects that were significant for the deceased, and also for her family, should not be placed on the coffin. I think this because it seems to me that the identification of the dead person and the congregation by the placing of the symbols of the church on the coffin, and the words that are uttered, and the rest of the liturgy, set forth the true glory of the fullness of the dead person's life in Christ. These symbols are comprehensive for they encompass the whole of the deceased person's life; that is her past, present, and future. The special objects which are of great importance to the family, and which hitherto have totally identified the deceased, now have, in this sense of the whole of life, a penultimate identifying role. This does not mean that these objects are treated lightly, but simply that that they are understood as penultimate in relation to the declaration of the ultimate identification of the deceased as justified sinner.

Dr. Dempsey raises the question as to whether grieving families can understand what is set forth here about their identity and the identity of their loved one if we do not allow them to place symbols important to them where they wish. I would hope that a conversation about the liturgy and its significance would occur when the minister meets with the family prior to the service. It is at this meeting where the minister explains the movement of the funeral liturgy and the place of each part and thus prepares for their hearing of the gospel.

Finally Dr. Dempsey might be right when he states that "funerals in the Uniting Church will always remain contested events". One may judge this to be fortunate or not depending on one's perspective: I suppose that what I have written here can be characterized as just another "competing theological perspective", and probably will be so classified. Nor, if history teaches us anything, need Ken Dempsey be afraid that the Uniting Church will make a doctrinal decision about these issues. But it is good that we both want the gospel to be heard and lived in!

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about the dead person's identity and, for that matter, the identity of the mourners and the minister conducting the funeral.

The American Presbyterian Church's *Book of Common Worship* gives its funeral service the title, "A Service of Witness to the Resurrection". This is important because it signals that we are not, in the funeral service, thanking the deceased for producing her own life, which is the impression one sometimes gets when attending funerals. On the contrary, in my understanding, witnessing to the resurrection means drawing attention to the drama that commits God to humanity and humanity to God in the incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus. It is in this drama that the identity of God is forged, as is the identity of each person.

The funeral service is then, we might say, a declaration of an event whereby we discover and celebrate the fully formed identity of the deceased. This is to say that we discover what it is that was always fundamental and indestructible about the identity of the deceased: we discover that they were, and continue to be, the recipient of God's commitment to their life in Jesus Christ. We also discover who they shall be. Thus it is that the liturgy declares that the deceased was freely created by God, is never abandoned by God, and has always stood in relation to God. This reality is made plain when the minister, in the first acts of the funeral liturgy, publicly identifies the deceased in this way by the placing of a pall on the coffin, the lighting of the Christ candle, the sprinkling with water, the placing of the cross and the bible on the coffin.

These acts of identifying the deceased do, I think necessarily, "momentarily" bracket the "self" that is central in the memory of the person's family and friends: we might say that in the movement of the liturgy the self remembered by the mourners is displaced from the centre. But this is done in order that the full richness of the person's identity can be set forth in its bestowed fullness. All that this person was, all the precious memories of the people assembled, are now seen to be realized because of God's commitment to their life, a commitment that gave them the space and time to be who they were.

But there is more than this. The identity of the deceased and the identities of those remembering are declared novel because the deceased is remembered as someone who is forgiven, and she is mourned by those who have heard that they are also forgiven. This means that the assembly now knows themselves and the dead person eschatologically, as those touched by the wholeness that is God's future. We could say, then, that in the freedom bestowed by God's forgiveness the mourners receive their memories of the deceased anew.

great commission, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations". People are called to faith by God but the word has been heard through the medium of language and human contact, be it migration, trade, war, travel, colonization, proselytizing or simple witness.

Ministers and academic theologians may proclaim that all we need to do is to keep the faith; any activism is human arrogance seeking to supplant God as the one who calls people to faith. But do they rely on faith alone to provide their stipends or the buildings and institutions that support their humble faithfulness? No! Many churches keep going because of the activism of their members. They welcome new people and practice outreach. They spend a great deal of their own time, talents and money in getting on with the printing, cleaning, repairs, visiting, chauffeuring, cooking and fundraising work that is not theologically "pure" but is necessary to keep a faith community glued together. And they think, plan and act to keep it glued together.

Peter Sellick is right to point out that the best management techniques will not call people to faith nor fix the church. The great commission is however a strategic plan. Human beings are called to a role in building the church and to fix it, for the church is founded on human interrelationships as well as the God-human relationship. In the past God has intervened and rained manna from heaven and provided donkeys for transport. However I know of no 21st century equivalent where God provides transfers to the bank accounts of the faithful, nor minibuses to chauffeur the elderly who would not otherwise attend church.

God provides the seeds but he expects his people to plant, cultivate and water and not just devote themselves to theological purity.

Valerie Cox

A Jar of Vinegar

thoughts gratefully stimulated by Timothy Gorringe

John H. Smith

A FRIEND WORKED in one of the professions until the time the post-modern age caught up with what he was doing and he left. In a world where everything is relative and the old guideposts have been undermined the urgent question is, what is true? As new views of reality gained more control, nothing he believed in seemed to hold or make sense. But ceasing to practice his profession hasn't made him content because he still feels the world was stolen from him and there seems to be no road that makes sense, back, or forward. Even within his own frame of understanding there seems to be nothing for him to rely on or trust in as good any more. At one point in our conversation he said to me, "At least you have a God to believe in". There was a new edge to his bitterness, which made me feel sad and brought to mind an old Middle Eastern saying: "If the vinegar in the jar is too strong it damages the jar".

How can hope take root in a context where all the foundations have been undermined? In what can we trust? This is a major challenge as we negotiate the times we live in, driven as they are by a culture of cynicism with regard to the truth. It becomes hard to distinguish fact from fiction, reality from television soap. In an environment where cultural restraints are few, most people respond by doing what they like or what they think is best which generally means pleasure rules. The free market values of our time go beyond consumerism to dominate all aspects of life. It is unlikely the world can sustain what is happening, materially or spiritually, but what if anything, can the church contribute?

Timothy Gorringe suggests the church can contribute by going about its eccentric business of praising God and witnessing to a hegemony that runs counter to the imperialism of belief in market forces. This would involve restoration of a different focus for hope, which in turn may suggest new directions that would limit the surge of self-seeking by

Penultimate Identity

a response to Ken Dempsey

Ross Carter

I HAVE HAD some difficulty in making a response to Ken Dempsey's article in the March edition of *Cross Purposes* because there did not seem to be much more that could be said about the matters raised. I can make no comment about what he refers to as the "Essendon Incident", or the people named, as my only knowledge of those events were what was reported publicly at the time. Nor is there any reason to comment on Dr. Dempsey's survey, or his analysis of how "the dead" soldier came to be seen as some kind of saviour or sacred person; I don't dispute the opinions obtained by the survey or his sociological analysis of how some symbols seen as witnessing to the many lives that were sacrificed in war came, in Australia, to be regarded as morally and spiritually excellent.

Dr. Dempsey has also reminded us of the substance of the report made by a committee that was appointed to examine the issue. He has further reminded us that the report was released by the Moderator of that time as a discussion paper. He also drew the reader's attention to the Moderator's preamble which basically said that ministers did what was good in their sight. So even though I agree with the suggestions made about flags and memorabilia in the notes to the funeral service in *Uniting in Worship 2*, it seems pointless to restate the reasons advanced in support for these suggestions because they are available for anyone to read. So in view of this it might be asked whether there is anything else to be said, or that should be said.

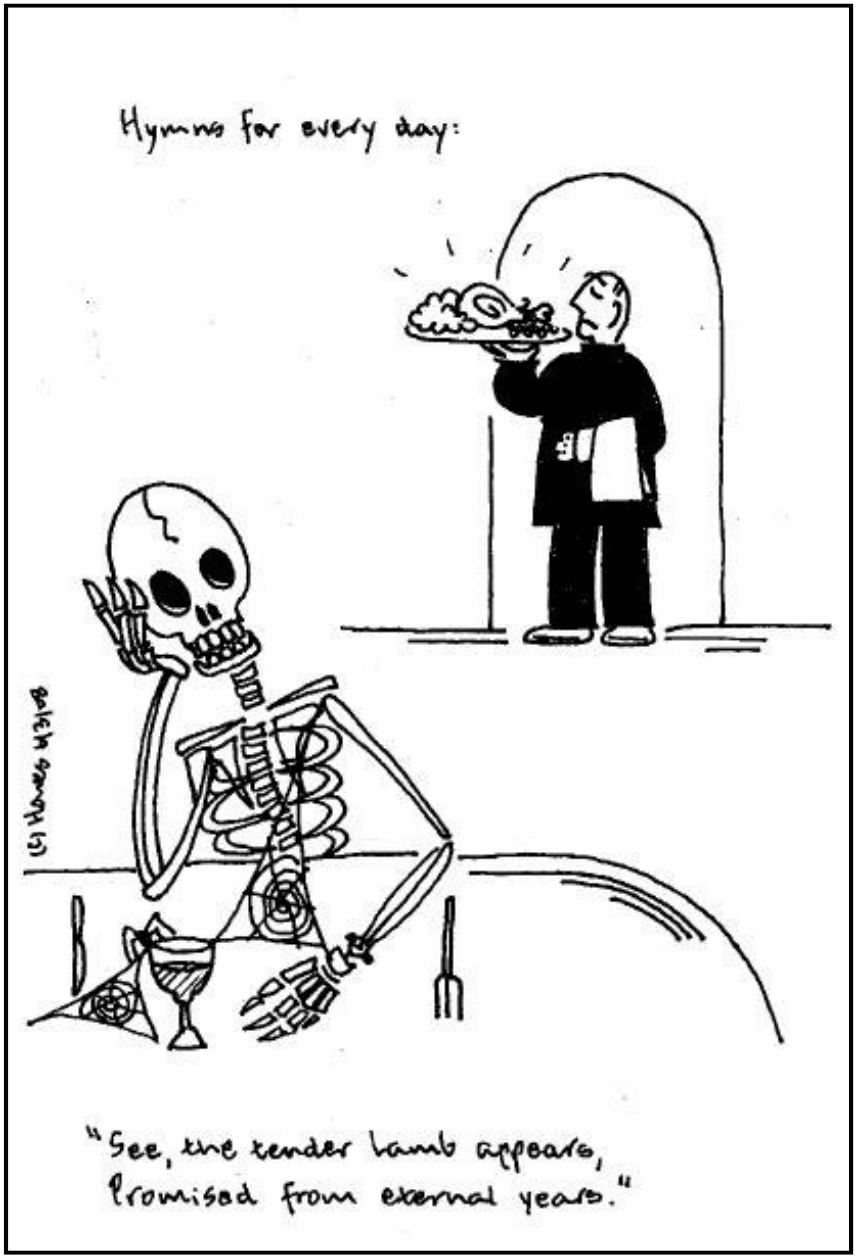
Despite my suspicion that there may not be much more mileage in the "funeral and flags" issue, Dr. Dempsey's article did cause me to ask myself whether the matters he raised would lead me to change my view about the controversy and allow objects that were significant to the dead person, including ensigns, to be placed on the coffin. I have to say that I have not changed my mind, and in stating why that is the case I can draw attention to how Dr. Dempsey's article helped me in reaffirming that view.

Dr Dempsey believes that, in the funeral service, we should respect the identity of the dead person and the deep feelings that her loved ones bring to the funeral: he makes it clear that he thinks this is very important. I agree with him on this. However we may differ as to the way we think

op. cit.

Double Take

by Hilary Howes



placing communal values to the fore. An example of the church having done this in times past was in the days of St. Benedict. Gorringe quotes John Henry Newman, who pointed out that when the structures of the old world collapsed and the ethos changed, silent men and women were seen settling in the countryside, working in the forests, building, cultivating, praying, reflecting on scripture and studiously copying manuscripts they had saved from the devastation. As they quietly preserved and lived their story, new communities grew that were free of the old excesses, and were slowly joined to other communities by roads and bridges restored after the havoc of the Vandals and Goths. There was more to it than roads and bridges. What evolved was a culture shaped by deeper spiritual and moral bonds.

The power to behave in this way came from the church's steady reflection on its guiding story in which Spirit and Flesh are not divided. This story has the power to bring forth structures based on moral and communal values that have the transformation of human life in view, rather than principles of economic ideology.

In seeking a way forward during times of cultural collapse and change, the church is blessed with a long history through which it has access to a residual form of our culture. What is residual is not necessarily out of date or untrue, and may have within it the power to help overcome our cultural memory loss. Through its liturgy and reflection, the church is capable of telling the story of our creation as a people with a purpose. This story includes everything from sin, evil and failure, to the grace which enables the overcoming of greed, violence and death. The one thing necessary is for church to be willing to be eccentric enough to continue reflecting on its story and to trust the one at the heart of its message. Despite all the changes, nothing changes the reality of the name at the centre of the church's story: "God with us". The presence of this name means there is a purpose to the human project that reaches beyond current imperialisms, and has the power to redeem us by turning us out from ourselves.

One of the saddest things about the present moment is that amongst all the voices reviling the church and pronouncing its death, its own voice can be heard. When that happens the vinegar has damaged the jar itself. It means the church has been overtaken by present forces, has become detached from its own story and is suffering from memory loss. Such a church has lost hope and no longer knows how to direct its reflection and worship.

Karl Barth said theology is a happy science. Since God-with-us is at the heart of the story we share, the bottom line for us is Life, and we know that all forms of death have

been overcome. This is the antidote to cynicism and bitterness; it means that if theology is a happy science then, in the deepest sense, the scientists are happy too. In a church like ours all members of the body of Christ are called to be theologians. They are called to reflect upon the story of God's dealings with us in the past, and praise God for the gifts of life and hope. This is the real antidote to all that undermines our true purpose, an antidote accessible through liturgy and reflection.

How can the church be at mission in our environment? The Dominican priest and author Timothy Radcliffe visited a community of Dominican sisters in Burundi, at the time of the war between the Tutsis and Hutus. The country was a dangerous, blackened ruin, but suddenly a green hill came into view on which lived a religious community of twelve women, six Tutsis and six Hutus. Together they were a vibrant sign of reconciliation. He asked how what they did was possible. Their reply: they prayed together, and listened to the news together, to accompany each other in their grief. Their community had become a place of peace in a sea of darkness, a sacramental sign of hope in a dead environment. Their life together had literally greened the countryside as others, finding it a place of peace, came to live there and plant their gardens.

As the church goes about its business in the first decades of the 21st century, it is important that it remain focussed on the heart of the story, rather than the problems of the modern era, so that it gives priority to using its resources to express in word and deed the hope of the promises in which we live. We can't predict what will become of the church. But we are inheritors of a tradition of faith and hope, which places its trust in God-with-us who accompanies us in our life, and continually creates new life where none was expected. On this basis, even though at times we find it hard to imagine how it will happen, ongoing renewal of life is truly possible and, by the grace of God we can be part of it in our time and place.

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I read the parables of Jesus with a sense of discovery—those subversive stories that instead of telling us what to believe or to do, more often end up with a question that is ethically and spiritually challenging at the heart of our lives and at the same time invites us to a new Way to live.

What is most important for a full life?

What does it mean to be neighbour?

What is the benefit to you if you gain all the things in the world and lose the richness of life?

The strange unbelievable figure described in the historic creeds of the fourth and fifth centuries or by the reformers of the seventeenth century has receded. In his place there is Jesus who is an inspiration and invitation to living—offering stimulating teaching that opens up possibilities, that invites me to deeper living.

He is indeed a window to God and a signpost to depth in life. To be a part of a community of explorers of his way is what it means for me to be Christian.

Continuing explorations

There are many aspects of faith I want to continue to explore. Because even a little knowledge of history shows that yesterday's answers have so often restricted people, I know that valuing questions and accepting uncertainty and ambiguity are essential for a growing faith.

God is the reality in whom we live and move and have our being—always present.

Our relation to God is not about persuading God to our ways but about aligning our lives with the deepest sources of meaning—about how we are connected to our environment and to all life.

Perhaps God is to the universe as mind is to brain—although both of those distinctions may turn out to be category mistakes. There are "window-opening ideas" about this from a growing stream of writers around the world.

What images and words will energize me and give wings to my faith? What could worship mean with music that touched my mind and heart but without the mind-numbing and ethically appalling hymns? Or without those prayer requests for God to do what is clearly the responsibility of humans to do—to build life-enhancing communities and grow compassion, to provide for the sick and poor and remove unjust systems that oppress other humans?

There is so much I want to explore to give expression to my reshaping Christian faith.

I am looking for an Aussie hat with a wide brim to fit this still bursting brainbox.

DAVID MERRIT is Secretary of Victoria's Progressive Christian Network.

tionally in their day inspires us to engage with God in our day.

Jesus as our window to God

My second discovery is about what Jesus means to me.

My discovery is about what others have known but the church in its common life has largely kept silent about. About the variety of ways of thinking about Jesus in the early centuries after he lived. About historical, political and philosophical factors that gave us our traditions. About early battles of ideas that shaped the New Testament and creeds but that resulted in victory not for absolute truth but for those who had clout in their day.

The New Testament literature came from different communities exploring in their thought forms and in the circumstances of their day how the new ways of looking at life that came from Jesus transformed their living. Paul and the unknown writers of Mark and Luke and Matthew and John show a great variety of ways of thinking and talking about Jesus in their day.

They are not primarily descriptions about what happened but interpretative portraits about the meaning of Jesus for them and their communities of faith—each a gateway to go through or a lens to look through. They particularly used the Hebrew scriptures to provide metaphors and images that helped them talk about the significance of Jesus, sometimes in ways that are fanciful for us but which we can decode to sense their sense of wonder.

A particular discovery is the importance for me of denying the truth of that destructive saying from the late first/early second century community that wrote about how they understood the meaning of Jesus in the Gospel of John: "No one comes to the Father but by me". (Another of the sentences that would have been better if never uttered because of the ways it has been misinterpreted.)

At this late stage in my life, I have become captivated by Jesus again because he has been freed from so much that is literally incredible.

He was an extraordinary person—one of the towering figures in human history. The one above all others in our tradition who shows us a transforming way to live. Among an oppressed people in a country occupied by a brutal army, he showed people a different way of seeing their lives and what was possible. Among people where official religion was part of a system that exploited people, he focussed on what religion was all about, on enlarging their minds and hearts to live with hope and compassion.

He so captured their minds and imaginations that he lived in their memories and in the stories of the communities who remembered him and who through him found a new vital experience of God.

Rich and Poor

a sermon preached at Brunswick UC, 30 September 2007

Luke 16:19-31; 1 Timothy 6:6-19

Caro Field

YET AGAIN, we are presented with a reading about money and wealth, and this week it's not just in the gospel reading but in the epistle too, where we find the saying, "The love of money is a root of all kinds of evil" (v. 10).

The Olive Oil project is therefore well timed,* as in the Lectionary we have themes of money, wealth, generosity and hospitality constantly before us as we consider our own stewardship of God's gifts, and contribution to God's work through this congregation. Was it planned this way? Or just that God works in mysterious ways?

So we turn to today's Gospel reading: the Parable of the rich man and Lazarus. If Luke were writing to our society, I think he would set the scene something like this:

The rich man: lives in the lap of luxury in a huge mansion, no doubt with an enormous plasma TV and in-home entertainment system. He wears designer clothes (in purple, of course!), and even has a personal gourmet chef. All in all, he is generally living a good life.

Compare this to Lazarus: living rough on the streets, probably sleeping under a newspaper, dressed in rags, and starving. In fact his malnutrition is so bad that his skin is covered with sores, due to vitamin deficiency and his body's inability to heal. From his position on the street outside the electronic security gates of Lazarus' mansion, he can smell the delicious cooking odours, wafting from the house as the gourmet chef does his thing.

But Lazarus is too weak even to get into the rubbish bin to salvage the scraps (which would make quite a feast by his standards). He is also so weak, that the wild dogs hover, licking his sores, waiting for him to die.

It's good to remember that in biblical days, dogs were wild, and not domestic pets; so unlike the situation today, where pet dogs lick their owners (which my mother would describe as a "kiss", indicating the dog likes you—can you tell I'm not much of a dog person?), the dogs licking

*The *Olive Oil* is a project run by Brunswick UC to encourage participation and stewardship in the congregation.

through a glass darkly

Lazarus' sores would be anticipating his death—licking their chops and waiting to rip him apart.

Eventually both men died, and we see a great reversal, and Lazarus ends up in a place of comfort (Abraham's bosom), and the rich man is in a place of torment (Hades).

BUT—what did they do to deserve their fate? Lazarus is not depicted as being especially virtuous—just poor (perhaps in giving him good things after his death God is responding to his poor condition during life), and likewise, the rich man is not described as being especially bad or oppressive, which is underlined by the fact we are told he was buried.

To us the readers, we see the contrast of the descriptions: Lazarus is carried off by angels to Abraham's bosom (which sounds a bit romantic, don't you think?), and the rich man is just buried. Plain, simple, and we get the sense of it being final, ordinary and nothing special.

However, in Jewish culture of that time it was shameful for a person not to be buried according to tradition, and if a person led a dishonourable life (e.g. was a criminal, social outcast, or just plain evil) this was reinforced by shame in death.

Therefore the fact that we are told the rich man was buried is significant, because this reinforces the fact that he was *not* a bad man, he was just rich, and no moral judgement is being made about him here.

Perhaps his only sin (that we can see) is being too self-absorbed to notice the starving beggar at his gate. The only explanation we have for the reversal of fortunes after death comes from the words attributed to Abraham in this narrative, who says to the rich man: "during your *lifetime*, you *received* your good things, and Lazarus, likewise evil things, but now he is comforted and you are in agony". There seems to be no rhyme or reason to why this happened.

What does this have to say to us? Should those of us who are "rich" (which relatively speaking is probably most of us) be worried?

The reading from Timothy gives us some clues. Verse 10: "The *love* of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their *eagerness* to be rich, some have *wandered away* from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains".

So it's really all about attitude and motivation; not the fact that a person *is* rich, but the focus on the desire to be rich, to the exclusion of all else is what really causes the problem.

Following this logic then, the rich man's problem was *not* that he was *rich*, but so preoccupied with his self interest, wealth and lifestyle that he wandered away from the faith. The teachings of the Old Testament are rich with exhortations for God's people to care for strangers, widows, orphans, the oppressed—in fact, all those who could not fend for themselves.

dominated much traditional thinking about Jesus. What view of God requires the killing of a son to appease offence? What would we say of the ethical quality of any father who dealt with a son or with any human being in such a way?

And how can anyone think that such a sacrifice has broken the power of evil in the light of the activities of our species in our lifetime?

There are sayings that would have been better never uttered if the speakers could know what damage to the human race they would later contribute to. Some of those sayings are in Paul's ideas about atonement for sin. "Sin came into the world through one man and death by sin" (Rom. 5:12), "We were reconciled to God by the death of his Son" (Rom. 3), "God put forward Jesus as a sacrifice of atonement", "So one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all" (Rom. 5:18).

The saviour emphasis is another part of the traditional story that for me at best is incredible and at worst ethically offensive. My thought journey away from the sin and saviour parts of our religious tradition has far reaching consequences for me.

So instead:

- I look at our incredible world that is vast beyond what we yet know and see the story of life on this planet over billions of years;
- I see our inextricable links with all life on this little planet over billions of years and the amazing story of humans developing over hundreds of thousands of years;
- Instead of the ancient sin and saviour story, I see us as a developing species with an inheritance that in some ways conflicts with what our new environment needs from us and what our new consciousness and knowledge make possible for us;
- And I want to live affirming that God is present and Jesus is one of the pathways to God—and I affirm especially that Jesus is my pathway to God.

My discoveries in progressive Christian thought are not about changing from one set of beliefs to another more authoritative set of beliefs but from being bound by the distortions of some earlier images and beliefs to seeing that beliefs are always partial and temporary and to be changed as our knowledge and experience and circumstances change.

This I affirm is biblical faith—it is doing what the various biblical writers did over a couple of thousand years in their very different times and cultures. They looked with wonder and fear and distress at the world and life around them and using their experiences of God, of what gave meaning to life, and the ideas and wisdom of their day, they created stories that lifted their minds above the day-to-day struggle for survival and gave them hope and a sense of direction to their living. What they did inspira-

The attempts to integrate these two stories of prescientific humans and contemporary science have seemed to me increasingly pointless—and my interest in those attempts is nil. But more recently I have realized that the ancient stories of origins can do enormous damage to us as humans.

Humans are depicted as somehow separate from the natural environment and masters of it to exploit it for their own purposes. Now we have to struggle to undo some of the disastrous results of that view. Further, the idea of humans beginning as perfect and human sin entering as the destroyer of God's perfect plan, as an offence against God, has contributed to appalling damage to the well being of people—to say nothing of making Christianity incredible and easy to reject.

The idea of a perfect beginning and human wilful destruction of that perfection as a sin that offends the creator is not compatible with how I understand the story of life on this planet. And the consequences of that wrong ancient story seem to me increasingly unacceptable.

The emphasis on sin warps our view of life. The idea that human life is somehow essentially contaminated so that even new-born children are tainted is a terrible basis on which to build love of our children and compassionate communities. And that view is still expressed in many baptismal services, weekly prayers of confession, bible readings and hymns.

It made it worse early in the Christian era that Augustine and much of the church linked the transmission of the taint of sin with sex. That has distorted Christians' views of sex, of pleasure, of women, and of the relation of women and men.

No-one in our day needs to be persuaded that human evil can be horrendous. In our time, in addition to widespread abuse of women and children and the exploitation of the poor around the world, we have witnessed the Turkish slaughter of over a million Armenians, Stalin's bloody purges, the Nazi slave camps and gas chambers for Jews, gypsies and homosexuals, Pol Pot's piles of skulls in Cambodia, Ruandan massacres, and on and on goes the catalogue of modern human evil.

However, at a time when evil is often structural and national and international, to personalize the story of evil is both to trivialize the issues and to distract us from the great challenges to human societies for cooperation to create health, justice and peace, and to care for the environment. It makes Christianity and the church seem irrelevant to the real world.

A further disastrous result is that "the sin story" led in the New Testament to the "saviour story" about atonement and blood sacrifice for a right relation to God that has

selves, and the rich man in the gospel reading clearly failed to do that for Lazarus.

Today so much of the world's population sits like Lazarus outside the gate. The key is *how* we respond. Are we good neighbours to them? Or do we ignore them, as the rich man ignored Lazarus?

Those of us present at the opening worship for the 2007 Synod meeting were asked, "What does it mean to be a good neighbour?", and were encouraged to consider local and global neighbours. As I discussed this with those around me, I was reminded of John Marsden's "Tomorrow" series, a series of seven novels written for young adults. The basic storyline is that a group of teens were camping in the bush one long weekend, when Australia was invaded by an unnamed power which led to a full-scale war. Because of their isolation, the teenagers escape capture, and proceed to wreak havoc for the invaders, as a home-grown resistance group. In the first book of the series, one of the teenagers asks, "Why would anyone want to invade Australia? What have we done to deserve this?" The response from one of the other characters was that maybe these people are so poor and when they see the wealth and resources we have, after a while they get sick of waiting for us to share, and in desperation take it forcibly.

Whilst John Marsden is very careful not to name the invading power, there are many countries that could quite easily fit into this story; countries to whom Australia is not a good neighbour. As Christians, how do we respond at this level? How do we tell our leaders we want them to be more generous? Maybe in the light of the upcoming election, this is a message we need to give them.

In Luke's gospel, Jesus' words about wealth are often scathing; but is it bad in itself to be comfortable, or well off? It's not all doom and gloom—the Timothy reading has some good news:

Verse 17 says, "As for them who in the present age are rich…don't be haughty/proud, don't set your hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God…be generous, ready to share". As Christians, everything we own—our very lives, belong to God. What does it mean for us to take this seriously?

When I was in my 20s, I worked for Fusion, which is a faith ministry, and its staff workers aren't paid a wage, but rely on the financial support of Christians and churches for their income. When I started working for Fusion, I had to explain to my parents (who aren't Christians) how I would be supported, and that this really would NOT be bludging off other people. Because, if Christians truly believe that everything they own comes from God and belongs to God,

it's quite legitimate to use God's money to pay people doing God's work, as I was in Fusion.

There are also many examples of Christians who give generously to all kinds of charities, causes, mission organizations; whether these organizations are overtly Christian (like Uniting Care or World Vision) or more secular (like Amnesty International), the task of caring for people, in diverse ways and through diverse means is all God's mission in the world.

I have been struck by Clare Boyd Macrae's words in the Olive Oil brochure: "When you start giving money away, it starts to lose its hold on you". Generosity has a double benefit; not only do I get to help others, but there is also a freedom and lightness for the giver—which is in itself a great blessing.

It is only when we have the kind of attitude that allows us to give generously, and hold onto our possessions lightly, that we are safe from the "root of all kinds of evils" (that is the love of money).

The challenge for all of us is to ask: Who is *my* Lazarus today? Who is the person or situation outside *my* gate, longing to be noticed?

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Alternatives to Traditional Christian Thought

Some Personal Discoveries

David Merritt

This article is an edited version of an address given as one of a panel at a meeting of the Progressive Christian Network of Victoria in September 2006. The topic was an invitation to share some personal discoveries about being Christian in light of contemporary knowledge and personal experience.

TWO OF OUR grandchildren who live in another state expect me to arrive each time with new jokes. That is a tough ask! So I have to be on the lookout. I saw one recently that I though might be about right. And then it occurred to me that it could be a symbol for much theology.

Two friends were talking. One said, "I have this wonderful new invention. It is an automatic shaver. Any man can put his head in this box and it automatically shaves him." "But", his friend said, "Everyone's head is a different shape". "Only at first," the inventor replied.

Theologies from other peoples and other times sometimes do not fit us well—they don't take account of our experience, our life, our knowledge and our times.

Perhaps a more poignant symbol of doing theology for me comes from the cry of Giordano Bruno, who was burned at the stake in 1600 by the Catholic Inquisition because he held ideas contrary to the then teachings of the Church:

I was a troubled soul trying to find a hat to fit this bursting brainbox.

I think that many of us in times of wonderfully expanding human knowledge are searching for that kind of hat.

Perhaps another more encouraging symbol is that in 1889, on the spot where Giordano Bruno died, the faculty and students of the University of Rome unveiled a statue of Bruno. The inscription read: *To Giordano Bruno, from the century he guessed at, in Rome, on the place where he was burned.*

If your matches are securely away, and you are not in a mood for burning heretics, my two discoveries of alternatives to traditional Christian thought and practice are about the idea of sin and a saviour, and why Jesus is important.

Sin and a Saviour

I have increasingly come to see that images and metaphors and stories are the stuff of all talk about meaning and values and religion. To be literal is to be seriously handicapped.

So I have for a long time valued the Bible's creation stories as nearly 3000-year-old stories of beginnings using the ideas of ancient pre-scientific people. They are wonderful examples of early searches for meaning by people with a profound sense of God.

And alongside them I have valued our story of a vast universe billions of years old—with DNA streams on our planet branching and interconnected, starting with single cell life and evolving to the great diversity and complexity of life today, of which our species is both a small and wonderful part—and now a possible threat to the whole ecosystem for all life.

A particularly amazing part of the contemporary story is the emergence of consciousness, so that after billions of years there is mind to begin to appreciate this larger story.

On Areopagus Hill