

SOFiA Newsletter 168, October 2023

Exploring Values, Meaning and Spirituality



Limestone cliffs like those at Dover, scene of the poem “Dover Beach”

Subscription Holiday

The national committee is proud to announce that there will be no charge for newsletter subscriptions between 1 July 2023 and 20 June 2024. The editor suggests that you use this holiday to encourage some new subscribers. Email treasurer@sofia.org.nz with their names.

SOFiA AGM Talk on Bob Marley now on Website

John Thornley’s keynote talk on Bob Marley and Rastafari, opened the Zoom AGM held on 2 September 2023. The full text, including eleven pictures, can be downloaded from the SOFiA website. Go to sofia.org.nz/Conference.html.

There is a link to the videofilm of Bob Marley singing ‘Redemption Song’

The talk lasts for a half hour, and is in four parts:

1. Chris Blackwell, a white Jamaican and producer of Bob Marley’s recordings, tells of his first encounter with the Rastafari ‘outcasts’ of Jamaica.
2. ‘Redemption Song’ verse one. This is a late anthem of Marley, recorded in 1980. He died of cancer in 1981. John’s talk places it in the

context of the biblical story of Exodus, slavery and colonisation, and the Rastafari studies of Hebrew scriptures, especially the Psalms.

3. 'Redemption Song' verse two. Continues the story of post-independence of the West Indian nations, Jamaica and Trinidad 1962. 'No chains around my feet/but I'm not free' (Bob Marley 'Concrete Jungle')

4. Summing Up

John and Gillian Thornley lived in Trinidad and Tobago from 1967 to 1969. John was organiser for the Student Christian Movement, while Gillian lectured in mathematics at the University of the West Indies. Email: John.gill@inspire.net.nz

Lloyd Geering on Israel-Palestinian Conflicts

The following quotation has new relevance, given the latest war in the Middle East.

"As we move into the 21st century, within a process of rapid globalisation, the western world has to learn the hard lesson that, though domination by force may quell violence and appear to restore order, it does not bring peace. That point was made more than 2500 years ago by a prophetic voice that came out of Jerusalem. Jeremiah the prophet proclaimed: "They are saying peace, peace, when there is no peace". It is not for nothing the Holy Land is regarded as the religious centre of the world by nearly half of humankind. Jerusalem remains to this day a powerful symbol for the world. In many ways, it is a microcosm of the world at large and of the international tensions within it. In particular, there runs through this city the major fault line between two of the earth's "civilisation plates", Islam and the West. When we have found a way of establishing peace in the Holy Land, we shall have some chance of creating a stable, global peace."

Lloyd Geering "Who Owns the Holy Land?" concluding paragraph.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Theologian, Conspirator, Martyr

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) exploded on to the English-speaking world with the publication of John Robinson's book *Honest to God* in 1963. There it was the exploratory thoughts from his *Letters and Papers from Prison* that held centre stage. Religionless Christianity, man come of age, and the god of the gaps were key concepts. But this perspective gives a rather one-dimensional impression of the man. A better account includes the various books he published and the poems he penned while in prison.

The Cost of Discipleship. In this exposition of the gospel message, Bonhoeffer focusses on discipleship, on the matter of following Jesus. Just as the first disciples followed Jesus, so we today are called to follow him.

Lutherans traditionally believed in "grace alone," in God's gracious forgiveness when we take a false step, but the Lutheran Bonhoeffer engaged in a polemic against "cheap grace," grace that is sold at a cut price, unconditional grace that requires no discipline of following Jesus. Undoubtedly this perspective (which some denounced as a new legalism) prepared Bonhoeffer for his uncompromising opposition to the Nazi regime.



Life Together. In Germany, the study of theology was typically a solitary, individualistic pursuit. Bonhoeffer pioneered a quite different way, one that involved a community and even hearing one another's confession. It's hard for us to realise that this was also revolutionary in another way. Germans were accustomed to a state church, so donations played almost no role in its support, but when Hitler took over some provincial churches, the Confessing Church was formed, which was quite outside this structure. Bonhoeffer was responsible for training new pastors for that church in an environment that saw the Nazis restrict and eventually close it down. Eberhard Bethge (Bonhoeffer's friend and biographer) was shocked when the announcement came over a loudspeaker that France had fallen and Bonhoeffer, along with others in the restaurant, gave the Hitler salute, but he did this because it had become futile to express public resistance to the Nazi regime. Any future actions would have to be carried out secretly.

It is well known that Bonhoeffer was part of the resistance against Hitler, but few appreciate what that really meant. He was a pacifist and his initial worry was whether he had the strength to become a conscientious objector with all the hatred and possible execution that would attract. To become a conspirator against Hitler was to revise that pacifism and become willing to commit murder. Bonhoeffer was employed by the German Abwehr (military intelligence) to report on Allied troop movements. That meant he attended ecumenical conferences and at the same time was gathering intelligence that would help Germany in its fight against Europe. French or English delegates would no doubt regard that as a betrayal and a lack of any solidarity with them. But Bonhoeffer was also a double agent. Spying for the German Abwehr was merely a front for his real activity which was conspiring to depose Hitler. In that role he met with the English Bishop Bell with a message from the conspirators for the English parliament. Would they accept a negotiated surrender if Hitler was toppled? The response was "No." The British authorities had ruled that surrender had to be unconditional. Imagine what that meant for the conspirators! They are on their own. In contrast, for example to the French resistance, they cannot rely on any support from the allies. They are vulnerable to the criticism that they are completely unpatriotic, betraying Germany with no benefit in sight. Bonhoeffer understood the ethical dilemma he was in and declared that he would resign from the church if it should fall to him to kill Hitler, so that he didn't darken the church's image.

Bonhoeffer was arrested and interrogated (torture was a real possibility). When the diary of Admiral Canaris, the head of the Abwehr, was found, the game was up. Bonhoeffer's real role was exposed and he was executed by hanging in the last days of the war.

In prison, Bonhoeffer penned several poems, astonishing given that he had absolutely no previous involvement in poetry. A new year's poem which is now an extremely popular hymn in Germany, a poem on death as a festival of freedom, and a long meditation on the experience of prison. Hearing that last item set to music and performed by Siegfried Fietz at a concert in my little village church in Germany was a highlight of my time there.

Further Reading

The Faithful Spy. Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the plot to kill Hitler by John Hendrikx. It's a good idea to start with this one; the detail isn't overwhelming and there is lots of useful information. Particularly good on the interaction between what was happening in Germany and what Bonhoeffer was doing and thinking. It's actually in the Teen Graphics section of the library - it's full of illustrations and designed for young adults. In spite of this, it is accurate and full of detail. The only thing missing is any treatment of the new theological thoughts he had while in prison.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer A Biography by Eberhard Bethge 1970. The classic and authoritative biography, though written before many more recent items by Bonhoeffer were published. A very detailed account (867 pages!) that is probably too much for most contemporary Anglosaxon readers. However, the essay on the new theology (p 757-795) provides a good interpretation of his sketchy thoughts in Letters and Papers from Prison.

Bonhoeffer. Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy. By Eric Metaxas. 2021. A popular account that has been criticised for lack of understanding of the German theological world and for distorting Bonhoeffer's thought to turn him into a modern, American, anti-liberal and pro-Trump evangelical.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer 1906-1945: Martyr, Thinker, Man of Resistance. By Ferdinand Schlingensiepen 2010. A more scholarly account that sets Bonhoeffer in the world of his time and place.

The Editor

Obituary: Merran Flemming

It is with sadness that we learn of the passing of Merran Flemming who suffered a severe stroke three weeks ago. Merran's health issues have been a huge challenge for her over many years.

Merran joined SOFiA in 1998 and was the coordinator of the Wellington local group for most of this time until the local group went into recess. She was a regular attender of conferences when her health permitted.

She is survived by her husband Hans Kuiper and three adult children. Merran will be missed by many.

Introducing *'Wounded World and Broken Church'* by Keith Rowe

Rev Dr Keith Rowe is a retired minister of the NZ Methodist church. He has served both as President of the national connexion, and Principal at Trinity College tertiary college for ministry training. He served the church in Sydney for some years, then briefly at St Lukes, Remuera, before retirement in Hawkes Bay. His book, published in 2022, is a collection of sermons, all based on the lectionary reading for Sunday.

On 23 July this year I led the service at Wesley Broadway, Palmerston North, taking the book title as my worship theme. Four hymns from Alleluia Aotearoa were included: 'In this familiar place', 'Come into the street with me' 'Let justice roll down' and 'Touch the earth lightly'. The words of two of these hymns are included in this article. The four prose texts are taken from Keith Rowe's book. I chose to hold together the well-known hymns with the progressive theology of Keith Rowe. The latter illustrates both the individual and collective, the private and public, church and world, as foundation stones for building a relevant faith for the 21st century.

'In this familiar place' by Colin Gibson, tells of a rural UK church service, and illustrates the eloquent simplicity and depth of a George Herbert poem: 'Among these friends of mine/I taste the company divine' and 'Within this narrow sphere/I learn that you are everywhere.' A brief quotation from Keith Rowe:

'There is a beautiful legend about the Christian church in Ephesus, the place where it is believed John died. When John was a very old man he would be brought into the group to give a blessing and he would simply say, 'God is love; love one another'. Just imagine if every Sunday one of the older members of the congregation were, like John, to give the same reminder of what matters most. Perhaps there could be a roster, who will give the 'John Reminder' of what we know but often forget.'

'Come into the streets with me' by Shirley Erena Murray takes the Palm Sunday story into greater depths than most hymns that mark the beginning of Holy or Passion week:

Come into the streets with me!
Come to where the crowds will be,
see a strange and gentle king

on a donkey travelling –

Come and follow my leader,
come and follow my leader,
Jesus Christ is riding by,
come and follow my leader!

All the people shout his name,
waving branches, sing his fame,
throw their coats upon his road,
glad to praise the Son of God –

If the soldiers draw their swords,
will we dare to sing these words,
be his friends for just a day.
cheer him on, then run away?

Jesus goes where things are rough,
Jesus knows when life is tough,
always comes to us, his friends,
so his story never ends

Keith Rowe writes: 'The Palm Sunday gospel reading tells of the day when the 'Lord of the Dance', the freewheeling Galilean preacher, healer and social reformer, arrived in the national centre of political, religious and economic power – the important city of Jerusalem. Jesus' arrival in the city was a carefully staged piece of street theatre. He's travelled from the villages of rural Galilee with a pilgrim group who thought of him as among the prophets and were attracted by his message of radical love. Like him, they sought a society that provided a secure place for the poor, the needy and the overlooked. Passover week was, and is, the Jewish time to remember and re-enter dramatic events believed to have taken place when Jewish ancestors, enslaved within an unjust system, under the leadership of Moses, escaped from captivity in Egypt. The Galilean pilgrims accompanying Jesus sought an escape from contemporary forms of slavery under the domination of the Roman Empire. Perhaps they thought and hoped, 'The revolution might begin this week!'

What does the Palm Sunday event say to us today? The Way pioneered by Jesus is bigger than the life he lived in Palestine – it is a light shining down the corridors of history, summoning us into a future yet to be born, and the binding of those who will become the community of Jesus-Spirit.

Renewal of Christian integrity involves an ever-fresh discovery of the life transforming Way pioneered by Jesus. My use of the word ‘pioneering’ attached to the Way that claimed Jesus is important. Jesus does not represent a set of rules chiselled into concrete slabs, but rather a way of living, a style of life, that needs to be re-discovered, re-explored, and re-expressed, in every generation, every culture and nation. The resurrection stories – Palm Sunday as the opening Act – symbolise for us that the Way of Jesus continues as contemporary possibility and evocative symbol of what the future can become. Renewal of Christian integrity and contribution to the healing of our world will involve a fresh discovery of the Jesus Way as pioneered in the first century and, crucially, as continuing possibility in every time and place.’

In ‘Touch the earth lightly’ Shirley Murray highlights the destruction of the natural environment by human exploitation:

‘We who endanger / who create hunger / agents of death for all creatures that live / we who would foster / clouds of disaster / God of our planet / forestall and forgive.’

Keith talks about a gap or closed door in the life of most churches. ‘This is the gap between challenging words spoken in the pulpit or prayer at the prayer desk and decisions made in Parish Council or whatever group plans and nurtures what is usually described as the ‘mission’ of the church, the things this group of friends does in response to its exploration of the way pioneered by Jesus. This includes the church’s contribution to the healing of the world, and the church’s presence in their local community. Pulpit or study group offer exploration of the Way pioneered by Jesus and hints as to what they might mean in our time. Words spoken with much thought and sensitivity to the purposes of God made clear in Jesus, are mislaid in the short walk from pews, pulpit and prayer desk to the meeting room and so-called ‘business agendas’.

According to denominational housekeeping, leaking downpipes and clergy leave provisions seem to take precedence over the hard thinking, careful planning and courageous action involved in exploring what and how it means to live the Way pioneered by Jesus. It's a gap that should trouble us.

In the sermons found in my book *Wounded World and Broken Church*, I offer a little light in what is a dark time for the Christian adventure. It's an even darker time for humanity and our fragile planet. Climate change and environmental destruction, the continuing and growing gap between rich and poor, possibilities and perils in the development of 'artificial intelligence', new knowledge in genetic engineering, and fresh awareness of human fragility revealed during Covid pandemic times – all cry out for fresh thinking and bold action. These and other challenges are the setting of our believing, our praying and our living.

'Let justice roll down' is arguably the finest of Colin Gibson's justice lyrics. Any one who was fortunate enough to hear it read live by the hymnwriter, in the style of an Amos or Jeremiah, will have it in their memory box of 'prophetic moments':

Let justice roll down like a river
Let justice roll down like a sea
Let justice roll down like the river
Let justice begin with me.

Justice for all who go hungry,
crying to God to be fed,
left in a world of abundance
to beg for a morsel of bread.

Justice for those who are homeless,
victims of warfare or need,
trapped on the borders of nowhere,
lost in the canyons of greed.

Justice for all who are powerless,
yearning for freedom in vain,
plundered and robbed of their birthright,
silently bearing their pain.

My own introduction picked out the plight of refugees, victim of civil wars desperate to find new homes but, without passports, trapped 'on the borders of nowhere', and pictured the skyscraper offices of banks, insurance firm, and finance companies, as 'canyons of greed', lining the Terrace in Wellington, Queen St in Auckland. The final words from Keith are a natural follow-on from the Gibson hymn. The Bible text is John 17, verse 8, Jesus at his last supper with the disciples:

'I told my followers what you told me, and they accepted it. They know that I came from you, and they believe that you are the one who sent me.' The Gospel of John is an extended reflection on the significance of Jesus, and was written about 60 or 70 years after his death. It tells us as much about the infant church and how Jesus was regarded in the churches of Asia Minor as it tells us about the historical Jesus of Galilee. The words of verse 8 offer a fresh and important description of the church as the community who received the words of Jesus and who continue to share and to explore these words on behalf of, and with, the whole human family.

We should be troubled that the words of Jesus are neither well-known nor heeded in our secular society. As stewards of these words, we have a responsibility to ensure they remain available to our culture at a time when many flounder about for a direction to life's adventure. Their power, as recorded in the Gospels, is their capacity to jolt readers in to new ways of seeing and living life.

We take it for granted that war is an inevitable part of human living, but we read that Jesus said, 'Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the children of God.' We live in a world where it seems to be taken for granted that starvation is a natural occurrence within some nations and regions of the earth, that prisoners and the needy beyond our own community are someone else's problem. Jesus pictured God saying, 'I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.'

In a world where revenge has become an art form and grudges allowed to linger, Jesus, in response to a question replied that his disciples should forgive without limit, even seventy times seven! Try another

text: Those who want to save their lives will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?

The words of Jesus could not be enshrined in law or regulations. They're not that sort of wisdom. The words of Jesus, in parable, sayings and proverbs, typically cause hearers and readers to stop and think again about actions they take for granted but that fall short of genuinely healing truth.

Jesus called into being a community who were distinctive, not because they were smarter than others, but they were open to new possibilities and were willing to be questioned by the way Jesus lived and spoke.

Put it this way. We know very little. We live on small islands of certainty surrounded by a great sea of mystery and uncertainty. The words of Jesus, if we will enter into their world, take us towards the edge of what we are comfortable with, to the edge of our small island, and invite us to imagine another way to the way we currently live. The words of Jesus are unsettling. They speak of possibilities of sharing with others, forgiving enemies, welcoming strangers, caring for the marginalised, trusting in Divine grace to guide us through life's tough places.

Note: Copies of Wounded World and Broken Church can be ordered from Pleroma Books, Otane: order@pleroma.org.nz. Cost: \$40.00 plus p&p.

John Thornley