



Re-imagining a better world

As I compile this final PCNV newsletter for 2020, two themes are running through my head. First, how most of us have co-operated and accepted restrictions for the common good to defeat the threat of a pandemic out of control – in the Christian tradition that is described as ‘loving your neighbour as you do yourself’. Secondly, how widely new ideas have emerged about differences we would like to make in the post pandemic world - a better balance of work and family life, more investment of time for friendship, caring and love, ways to organise work that provide more dignity and hope than the extreme casualization that has characterised recent decades - especially for women and young people.

The first article by Cristy Clark, “Re-imagining a better world” sets the theme. “Dreaming as a single human family” about the recent encyclical, Fratelli Tutti, by Pope Francis takes the theme to a world-wide perspective. “Has the kingdom Jesus pointed to been coming?” provides a sharp focus on the message of Jesus and confronts us with the question of where we expect to see evidence of his alternative vision for a way to live.

Poems by Kiwi poet and Presbyterian Minister Glynn Cardy invite us to see the “ordinary world” as a place of wonder and practical compassion.

2020 has brought big changes for the Progressive Christian Network of Victoria as face to face meetings have been replaced by gatherings by Zoom. A major review next year will consider the best way for PCNV to function as a network to encourage understanding and practice of progressive perspectives on the way of Jesus.

The themes above seem a promising way to finish 2020 and look hopefully to 2021. -DM

<https://www.pcnvictoria.org.au>

The new PCNV website is now functioning.

- You can download a membership application form or a form to renew membership.
- There are Youtube videos of some recent PCNV programs and text of other presentations.
- Coming events are described.
- Previous editions of the Newsletter in recent years are available/
- As well as contacts for progressive Christian study groups in Victoria, there are links to progressive organisations in Australia, NZ, and worldwide.

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Re-imagining a better kind of society

by Cristy Clark

One of the things that has struck me during this pandemic is how clearly it has highlighted the precarity of the lives we lead. Obviously, this includes our actual lives — especially in places where the rates of infection and the death toll are still rising exponentially. But it also includes so many other things we often take for granted — our jobs, our homes, our way of life.

But just as the frighteningly precarious nature of our lives has been thoroughly exposed, so too has the inequality of it all. Even in a pandemic, [we aren't all suffering equally](#). Across the globe, the lowest paid communities are dying the fastest, in addition to falling further into poverty. And lockdown is markedly different for those of us living in comfortable homes, as compared to those confined to tiny apartments or informal settlements. Even in a pandemic, structures of privilege continue to operate.

As I contemplate these realities, a number of things occur to me.

First, in many ways this is a high-speed test run for so many of the issues we are facing due to climate change. People are already dying from the impacts of climate change. And people are already losing their livelihoods, their homes, and their way of life. But this will continue, because we have accepted this human sacrifice in order to protect 'the economy' and our own way of life.

Second, it doesn't have to be this way. We are capable of fundamentally rethinking significant aspects of our property and labour systems overnight. We can impose a [moratorium on evictions, double jobseeker, and introduce a whole new scheme for basic income protection](#). The choice to lift people out of poverty and to prevent homelessness [has always been there](#).

Third, the current push [to get back to 'normal life' as quickly as possible](#) includes continuing to accept the ecological (and related human) cost of climate change, as well as rapidly discarding the barely nascent social safety nets that have been introduced to reduce the unnecessary suffering caused by unemployment and housing unaffordability.

Is this really what we want?

Throughout human history, periods of upheaval have led people to question the fairness of their social order. After the plague — or 'Black Death' — reduced the English population by half, from around 5 million in 1348 to 2.5 million in 1377, a shortage of labour and tenants shifted the balance of power away from the landed gentry. In the years that followed, [the manorial system slowly collapsed](#), as serfs took the opportunity to liberate themselves and labourers successfully resisted historically exploitative arrangements by refusing to accept long-term contracts and negotiating higher wages than those that were established under the Statute of Labourers.

Of course, change didn't happen overnight — and there were some serious setbacks, such as [the failed peasants' rebellion of 1381](#) — but, over time an economic and social system that had once seemed unassailable was ultimately dismantled.

Another example comes from 1649, in the unsettled period after the English Civil War and the execution of Charles I. On St George's Hill in Sussex, a man named Gerrard Winstanley sought to establish a new utopian community in which the commons would be claimed ['for and in behalf of all the poor oppressed people of England and the whole world'](#) and communal farming would create a society free from exploitation. Winstanley named his community 'the True Levellers', but they came to be called 'the Diggers' and this was the name that stuck.

To justify their occupation of St George's Hill, and to promote it as a model for a new society free of the exploitation of wage labour and private property, [Winstanley](#) and the Diggers argued that the commons had been stolen from the people and hedged into 'enclosures' by the rich leaving the poor to live in miserable poverty.

Ultimately their argument did not win the day. In fact, the Diggers colony survived for less than two years before being evicted, but Winstanley's vision for a new society did live on through his writing.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not arguing that we should pick up where Winstanley left off. For one thing, he took a very conservative approach to the position of women (even for his time) by arguing for a strong patriarchal role for husbands and fathers, and only limited education for girls. But I do think that we should draw inspiration from those who have been willing to reimagine society from the ground up. There are so many systems that do not serve (the majority of) us well, but which we have accepted as immutable for too long.

The sheer precariousness and injustice of our current system has been laid bare by this pandemic, and the cracks that have been exposed are only going to deepen in the coming climate crisis. In our haste to get back to 'normal', let's not be too quick to re-embrace the bad with the good. We can re-imagine a better kind of normal. We just have to be brave enough to try.

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‘The kingdom Jesus pointed to has been coming, and we haven't even noticed it’

Now, our new creation story is that the universe is self-explanatory.

The ancients personalized the forces of nature. We can name them, though we actually know very little of what takes place in the universe.

We know that our planet's life has been evolving over 3 billion years, and that our human species came out of myriad life forms. (Video)

In my latest little book [Is Christianity Going Anywhere?](#), I contend that we have come to the end of traditional Christianity, and I point to the new phase which it has already entered. Indeed, if we look around us in the modern, secular world, we find already there many of the elements that Jesus talked about when he spoke of the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God has been coming, and we haven't even noticed it. It's been coming when we asserted human rights for everybody. It's been coming when we emancipated women from male domination. It's been coming when we freed the slaves. And it is coming as we still painfully try to give fairness to homosexuals. And this book further suggests that we have discovered sufficient of the footprints and the voiceprints of the original Jesus, to help us and inspire us in the path ahead.

Lloyd Geering – “God and Me” speaking at Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sydney, October 2004.

“Dreaming as a single human family”

David Merritt

On 3 September 2020 Pope Francis signed his third encyclical. He chose the tomb of Francis of Assisi as the location to announce this statement and named it using words from the writings of Francis of Assisi - Fratelli Tutti . The literal meaning of the words, “All brothers”. has been criticised as excluding women but the Italian phrase has a common meaning of “all of humanity” and earlier in the year Pope Francis had said, “We are all brothers and sisters. St Francis of Assisi used to say: ‘All brothers and sisters.’”

An encyclical from a pope is a letter to Catholic clergy and laity. It is widely read. This encyclical is about issues that are particularly important at this time – “about openness that allows us to acknowledge, appreciate and love each person, regardless of physical proximity, regardless of where he or she was born or lives.” (Paragraph 1) The first chapter is titled “Dark clouds over a closed world”

“As I was writing this letter, the Covid-19 pandemic unexpectedly erupted, exposing our false securities. Aside from the different ways that various countries responded to the crisis, their inability to work together became quite evident. For all our hyper-connectivity, we witnessed a fragmentation that made it more difficult to resolve problems that affect us all. Anyone who thinks that the only lesson to be learned was the need to improve what we were already doing, or to refine existing systems and regulations, is denying reality.” (Para 7)

“Let us dream, then, as a single human family, as fellow travelers sharing the same flesh, as children of the same earth which is our common home, each of us bringing the richness of his or her beliefs and convictions, each of us with his or her own voice, brothers and sisters all. “ (Para 8)

“Without claiming to carry out an exhaustive analysis or to study every aspect of our present-day experience, I intend simply to consider certain trends in our world that hinder the development of universal fraternity.” (Para 9)

If you would like to read the entire encyclical you can download it in English as a pdf file – all 92 pages. There are several sources. Mine was:

<https://www.thecatholictelegraph.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Fratelli-Tutti.pdf>

In a recent issue of the monthly online publication “Eureka Street”, Andrew Hamilton wrote about Fratelli Tutti:

“The moral compass of the document is ... provided by an exposition of the Parable of the Good Samaritan with its emphasis on practical friendship for the wounded stranger. The love that looks to the good of the other represents a counterpoint to the attitude that underlies the dehumanising signs of a closed world, and a bridge to an open world.”

The encyclical proposes “a better way to deal with the aspects of public life which the CV crisis has shown to be at risk. It encompasses relationships between nations and particularly the need to open closed borders that hurt refugees and minorities, and to strengthen international conventions and institutions to make possible the remission of debt. It calls also for a reform of political life based on respect for persons, respect for law and for human rights, and attention to the common good rather than to individual and sectional interests. All these things call for a culture marked by the search for truth and openness to others. They must also be built on a commitment to peace, the rejection of war and capital punishment, and the encouragement of processes of forgiveness and reconciliation within societies.”

- Andrew Hamilton, Eureka Street 7 October 2020

POEMS by Glynn Cardy

At the PCNV meeting on 27 September, Rev Glynn Cardy, minister of St Luke's, a progressive Presbyterian Church in Auckland, and a noted poet, read a selection of his poems. They evoke awareness of the magic of the ordinary. This selection is printed with permission.

*Blessed are those brief moments of gift,
when the serendipitous slips into the sacred,
when a lucky coincidence becomes
a strange warming of the heart.*

*Blessed is the hand there to be held and
the one holding, both on to the life that flows,
in, through, under the expected, hoping...
as the beeping monitors serenade.*

*Blessed is the untimed arrival of a friend,
sitting, watching, serene, presence as prayer,
wordlessly knitting a sacred garment of
moments
past with moments present.*

*Blessed is that bird on the outside sill,
visiting each day, as if to say, 'Are you okay?'
No wonder holy spirits are oft ornithic,
leaving a gift, a crevice in time.*

*Blessed are those brief moments of gift,
when the serendipitous slips into the sacred,
when a lucky coincidence becomes
a strange warming of the heart.*

The elusive divine

*Blessed is a poem
the verses of which are still being written,
as we discover who we are
and might become.*

*Blessed is a symphony
in which we are invited to play,
but in which the music keeps changing...
so we improvise.*

*Blessed is a work of art
forming with the colours and strokes we bring,
transforming us as it emerges, changing
how we see.*

*Blessed is a silence,
a gap, a pause between words,
a waiting, a holding, a patience, a stillness
as the tide recedes.*

*Blessed is the elusive divine,
moving within and without, beyond,
paradoxical, questionable, a mystery,
a child playing.*

Hospitality

*Blessed are those who can open
their doors, tables, and hearts,
letting the known and unknown
come in*

*Blessed are those who absorb
others' quirks, hurts, and foibles,
with good humour and calm;
gracefully.*

*Blessed are those hosts who know
that they are in turn welcome and
needed, as they welcome and
feed others.*

*Blessed are those hosted who know
and appreciate the vulnerability that such
welcome might bring. Respect goes
both ways.*

*Blessed are we when we open,
absorb, welcome, need, feed, appreciate,
and allow others to gently return
the same*

Loving all of us

*Blessed are those unheralded souls who slip
tangentially into situations,
coaxing forth possible solutions;
and who, on the edges, help and restore.*

*Blessed are those who seek the common good
even when it's not their own;
caring for those who don't care for them,
caring for those who can't or won't be good.*

*Blessed are those who've learnt and give
empathy
without needing reciprocity,
without needing recognition or reward.
They emanate contentment; like angels.*

*Blessed are those tireless encouragers,
who see the best in the worst,
who see the light in the cracks of our lives,
who lead us, guide us, bring us home to our
heart.*

Practice compassion

... what it means to be human. It means: Act out our interdependence. Practice compassion.

It is not just the Jewish and Christian traditions that agree on this central foundation of authentic religion.

We see it in Buddhism when the Dalai Lama declares: “We can do away with all religion, but we can’t do away with compassion—compassion is my religion.”

And in the Koran, by far the most commonly used name for Allah is “Allah, the compassionate one.”

Matthew Fox. *Daily Meditations with Matthew Fox*. 3 September 2020

His disciples said to him, “When will the (Father’s) empire come?”

“It won’t come by watching for it. It won’t be said, ‘Look here!’ or ‘Look there!’ Rather, the Father’s empire is spread out upon the earth, and people don’t see it.”

Gospel of Thomas 113.

The Complete Gospels. Robert J Miller, editor. Polebridge Press 2010. Page 303

Threats to human survival

The Commission for the Human Future (CHF) is a body set up by concerned citizens of the Earth, to raise awareness of the nature and scale of the catastrophic and existential threats we face, to share information about them and to help develop lasting solutions to them.

A report titled [Surviving and Thriving in the 21st Century](#), published on April 22 this year by the [Commission for the Human Future](#), has isolated ten potentially catastrophic threats to human survival.

Not prioritised over one another, these risks are

1. decline of natural resources, particularly water
2. collapse of ecosystems and loss of biodiversity
3. human population growth beyond Earth’s carrying capacity
4. global warming and human-induced climate change
5. chemical pollution of the Earth system, including the atmosphere and oceans
6. rising food insecurity and failing nutritional quality
7. nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction
8. pandemics of new and untreatable disease
9. the advent of powerful, uncontrolled new technology
10. national and global failure to understand and act preventatively on these risk

<https://theconversation.com/there-are-10-catastrophic-threats-facing-humans-right-now-and-coronavirus-is-only-one-of-them136854>