

We Start With...

A two minute period of silence - a moment of peace.

From the Chair

I had the great pleasure of joining the 'Introduction to Drawing and Painting' class at the Wanaka Arts Week recently. After an engaging and energy-intensive week I was amazed to see remarkable progress in my capability (though I am not ready for a one-person show just yet). Even more significant than my work on paper, my eyes were looking at everything – the beautiful autumn colours, the hills, buildings, objects, people – very differently, and that skill and interest is with me still.

I get the same feeling after Sea of Faith meetings. Each time, I feel I have been shown a new way of looking at things, and I can continue to use that skill for as long as I wish. That's why I value Sea of Faith meetings, and my Sea of Faith colleagues, so much. They give gifts that keep on giving.

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Our Next Meeting

'How does it feel?'

At this month's meeting David Kitchingman will follow up on his October 2017 presentation: "A life on the heaving sea, A home on the bounding wave!": Motion and emotion on the Sea of Faith". By popular request, he will help us to look at our own journeys from a viewpoint that is not usually explored, either within Sea of Faith or elsewhere.

Last Meeting

We looked at the various indicators, as evidenced through the pages of the ODT for the previous three weeks, to remind us that the earth is finite, resources are finite, there is sometimes severe competition for those resources and along the way there is a price to pay for not looking after our home on planet earth. That price includes proliferation of waste, especially plastics mixed in with our food supply from the oceans and the extinction of many animal species as their habitats are destroyed.

Many of the issues seem to be too big for any one of us to affect but by participating in planning choices made by the City Council and Regional Council we can raise a voice. We also can look

How does it *feel*?

David Kitchingman

**REMEMBER
THIRD THURSDAY**

Thursday, 17th MAY

St John's Church Hall,
Cnr Wright Street
& Highgate

Tea and Coffee

will be available from 5.30pm

**The programme will start at
6.00pm**

Contribution - \$5

hard at the CVs of the potential Councillors at election time and vote for those who claim to believe in earth-saving principles.

How my thinking has changed
Sir Lloyd Geering 21st May 2017

My religious thinking began when I was sent to Sunday School from the age of five. As a child I never went to church, for in those days the Sunday School was separate from the church services and met at 2 pm on the Sabbath. And when I returned to New Zealand from Australia at the age of twelve, I had no further connection with any Christian organization during my adolescence, since my parents had long ceased to attend church.

It was during my second year at university that a series of events occurred in such swift succession that they resulted a major change in my life. At the invitation of a student friend from school days, I began to attend the Presbyterian Church he went to, and I soon followed him even more enthusiastically into the activities of the Student Christian Movement.

In that year of 1937 my whole style of life changed completely. Within a matter of only three or four weeks I found myself going every Sunday to senior Bible class at 10 am, attending the 11 am morning service where I sang in the choir, teaching Sunday School in the afternoon, and later attending the evening service at 6:30 pm. My thinking was developing so rapidly that after attending a Mission to the University conducted by the SCM, I gradually came to feel, and by the end of that year convinced, that I was being called by God to enter the ministry. When I confided this to an older brother he said, "Don't waste your life that way! – the churches will all be closed in thirty years' time!" He made this comment despite the fact that most churches were then still full - the Church I joined had over 1000 members. These many decades later I realise his judgment was by no means wholly misleading, yet I have never felt I wasted my life. Indeed, my decision led me to a very rich one.

During my three years of theological training at Knox Theological College, I regarded myself as such a novice in the life of the church that I

accepted rather uncritically all that I was taught. Fortunately, my teachers had all embraced the liberal theology and the modern understanding of the Bible that developed during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. By using the new tools of historical and literary criticism, they showed us how to study the Bible as a collection of humanly composed historical documents. It was to this liberal approach that fundamentalism arose in reaction from about 1920 onwards.

I became a very enthusiastic student of the Bible, particularly of the Old Testament. I also developed a strong interest in Church History, having had the good fortune to be taught by a young refugee from Nazi Germany, Helmut Rehbein. He showed us how Christian thinking has been an ever-evolving process, rather than a set of unchangeable doctrines.

On the other hand I found Systematic Theology quite dull and unexciting. Yet from our elderly Aberdonian professor, John Dickie, I learned one useful thing about the role of theology. He taught us that the task of theology is not to expound the unchangeable dogmas revealed by God, as it had been regarded before the time of Schleiermacher in the early nineteenth century. Dickie followed Schleiermacher, regarding theology as the intellectual exercise by which Christians 'think through their religious experience and relate it to all other knowledge'. That is what I have tried to do ever since. I was among the last of John Dickie's students, and thoroughly imbibed his liberal approach. Strangely enough, the theology taught at Knox College for the following twenty years reverted to the more traditional form of dogmatic theology. It was called Neo-orthodoxy and was initiated by the Swiss theologian, Karl Barth. But John Dickie warned us against him.

So that is how I came to be shaped by the liberal theology that was current in the early twentieth century. As a parish minister I never once preached that Christ's death on the cross had achieved our salvation, for I regarded that sort of orthodoxy as quite outmoded. Rather, my sermons expounded Christianity as a way of life based on the moral teaching of Jesus of Nazareth.

It was not until I became a theological teacher in 1955 that my thinking began to develop further. As I read the books of such German theologians as Paul Tillich and Rudolf Bultmann I was led on from the liberal theology of my student days to the more radical approach found in Bishop John Robinson's 1963 best-seller, *Honest to God*.

Bultmann showed me how the story of Jesus in the New Testament is clothed in the mythical thinking that was current in the ancient world, but which is no longer relevant today. To discover the truth of the New Testament Christian message for today's non-mythical world, Bultmann said it must be 'demythologised', lifted out of its mythical setting and re-interpreted in a manner that enables it to speak to today's secular world.

And that is why in 1966 I wrote an article that tried to explain to modern readers how to understand the resurrection of Jesus, for in today's world the mythical stories of his resurrection and ascension into heaven can no longer be taken at face value. And most of you know what an uproar that caused!

When I subsequently moved to the Chair of Religious Studies at Victoria University in 1971, I had to read even more widely, and eventually I became involved in the activities of the Jesus Seminar in California.

It is only natural, then, that in the course of this long and variegated spiritual pilgrimage my thinking changed quite significantly from what it was when I first embraced the Christian faith as a young and immature adult. My subsequent books illustrate this in much more detail than it is possible for me to sketch here. Moreover, I discovered that the writing of books can change one's mind just as much as reading the books of others.

Take for example, one of my recent books, *From the Big Bang to God*. Here I tried to make it clear that, far from an unseen God having made the universe, it was the process of evolution that eventually brought forth the human beings and human language. This in turn resulted in the creation of such concepts as God.

In writing this book I came to realize something that had not occurred to me before, even though it is immediately obvious when one thinks about it. The story of the evolution of the universe is a story we humans constructed, and one that could not be told until we had created a language in which to tell it. We seldom recognize how much our human life depends on language. This is why the ancients unthinkingly assumed that language had existed from the beginning of time. The Bible tells us that God created the world by the use of language: "God said, 'Let there be light!' and there was light!" Similarly, the Fourth Gospel begins, "In the beginning was the Word". It is not too much to say that it is language that enables us to make sense of the world we find ourselves living in.

My discovery about the priority of language made me realize that we humans do live in two worlds. But they are not the material world and the spiritual worlds in which our forefathers assumed they lived; rather they are the physical world and the world of human thought.

We enter the physical world when we are born, but we do not enter the human thought world until, from about the age of about two, we learn to speak. The human thought-world we enter from two onwards becomes the lens through which we see and understand the physical world. This is why we cannot remember anything from before the age of three. This is why people of different cultures live in different thought-worlds and see the same physical world rather differently. And also this is why the religious quest for meaning and personal fulfilment has taken different forms in different cultures. As a consequence, no cultural tradition, such as Christianity, can claim to be the only true spiritual path and judge all others to be false.

This is a brief account of how my thinking has changed and continues to do so. Let me illustrate it, using three basic examples.

The first has to do with God. Even from the time I embraced the Christian faith, I had no clear idea of what the word God meant. For me, God referred to the mystery of life that could not be grasped by

the human mind. But more recently I have come to realize that God does not name a reality in the cosmos at all. Rather it is a humanly created idea. It belongs to the human thought-world. It is a word by which we have tried to make sense of the physical world we live in.

This idea of God has a long history, which the remarkable scholar and former nun Karen Armstrong has written up as “The History of God”. God is an idea that has played an extremely important role in our evolving culture. It supplied an ultimate point of reference. It was the idea of God as creator and unifier of the universe that led to the rise of modern science, when mediaeval theologians tried to discover what they called ‘the ways of God’ by conducting experiments. It was they who laid the foundations of today’s empirical science.

But we also associated with this idea of God the values of love, compassion, honesty, and truth, because we find these make such moral demands upon us that they clearly transcend us. And though the idea of God had its beginning in our mythological past, it remains a useful word to refer to our highest values. As the New Testament asserts, “God is love”.

The second area of change is how I understand Jesus of Nazareth. For me Jesus is not someone to be worshipped as the divine Son of God, for that sort of language belongs to the world of ancient mythology. What the work of the Jesus Seminar has shown me is that Jesus was not even a prophet after the Old Testament model. Rather he was a wise man, a sage, walking in the footsteps of Ecclesiastes before him. The Jesus seminar scholars have attempted to uncover what they call “the voice-prints and foot-prints” of this Jesus from before the creative imagination of his first-century followers transformed him into the divine Christ-figure. The chief of these was Paul, who had never met Jesus in the flesh. The original Jesus did not talk much about himself, and not even much about God. Rather he talked about the Kingdom of God, describing it in such parables as the Good Samaritan, the Prodigal Son, and the Leaven. He used this term to describe his vision of

how people should live with each other in loving relationships of reciprocal goodwill.

The third area of change in my thinking has been in the acceptance of our mortality. We humans are finite, earthly beings, like all other planetary creatures. We are given one life to live and can expect no future existence beyond the grave in some heavenly spiritual realm. This is why the average funeral service has changed so markedly during the twentieth century. In 1900 it was the ritual by which we celebrated the departure of the deceased from this world to a better life in the next world, but by 2000 the ritual had increasingly become the celebration of a life that has come to end. It has become a gathering of family and friends to recall with gratitude what the deceased person had achieved and meant to them.

Yes, my thinking has changed markedly since I first embraced the Christian faith as an immature youth. But at no time have I ever thought it necessary or even desirable to reject Christianity, as some atheists delight in doing. On the contrary I remain very grateful to the Christian tradition. From the prophets and apostles of old, and particularly from that remarkable but elusive figure of Jesus of Nazareth, I have learned how to live life to the full. I also believe that today’s secular and humanistic world owes its origin to the Christendom out of which it emerged. Further, I believe that if humankind is to flourish in the future, it must acknowledge its spiritual roots and continually learn from them. And that is what we are doing whenever we meet together as the church!

<http://www.stlukes.org.nz/sermon/how-my-thinking-has-changed-sir-lloyd-geering>

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