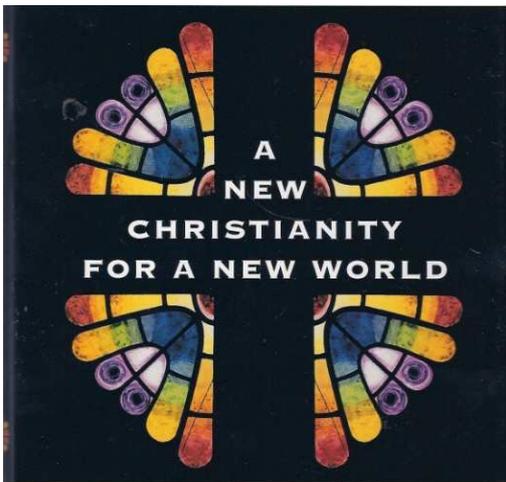


A New Christianity for a new world

Bishop Jack Spong in Glasgow – 2011

A Report on the Conference held at
Orchardhill Parish Church – Giffnock, Glasgow
By Rev John Hetherington – Kendal PCN Group



On 3rd June 2011 I went to Orchardhill Parish Church in Giffnock, Glasgow, to hear Jack Spong again. It was about my 6th time! I am sure many of you will have heard of him and read some of his important books, including...

- Liberating the Gospels
- A new Christianity for a New World
- Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism
- Here I Stand, and
- Jesus for the Non-Religious

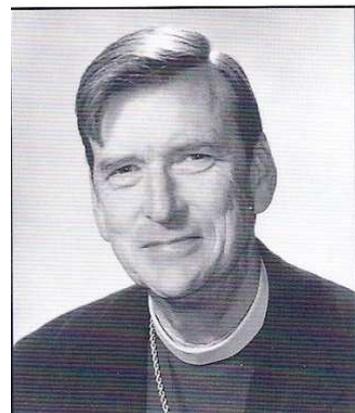
... to name but a few!

I went to Glasgow expecting a treat – and wow – we got it! He gave 4 lectures and an extempore Sunday Sermon at Orchardhill that awed everyone. He also spoke at Cairns on the Thursday evening. His Friday evening and Saturday lectures were:

1. **“God beyond Theism”**: Scripture and how we read it
2. **“Jesus – Why Saviour is no longer the proper title”**: God is real – but our human images of God are not real. God is not dying.
3. **“Seeking Divinity through Humanity”**: Jesus as the central Icon of the Christian Story
4. **“The call of the Spirit to a new Humanity”**: Human Life – what is it all about (and how should the church serve humanity – and not just Christians)

Jack was the controversial **Bishop of Newark** in the United States. His open minded progressive approach to theology was refreshing. He offered an enlightening antidote to the oftentimes prejudiced and literalist approach of some in the Episcopalian and more fundamentalist churches.

Eight years ago Jack came to the UK to launch the **“Progressive Christianity Network Britain”** in both London and in Kendal –



and he has been touring the UK regularly ever since. His last 3 visits he has said will be his last – just as this year’s in Glasgow was billed.

I remain a member but am no longer on its Committee. PCN Britain goes on from strength to strength with over 55 local groups active across the whole of Britain. I am Secretary of the Kendal PCN Group and the South Lakeland Interfaith Forum. We work alongside the Kendal Ecumenical Group (KEG) on major conferences plus regular discussion and study.

God beyond theism

In **Lecture 1** there were some wonderful phrases in Jack Spong’s **Friday evening presentation** – which he gleaned from what he called “**17 boring verses**” – the genealogy in Matthew Chapter 1, written around 50 years after the Crucifixion. In context Paul was writing from 50 to 69 AD. The “Ancestors” were actually an interesting lot he explained. Christianity was on the move as the story expanded. The symbolism included:

- “**Wise men from the east**” – a symbol of the ancient wisdom influencing early Christianity
- “**Getting out into the world**” – sharing “infinite love” beyond every boundary
- **A Human Jesus** – base born: “is this not the carpenter”, “we are not born of fornication” (John 7).

Jack also spoke masterfully of the whole thrust of the Old Testament – where he explained that the genealogy of the line to Jesus (in Matthew) was peppered by failures – not least “fallen women”!

His basic point is that **we don’t look to God’s presence in the “good” but in the, “oh so very human”**. The Jesus story is saying that when we meet the Life in Jesus we are discovering the free gift of Love. Jack was sceptical of creeds – the Jesus story is simply about life being lived – honouring all it means to be fully human for Jesus and for us.

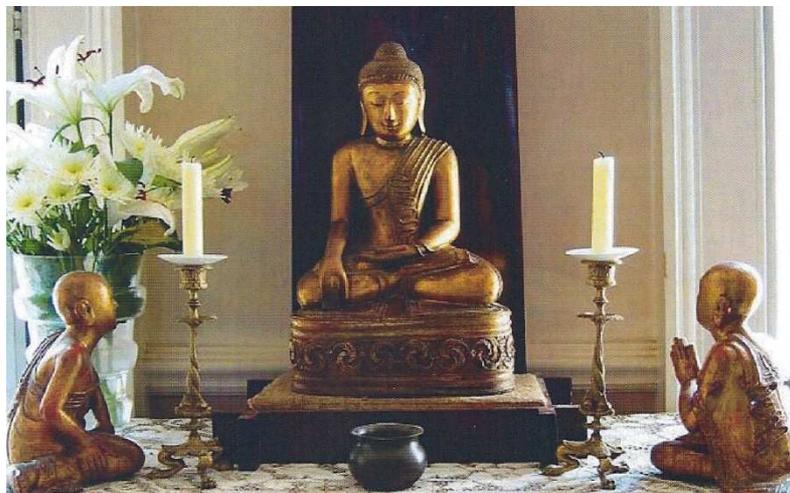
Jesus – Why Saviour is no longer the proper title

In **Lecture 2** on Saturday morning, Jack introduced his session with the phrase, “**We are making God possible once again**”. He pointed out that human beings can only see God in human terms – all we can use is analogy – so we use words like infinite, immortal, omnipotent. God is humanity magnified – but we can have no idea really. He pointed out that the Jewish religion warned against idolatry – especially in our attempts to humanise and limit the mystery of “Being”. Non-personal images were therefore used, like “breath”, a wind cannot be captured. God as “rock” or “Ground of Being” is also a metaphor.

All we can glimpse is through experience of “mystery” – so no creeds or beliefs can define God. All peoples have discovered transcendence and wonder. Christianity rapidly forgot

this, defining God as a “being” separate from us – hence the western Theistic understanding of God.

This does not work, Jack said. All the great thinkers of Christian history have moved beyond theism. He pointed us back to the animist approach and the role of ritual to point us beyond ourselves. God is always on the move – leading us on. Mother goddesses celebrated new life, agricultural communities made God into a warlike tribal deity –which he pointed out is just how the US sees themselves as “chosen”. In many ways Christianity is still tribal and not of the heart. He said that “reverse flattery” is found across all our liturgies – judge, father, “how great Thou art”, etc. This sort of God is dying – he said. We are growing up. *“The religion of Eternal Deity is dying.”*



The new way that is emerging east and west is in rediscovery of “practices” – which:

- Evoke internal presence
- See Love as a force that permeates nature and drives evolution
- Acknowledge the mystery of “That art Thou” as the source of life.

Seeking Divinity through Humanity

In Lecture 3, on the Saturday afternoon, Jack majored on **the life of Jesus**. He reviewed the powerful sense that in the life of Jesus the first Christians felt they had met God in the person of Jesus. He noted that Paul saw Jesus as “designated” through the “resurrection”. Mark called Jesus “God infused” through his baptism. Matthew and Luke pushed his significance back even further to the moment of his conception. John says God got into Jesus at Creation – as divine “Word”. Jack said that all this was, over time, evidence that “God was in Jesus”, with no-one debating the reality of their own experience of him.

The Roman church eventually made it harder and harder for a human Jesus to be found. **Jesus became less and less human, because our humanity was increasingly seen as originally sinful. We were no longer the pinnacle of creation.** Jack referred to the

wonderful book 70s book, “Original Blessing” by Matthew Fox. Oneness with God was only to be found in a tomb not in a garden. Jack pointed out that the church has made God a judge. Augustine saw the Christian story as a cosmic fall – we are “east of Eden” – and only a God above the heavens can save and rescue his broken creation. He covered much more than I have space for here, pointing out to us that that approach made Jesus a “God-Man”

Jack called all this “orthodox” doctrine, “deeply, deeply flawed”! It is a concept that has produced a plethora of “bloody hymns” – and it is so far from where truth lies.

He then offered us a **New Vision**. It is the “earth story” of Life – the evolution of the Universe and earth and ourselves. Every living thing (including us) is “survival oriented”. He took us on a biological journey across species – flight or fight – a rationale for survival. And we are such living creatures too – self aware and spiritually aware at our highest aspiration. Jesus was such a human in a long chain of connection – evolving into a higher consciousness. **We are not “fallen” – we simply “are”**. All that “pay the price” theology of the past two thousand years needs to be rethought. It has painted Jesus as God’s victim.

The word “saviour” is not in the Pauline writings. Mary sings to *God* as saviour. Jesus is an anointed one. The **distortion is NOT Biblical, but post biblical. Knowing this sets us free.**

The Church was organised to make us feel guilty. Phrases like “miserable sinners” have poisoned generations. No one is improved by “guilt” Jack said. What Darwin pointed out that there never was a fall and there never is perfection. What we are called to be is to become a new humanity. The whole **“fall-redemption myth”** falls in the light of what we know now. We are called to be lifted beyond our limits into a universal consciousness – connected one with another and the natural world. So:

- God is the **source of life** calling us to love fully
- God is the call to **go beyond** our boundaries
- God is the **source of love** – freeing us to love wastefully
- God is the, **“Ground of Being”** – freeing us to be all that we can be.

Nothing we can ever do or be puts us beyond life, love or ‘being-ness’.

- **God is not a supernatural being.**
- **God is an “indefinable presence”** beyond words
- **God** takes us beyond our survival mentality and **enables us to give ourselves away**
- **God is in Love** more than self-giving life and love to all that is
- **God is in humanity** enabling us to soar higher than our earlier insight.

Today’s spirituality telescope is turning inward to the God deep in each one of us.

We find here, Jack says, **a genuinely divine mystery** – in word and reality. **We are becoming “fully human”** – with a new depth of life and consciousness, finding God internally. There is something “more” to life – **we are related to that which is eternal, participants in universal consciousness**. Here we find eastern and western religions to be two sides of the same coin. **In closing Questions Jack talked of being a “God intoxicated mystic”**. Others found the word God a problem. We are participants in universal consciousness. But that leads into the final Lecture...

The call of the Spirit to a new Humanity

As we all assembled again for **Lecture 4** on the Saturday afternoon, Jack opened to us the call of Spirit to become a new humanity. He used the scriptures to open us to new possibilities. **He said, “There was something transformative in the life of Jesus”**. The divine presence was always at the depth of Jesus’ life.

Jack pointed out that eternity is the final dimension of time, when we actualise the whole: “All that is!” He noted that Matthew moved the meaning of the message outside the scriptural context – it was a Jewish gift to draw the gentiles and make disciples of all the world, out beyond the boundaries of tribe. Jack pointed out that, **“Jesus proclaimed an inclusive Love, where God transforms the ordinary into the extraordinary and broken lives are made whole”**. He returned to those women of Matthew’s history lesson – the doers of extraordinary things.

Christendom in the end collapsed the openness and shut down the gift of Jesus’s message. It was the same for the Old Testament where the Hebrew scriptures made God out to be a demon. We need to get past the “crassness of tribal deity”, he said. The God of the Old Testament was always changing – never static. Nothing can “capture” God. Religion today is churning, evolving and requires new images. The wind blowing, dry bones living again, dreams of presence and insight. The wind blew in the upper room at Pentecost – making the disciples whole again, reconnecting with **“tongues of understanding”**.

Jack pointed out that the revelation of “Godself” was in Jesus – setting us free to explore beyond theistic being. He pointed out that, **“Theism is not adequate to contemporary understanding in theology and science”**.

The Hebrew people saw God as permeating presence, a mighty rock. Prophet after prophet – Nathan, Hosea, Amos, Micah, Jonah and Malachi – prefigured Jesus. The message was one of Justice and “presence” – people have escaped the boundary of humanity to share the reality of the divine. So, when Jesus came along 2000 years ago in this prophetic tradition, people were drawn to him – and sensed God presence in him.

Jesus was primarily a boundary breaker, calling us away from our own security, enabling his followers to break out of their survival mentality. **When tried and condemned, he followed the path to life, while a gentile soldier looked up at the cross and said, “that’s what God is like”.**

As time moved on into the development of the early church, the risk taking in Jesus’ name continued. Jack commented that, “when you see a whole free human life giving itself away, that’s when you see God.” The birth and death of Jesus was able to draw the gentile world to God, in communities of acceptance.

Humanity still struggles to overcome our human nature – our fear, ego and desire. The way forward is to overcome our “victim” mentality, our drive to survive. Jesus and the early communities broke stereotypes and gender roles. Mary Magdalene was, he said, strong evidence of the open hearted community that emerged in the early years.

It took accommodation to Rome’s Empire and its later inheritor the Catholic Church, to create a belief system based on female purity and male celibacy. Jesus had stepped beyond his Jewish boundaries, to embrace women in the community.

To sum up his talks, Jack reminded us that we are all being called to step beyond our boundaries. When a human being is so freed up that he or she can embody “spirit”, “breath” and “life”, and pour out love, then we discover that we can “worship” – by living fully, loving wastefully, and being all we can be.

Quoting John 10:10 Jack concluded with these words:

“The purpose of Jesus is that we might have life and have it in all abundance”

He added:

“God is seen is when human beings are “whole”. Then the vessel can dance in awareness of the I AM of our life, love and being, too! Grasp it, step into it, live it, love it!

DRAFT REPORT – prepared January 16th 2011 – by John Hetherington