

Progressive Christianity Network – Britain

September 2010



Supporting and promoting open Christian understanding

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Who is Progressive Christianity For?

by Philip Sudworth

Progressive writers point out quite rightly that when we try to introduce people to faith, the starting point has to be where people are and not where we would like them to be. All too often the message given by preachers has been: "Just get to where I am, by believing what I tell you to believe, and you'll be all right."

Convinced that they have found the only safe route to salvation, they want people to walk in their footprints. If we reject this approach and want to empower people to follow their own spiritual journeys from where they are, how do we give them a sense of direction or support them in this?

A high proportion of people in this country cannot accept that a God of love would require a blood sacrifice or horrific execution (even of himself (?)) to satisfy his sense of justice before he could forgive people or that everything that happens is subject to the all-powerful God who generated the universe in one creative act. So they find themselves outside traditional Christianity. But where exactly are they spiritually? What is their starting point? They are all different, of course; but where are the bulk of them?

I suspect that most of those currently embracing the progressive Christian paradigm are people who have been brought up within conventional Christianity but have outgrown the images of God from their childhood. They are reasonably well acquainted with the bible and with stories of Jesus and with at least basic theological concepts. Many may still attend a

church within one of the traditional Christian denominations, though not without holding reservations about much of what is taught there. The new paradigm is a good way forward for people with this background, and they are the kind of people who will search out progressive Christian websites or read books on progressive theology. They are looking to move their existing faith forward.

The vast majority of those in Britain today rejecting traditional Christianity, or simply ignoring it as irrelevant to their lives, don't have this background, however; they are part of the great mass of the "unchurched". They may know the Christmas story from having taken part in a nativity play but they may well have only a very sketchy knowledge of what Easter is all about. They don't know what a spiritual journey is; though many do have a deep spiritual hunger. Is progressive Christianity just for those with a Christian background or is it also for these people? Do we have to wait until they have tried and moved beyond traditional Christianity or do we approach them directly now? If so, how do we connect with these people? What's the first step for them to take and how do we encourage them and empower them to take it?

I am not sure how successful we will be if we talk to them about concepts of God, unless, of course, they bring up that word. The term "God", which we may use as shorthand for the highest things we experience, carries all kinds of connotations for many people of an all-

powerful being enthroned above the sky in a kind of cosmic control room, who intervenes rather arbitrarily in human affairs. On the other hand, people do understand love, hope, joy, peace and creativity, particularly where they see them being practised. They can appreciate what liberates them from a pre-occupation with their personal affairs, from a pursuit of pleasure and from the cancer of consumerism, and raises them to a level where they gain self-fulfilment from contributing to the well-being of others. These surely are the foundations which we have to strengthen and on which we have to build.

Some 25 years ago the then Bishop of London was threatening to split the Anglican Church if women vicars were ever appointed – which he declared to be against biblical teaching. While the berobed bishops were debating this theological issue at great length and generating a lot of heat over it, a scruffy, foul-mouthed pop star, Bob Geldof, got very passionate about the suffering caused by the Ethiopian famine. “*If you care, why are you waiting while children die? Give us your mucky money now.*” (Except he didn’t say “mucky”). The tremendous response this received showed that underneath the prevailing self-centredness that was infecting the society of the day (including the church with its emphasis on *personal* salvation) there was a largely untapped spirituality that was ready to respond to the right stimulus. How do we today get through to those disaffected with, or disregarding of, religion, capture their attention and motivate them? Surely, not by discussing theology.

To use a military analogy, the danger is that we will waste much of our time, energy and resources trying to breach the Maginot Line of traditional church teaching. Theological battles will not get us very far because those whose power and influence come from traditional teaching will defend it vigorously and they are entrenched behind bastions built up over centuries. Their ranks include those who are passionately convinced that certain doctrines are the key to salvation and that to give ground is to betray all that is holy. If we are to make an impact on the general public, we have to find a route round the controversies and get directly to the people who need a new vision of what life is about. How we do that

seems to me to be a prime challenge for progressive Christianity.

Rather than becoming embroiled in disputes over doctrines, we need to change the agenda. Faith has to be seen as being more about disturbing this world than explaining God’s plans for a new earth; more about bringing heaven down to earth than trying to obtain a ticket into heaven; more about how we treat one another than relationships within the Trinity; more about values than doctrines; more about promoting justice here on earth than fear of God’s judgement; more about acts of love than condemning sin; more about service than worship; more about healing and wholeness than substitutionary blood sacrifices; more about allowing ourselves to be spent for others than getting ourselves saved; and more about what you are as a person than what you believe.

One way forward might be to encourage people to become involved with something like the Charter for Compassion that goes beyond the specifics on any one religion. That would enable us to develop a shared purpose and a shared language within which we could answer questions that arose about spiritual matters. If we can motivate people to make a contribution to transforming our world, we are more likely to be able to interest them in being transformed themselves. On a practical local level this may mean encouraging them to participate in community ventures and charities.

Of course, with few of us in a position to command the media attention of a Geldof, changing the spiritual agenda and motivating disinterested people might seem a daunting task. But you don’t have to heave at a huge rock to start a landslide. If you generate movement in a few small stones, which then take other stones with them, you can create the same effect. Faith is often shared best on a one to one basis. Opportunities for that come, when we have earned the right to share our faith. (Actions and attitudes are worth a hundred sermons.) Of course, if we don’t deal in certainties, the question arises of what we are to share. One answer, perhaps a simplistic one, is that we share ourselves, complete with all our questions and doubts, our hopes and dreams.

Letter from the Chair



As I write this letter I am looking a week ahead to our first venture into the annual Greenbelt Festival. Andy Vivian will head up the volunteers to staff the stand. If successful then this could well be the start of attendance at similar events across the country. However, to gain a presence at local events local or regional groups will need to take the initiative and responsibility. If groups are interested in awareness raising activities by 'taking' PCN Britain to events then help, advice, leaflets, etc will be available to you. A wise saying from the world of marketing is that having the best product in the world is useless unless people know about it! I remain convinced that the Christian Churches in Britain need PCN as much as we are there to support those Churches.

I am pleased to report the co-option of two members to the Management Committee: Sonya Brown and Paul Onslow. Both will strengthen the Management Committee and bring to it ideas and experiences that will reflect the 'younger end' of our membership profile.

In my recent letter sent by email to members who have given Andy Vivian their email addresses I mentioned the purchase of five new titles in the Living the Questions series of DVDs. These are now available on loan to local groups. However, with the new DVD library there is a need for a librarian. Again, in response to a request made in my email letter, two members have come forward to offer their assistance. Just as soon as a librarian is 'appointed' details of loan arrangements will be sent to all Group Convenors.

In response to a member who lives in an isolated part of the country and unable to attend any local group, the Management Committee recently discussed promoting a Skype-based group so that geographically isolated or house bound members with access to the Internet can hold regular 'local' group meetings on line. If you are interested and would like to participate in a trial Skype group, then please email me. If you have other ideas about improving existing or introducing new communication systems then please discuss them with your local group and/or contact a member of the Management Committee so that ideas can be discussed in its future meetings.

The next Management Committee meeting will take place on 25th September. If you have any issues or suggestions that you would like considered by the Management Committee, please contact either Andy Vivian or me in good time so that your ideas can be added to the agenda.

Finally, as you will see from elsewhere in this Newsletter, Hugh Dawes is retiring from full time ordained ministry in the Church owing to ill health. Both Hugh and Jill have given immeasurably to the development and life of PCN Britain and both have much still to give to the work and cause of progressive Christianity in Britain. On behalf of the Management Committee I wish Hugh and Jill a blessed and productive retirement.

John Churcher

News from local groups

Bath

(Sheena Carter 01225 331806
s.m.carter@pcnbritain.org)

The Bath group is now two years old, and usually attracts between 10 and 15 people, though we have risen to nearly 20 on occasion. We would extend a warm welcome to anyone in the Bath area who may wish to come along, as new ideas and interests are always stimulating and contribute to keeping the group lively and questioning.

The meetings for the autumn are:

27th September Embracing mystery: *is God knowable?*

25th October Being Christian in the 21st century: *Marcus Borg's talks in Edinburgh*

22nd November The nativity stories: *how can we view them today?*

We normally meet on the fourth Monday of the month from September to May (excluding December) in the Central United Reformed Church Halls (Grove Street entrance) at 7.30 pm. If you are in the Bath area and would like to come along, please do, and feel free to contact the convener at the phone number or email address given above.

Bolton

(Jim Hollyman 01204 456050
jim.hollyman@pcnbritain.org.uk)

We are currently viewing and discussing the Wild Goose/Living the Questions DVD "DreamThinkBeDo" and will meet next at 10am on Wednesday 8th September at 121 Junction Road, Deane, Bolton, BL3 4NF.

Do join us if you are interested. It would help us make sure we have enough chairs if you could phone (01024 - 456050) to let us know you're coming. We start with a cuppa (Fairtrade of course!) and usually end by 11.30ish.

The following meeting will be at 10.30.am on Wednesday 10th November.

We have recently had enquiries about holding an evening meeting. If you would be interested in joining an evening group please contact us so that we can explore that possibility.

Dundee

(Gordon Sharp 01382 643002
gordon.sharp@pcnbritain.org.uk)

We have been and are continuing to use the DVD "DreamThinnkBeDo", a sample of which was obtained through the Iona Community. It is clearly aimed at young people so its presentation was initially off putting. However, its content, including Bishop Spong and Marcus Borg, is very good and along with questions and comments issued in advance this is a useful way for the Group to progress. This DVD would be a useful tool in

many settings. I'd particularly like to see how it would go down in schools?

We also had our first "special" event with Ian Bradley, Reader in Church History at St. Andrews University, presenting his most recent book: "Grace, Order, Openness and Diversity". The book is about reclaiming a liberal theological tradition in Christianity that is seen as the mainstream with the present fundamentalism being a feature of the 20th century.

This event was very well attended with a lot of Anglicans joining what is mainly a Presbyterian group. Our meeting next month should see an increase in numbers and in churches being represented. This clearly offers potential for further growth and is encouraging.

Edinburgh

(Mary McMahan 0131 441 3337
mary.mcmahan@pcnbritain.org.uk)

Our group continues to meet in the Cluny Centre on Braid Road (with on-street parking and also accessible by bus to Morningside). Meetings are from 7.30 - 9.30 p.m., usually on the last Monday evening of each month....We welcome newcomers – whether PCN members or not - and recognise that each person has a valuable contribution to make.

Meetings planned until Christmas are:

Monday 27th September: 'Building on Borg' (a follow-up to the PCN weekend at St John's on 10-12th Sept)

Monday 25th October: 'Reading the PCN Compass' (an exploration of the 8 points of our logo)

Monday 29th November: 'Coming Together Separately' (a Jewish –Christian dialogue)

Monday 13th December: 'Sparks for the Journey' (our favourite saying/quotation) -followed by wine and mince pies

You are assured of a warm welcome at any of our meetings.

Exeter

(Liz Vizard 01392 668859
liz.vizard@pcnbritain.org.uk)

Last 'term' we enjoyed a series of talks and discussion on the theme 'My Pearl of Great Price'. This included local speakers of Jewish and Muslim faith as well as free church ministers. Our idea was to challenge ourselves by listening to views which might not necessarily accord with our own. If we are progressive we must of necessity be open to different perspectives on faith. This proved to be helpful and moving at times and our visitors seemed to enjoy the opportunity too. In some cases I suspect we may have surprised our speakers by our real interest in their faith journeys. The Muslim speaker (a British woman married to a

Palestinian) was probably best described as progressive, so we spoke to each other from a non-literal standpoint. It would be good to hear of other groups' experiences of meeting with those of other faiths.

Next term we look forward on Sunday 10th October at 2.30 at the URC Southernhay hall to hearing Rev Gareth Dyer, a Baptist minister and philosophy lecturer, who will speak on 'Why we need a God outside ourselves as well as within us' and another – same time and place – on November 21st on Green spirituality led by our member Noel Harrower: "Green Spirit - path to a new consciousness", the title of a new book, edited by Marian Van Eyke McCain. It has a forward by Satish Kumar, and there are references in the book to several faiths other than Christianity, but is essentially a recognition that humankind is but one species on this planet, and that we do not own it. All are welcome to all our meetings, whether a one-off visit, or as a continuing interest.

Gloucestershire

(Frank Godfrey 01452 533825
frank.godfrey@pcnbritain.org.uk)

We greatly valued spending an afternoon with two USA visitors, Sybil and Jerry Mcleese and hearing their story. Both grew up in Southern Baptist communities "but did not believe that their religion had all the answers." Eventually joining a Methodist church they were led with other church members into studying the New Testament and Understanding Islam which profoundly changed their spiritual journey –not least because eventually the local Minister could not tolerate this. Moving to a more open United Methodist church, they joined in a "Living the Questions" course but found that this too provoked such bitter opposition that finally the leading families had to leave that church. Meanwhile this experience had led Sybil and Jerry to discover the writings of Progressive Christians such as Borg, Spong, Crossan, Brueggeman and many others.

As they shared their present statement of belief with us we found ourselves saying "Yes – that's where we have arrived too."

Being the nearest group to Cheltenham four of us offered to help staff the PCN table at Greenbelt and our last meeting –with Andy –was used to consider what might be expected of us there. Next time we shall start using the DVD "Countering Pharaoh's Production-Consumption society." We meet on the first Saturday afternoon of each month.

Hampshire Hub

(Martin Godfrey 023 8076 6312
martin.godfrey@pcnbritain.org.uk)

The Alton Group reconvenes after the summer break on Tuesday 21st September at 10.30 in South Harting nr Petersfield. The topics for discussion are

the essays on *Reason and Education* from A.C. Grayling's book *The Meaning of Things*. Afterwards we will plan our programme for the autumn at a local pub. Meetings are normally held on the third Tuesday morning of the month at various locations near the eastern border of North Hampshire. The A27 Book Club has been following the lead of the Alton Group in reading and discussing essays from A.C. Grayling's *The Meaning of Things* and will continue to do so in the autumn months. Meetings are normally held on the fourth Tuesday morning of the month, 10.30 to 12, at various locations close to the section of the A27 road between Romsey and Fareham. The next meeting is on 28th September, in Swaythling, Southampton.

The Southsea Group met for a lunch in Portchester in late July to plan the autumn programme. This was followed by a walk through the Castle grounds including a visit to the Norman chapel. In keeping with usual practice members will take turns in providing either DVD or CD material on religious or spiritual topics and leading discussions on it. Meetings are normally held in Southsea on the fourth or fifth Thursday of the month, 2 – 4 pm. The Chandler's Ford and Winchester Open Spirituality Group will recommence meeting on the fourth Sunday of the month, 3 – 5 pm, on 22nd August in Chandler's Ford, Eastleigh. Members will provide music, poems and short readings relevant to late summer.

The Solent Coast Group is in a resting phase at present. However some members of the group and others from the Hampshire Hub regularly attend meetings of the Wessex local group of the Scientific and Medical Network held on the third Friday of the month, 2 – 4 pm, at the Friend's Meeting House adjacent to New Milton railway station. The topics for discussion are concerned with the ethical and spiritual dimensions of science and medicine.

Ex-Muslim activist, Maryam Namazie, who spoke at the Sea of Faith Annual Conference about the One Law for All Campaign, is the guest of the Dorset Humanists in Bournemouth at 2 pm on Saturday 13th November.

Hickling (Norfolk Broads)

(Merrie Longbottom 01692 598844
merrie.longbottom@pcnbritain.org.uk)

Our small group continues to meet, usually every Thursday afternoon, at members' homes for a time of sharing, studying – and supporting each other in our journey. We will soon be finishing the DVD series 'Saving Jesus', a good follow-up to Living the Questions I. We plan on next tackling a very challenging and thought-provoking book, *With or Without God – why the way we live is more important than what we believe* by Canadian pastor, Gretta Vosper. A warm welcome awaits anyone seeking more information.

Leeds, Yorkshire

(Sandra Griffiths 0113 258 2652
sandra.griffiths@pcnbritain.org.uk)

The Leeds Group meets at Chapel Allerton Methodist Church Centre (LS7 4NB) usually on the second Saturday of the month, with coffee/tea available from 9.30, between 10 and 12.

Members continue to use our 'library' of books donated by or on loan from members.

Contrary to what was said in the last newsletter, our first meeting after the summer break will be on 18 September (3rd Saturday) when Revd Barry Parker will introduce the topic Money and Wealth and then start our discussion. Future meetings to the end of the year will be held on 9th October, 13th November and 11th December, on topics to be announced.

Our fortnightly Monday evening meetings, Questers, start again on 27th September at 7.30 pm at the home of one of our members in Roundhay (further details on request). In the past nine months we studied *A Credible Jesus* by Robert Funk, the founder of the Jesus Seminar. Individually we were challenged and enriched. From September we are going to use some of the chapters in *Tomorrow's Christian* by Adrian B Smith as a focus for our thoughts.

We are always pleased to see regulars, occasional visitors and newcomers alike, and both groups contain all such.

Please contact me for further information or directions to any of our meetings. It might be possible to arrange a lift too.

London – Herne Hill

(Ted Offerman 020 8852 7063
ted.offerman@pcnbritain.org.uk)

We have met regularly through the year, ending with our usual summer party in July which was well attended and an enjoyable occasion as we bring and share food and drink. We listened to a tape recording of a conversation between Tom Butler (then Bishop of Leicester), Hugh Dawes (when he was a priest at Cambridge) and John Polkinghorne (Cambridge professor of mathematical physics and subsequently an Anglican priest) on the subject of Anthony Freeman's book *God in Us* which led to his dismissal from the Anglican Church.

It was interesting and inspiring - Hugh taking a strong liberal line, as one would expect, Bishop Butler somewhere between Hugh and the more conservative Polkinghorne.

It was our last meeting at St Faith's vicarage, since Hugh is retiring as the Vicar of St. Faith's at the end of September for reasons of health. The group will meet on Tuesday 27th September (usual time of 7.45 pm for 8.00) in the coffee lounge of St Faith's Community Centre, for exploration as always, but also to talk about the future, and where and how we meet. Certainly South East London needs a PCN group no less than anywhere else.

Hugh has been a great inspiration to us all. He and Jill together have welcomed us warmly and graciously to the Vicarage over the years and provided nibbles and wine on each occasion. We end our meetings with a form of night prayer, in part devised by Hugh, which we all appreciate. They leave us with our love and affection and both will be in our thoughts and prayers.

London - Richmond.

(Alan Powell 020 8878 7355
alan.powell@pcnbritain.org.uk)

The group is currently listening to and discussing John Dominic Crossan's DVD "Victory and Peace or Justice and Peace". The final two sessions, which are on Saturdays September 18th and October 16th, are

"Worship and Violence: What is the Purpose of Prayer?"

"Resurrection and Community: What is the Function of Your Church?"

The lectures, which last some 50 minutes and are followed by post DVD discussion and refreshment, will be held in the chapel of Hickey's Almshouses, Sheen Road, Richmond. Non members of the group will be most welcome.

If you can not come to either of these meetings, but are interested in finding out more about the Richmond PCN group, please contact Alan Powell (020 8878 7355).

Manchester

(John Ramsbottom 0161 456 5119
john.ramsbottom@pcnbritain.org.uk)

The group took a break over the summer and resumes meetings in the autumn. A slightly different format has been decided for the next months whereby members of the group will lead an evening on a subject of their choice. The plans are provisionally:

Sept 22nd - Concepts of God

Oct 27th - A "progressive" bible study

Nov 24th - Progressive Christianity and young people

There will then be a break for Christmas, hopefully resuming in January 2011, although the meeting topics have not yet been decided for next year.

As always there is an open invitation for anyone interested to attend - you will be most welcome on a Wednesday evening 7:30 pm at St Agnes church, Nth Reddish, Stockport. More information available from John Ramsbottom -
john.ramsbottom@pcnbritain.org.uk

Newbury

(Maria Grace 01635 47196
Email:maria.grace@pcnbritain.org.uk)

Our group in Newbury is small (5-8 people on average) but after each meeting we feel inspired and that we've learnt something new. We meet in our homes and take turns in leading a session - mostly on the last Friday of the month at 10 am.

There is always a welcome for anyone who'd like to join us.

We continue to look at the 'Saving Jesus' DVDs interspersed with other topics. After the session on the resurrection and looking at Mark's original ending - 'They ran from the tomb in fear' - we decided to spend the next session looking at what part fear plays in our lives and in general. Our August session was focussed on 'Vocation' - We discussed how and what we choose to do with our lives, till the end!

It was a pleasure for my husband and me to meet up with John Churcher and his wife in 'St Martin in the Field' crypt recently and he offered to come and meet with our group which we will certainly take up, possibly inviting another group to join us. Dates for next sessions are planned until the end of the year. In December we would like to discuss and practise how to celebrate Christmas the PCN way!

Sedberg

(Martin Dodds 015396 20308
martin.dodds@pcnbritain.org.uk)

Martin writes: There is not much for a local report from the Sedberg Group as we generally do not meet in the summer, and as yet have not finally fixed the date to reconvene, but we will, sometime in September! Anyone reading PCN News in the South Cumbria North Lancashire area who wants to know more about the Group can call me on 015396 20308.

Teesside and North East England

(Michael Wright 01642 851919
michael.wright@pcnbritain.org.uk)

There is a lively interest in the North East of England in the sort of concerns PCN has, though we have few actual members.

At Middlesbrough we have a Book Club called Journeyings. We completed our exploration of *The First Paul* by John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg. We found some stimulation in their thesis, but also disappointment that there were a number of issues raised for us which we thought the authors didn't explore in sufficient depth to satisfy us.

Our new book is *The Case for God* by Karen Armstrong. We start to explore this on Tuesday October 12th 2.30 - 4.30.p.m. at Middlesbrough Quaker Meeting House, 131 Cambridge Road, Middlesbrough, TS5 5HL. We will begin by discussing the first three chapters. Our numbers vary between 5 - 12, and encompass Quakers, Methodists, Anglicans, an occasional Baptist, and we would love to be joined by others including Roman Catholics. Not everyone has read the relevant chapters beforehand, but most have. Everyone joins in the exchange of perceptions and views. We are very accepting of difference, and there is a relaxed and welcoming atmosphere.

Breathing Space is a different organisation with similar concerns. It meets in Newcastle upon Tyne about three times a year on a Saturday morning, and attracts a range of speakers. In July the subject was Apophatic Theology. It is hoped to arrange the next event on either October 23rd or November 6th on the subject of Spirituality and Mental Health. There are strong links both with local church groups, and with the chaplaincies at both the University of Newcastle, and the University of Northumbria. Again Quakers, Methodists and Anglicans play a key part in planning the programme, and those who attend the events are from a wide range of views and allegiances. *Breathing Space* has been holding these meetings for almost 10 years, and usually attracts a gathering of between 30 - 60 people. The contact person is Bobbie Stephens Wright - bobbie@olympiag.freeserve.co.uk. There is usually a charge of between £3 - £5 to cover costs. The meetings are held in different venues close to the centre of Newcastle, and easily accessible by public transport. The group are very open to ideas for speakers.

Tunbridge Wells Radical Pilgrims

(Pat Churchill 0189253154
pat.churchill@pcnbritain.org)

Everyone is welcome to our meetings which are generally on the last Thursday of the month (do ring me to check time and venue). We tend to pick topics to discuss rather than following a set course.

We have only had two meetings since my last report, the first in June when five of us who had been lucky enough to hear Karen Armstrong talking on "The Case for God" discussed our reactions with other members of the group. We planned for "Stories for Peace", promoted by 'Spirit of Peace', on Sunday October 17th from 1pm at the Camden Centre in Tunbridge Wells, when two Peacemakers, Chana Yaffe a Jewish Storyteller and Sheik Ghassan Manasra an Islamic writer, spiritual teacher and scholar will join those who wish to come for a lunch and storytelling. Contact me if you would like further information, Our final meeting was light-hearted, but gave us a few points to ponder when we watched one of Alan Bennett's "Talking Heads" videos, "Love amongst the lentils"

There are so many events happening - Greenbelt, Richard Rohr's visit, and Marcus Borg in Edinburgh that feedback from these will keep us talking for many more meetings.

The dates for future meetings are: Thursdays 30th September, 28th October and 25th November.

Vale of Glamorgan

(Janice Proctor 01446 401152
janice.proctor@pcnbritain.org.uk)

The Vale group used the CDs recorded by the Exeter branch of PCN to consider once again the 8 Points of Progressive Christianity. This is the third time that we've looked at them from different angles. One point made by a member was he agreed with all the points but felt the name "Progressive" to be at odds with the questioning outlook of PCN. "Progressive" to this man implied superiority over those believers and seekers who are not deemed to be progressive. There was some debate on the question but no consensus was reached.

The group has just started a study pack on inter faith relations called "The Life we Share". We've only had one session on it but are enthusiastic to continue the exploration.

Having had a break during August, the group will meet fortnightly from 8th September at 101 Colcot Road, Barry, where all are welcome.

West of Scotland

(Chris Vermeulen chris@orchardhill.org.uk)

After much discussion and planning we had a meeting in June to form the West of Scotland PCN group. There were 55 present, with everyone having the opportunity to contribute and express their needs, wants and vision for a progressive Christian voice and support base. Needs were varied from clergy feeling isolated amongst their colleagues to a desire to learn. Given the numbers and the geography of the group we appointed a planning group to take the group forward. The WofS group will act as a hub with several small groups in the region, a forum one for clergy, three

big group meetings during the year, and a conference weekend in 3-5 June 2011 with Bishop Jack Spong. Our first big group meeting is scheduled for Renfield St. Stephen's, Bath Street, Glasgow starting at 7.30pm on Friday, 29 October where John Churcher will be our guest speaker. He will be talking primarily about Progressive Christianity and also his latest book "Setting Jesus Free". Two further events are being planned for 2010/11 session and these will be confirmed at a later date.

Woodbridge

(Julie Mansfield 01394 384370
julie.mansfield@pcnbritain.org.uk)

Julie writes: Our little group is steadily growing and we are beginning to open up to each other. We are wonderfully lucky that our perspectives range from the extremely spiritual through to the extremely political and we represent a good number of Christian denominations.

As I mentioned in our last report, PCN treasurer Terence Cooper did lead us in a session from 'Jesus and his Kingdom of Equals' and chose Lesson 19, 'A World of Sharing'. I think I can speak for our whole group when I say that we were disappointed in its understanding of Mark 6:41 as a rather unexceptional tale about sharing. We much prefer the symbolic meaning attributed to the story by (amongst others) Jeffrey John in his book, 'The Meaning in the Miracles'. In fact, as a group we would recommend this book for all thinking Christians.

We have not had a meeting in August and in September we are going to watch the DVD 'The Son of Man' which has had quite mixed reviews.

Jesus, Justice, and Non-Violence

by Tom Hinds

I'd like to share with others the revolutionary new perspective I was shown earlier this year in Lent by the books of Walter Wink of New York, a Professor of Biblical Interpretation. It puts some of "Jesus' teaching", as I've been given it over the years, into a dramatically new light, with huge implications for living my life.

The core is from Matthew's Gospel, 5.39: "Don't react violently against the one who is evil". React? Yes. Violently? NO! Non-violently? Yes, and here's how.

Matthew's Gospel goes on in the same verse: "When anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other as well". This does *not* mean: "Look for more humiliation".

In the culture of his time, Jesus is recommending an act of defiance. This is because the striking of the victim's right cheek cannot be done with the

oppressor's left hand, (because the left hand is to be used exclusively for personal toilet hygiene). Striking on the right cheek thus has to be done with the right hand, a contemptuous back-of-the-hand slap to demean the victim.

Jesus seems to be putting into the victim's mind and mouth the words: "Your first blow failed to achieve the intended effect. I deny you the power to humiliate me. I am a human being just like you. Your social status does not alter that fact. You cannot demean me". It is *standing-up against*.

Matthew goes on, 5.40, with Jesus saying: "When someone wants to sue you for your shirt, let that person have your cloak along with it". This does *not* mean: "I'll let you squeeze me dry". In the culture of his time, Jesus is recommending an *act to shame your oppressor*.

This is because in a culture of poor people and outcasts with whom Jesus was mixing, two garments were as much as anyone might have. To give the second garment would be to strip naked. In Judaism nakedness was taboo, and the shame fell not on the naked party but on the person causing or viewing one's nakedness. Jesus seems to have the victim saying: "You want my robe? Take everything. Now you've got all I have except my body. Do you want that, too?" It is a *public challenge*..

Matthew has Jesus going on to say, 5.41. "When anyone conscripts you for one mile, go an extra mile". This does *not* mean: "Accept deeper subjection". In the culture of his time Jesus is recommending an *act to put your oppressor in the wrong*.

In the culture of the Roman occupation of Israel, a Roman soldier could conscript anyone to carry their pack-and-equipment, perhaps 80lbs plus, for one mile. (Remember Jesus, and his cross - as soldiers' equipment for an execution, - and Simon of Cyrene?). However, if the soldier couldn't get you to find a replacement porter at the next mile-post, the soldier would break regulations if he tried to get you to go a second mile, the soldier would risk severe penalties under military law. Jesus seems to be saying:

"Seize the initiative. Take back the power of your choice. Find the law to quote against your oppressor". It is *asserting equality under the law*.

As Walter Wink says: "These three examples illustrate what Jesus seems to mean in his general saying: 'Don't react violently against the one who is evil'". Instead of the two options ingrained in us by millions of years of unreflecting brute responses to biological threats from our environment - *flight or fight* -, and instead of traditional Church interpretations of these sayings of Jesus: "Just put up with even more oppression", Jesus seems to be offering a *third way*, a way in which evil can be opposed without our having to use it in our response and thus ourselves becoming violent in our essence.

Walter Wink (thanks to my Lenten reading of his books) has led me to see Jesus as a genuine social revolutionary. Jesus' approach and advice seem still relevant to my world today.

If other readers would like to explore this issue of Jesus, the struggle for justice, and the tactics of what Wink calls Jesus' Third Way, the way of confronting oppression through Non-Violence they are welcome to contact Tom on 01753 858123 or write to 145 Maidenhead Road, Windsor, SL4 5EZ.

Looking back – St Deiniol's in May

There are three wonderful things about a PCN weekend at St Deiniol's: the place itself; the company; and the chance to reflect on matters of faith with openness and honesty.

First of all, the place. St Deiniol's is (just) in Wales. It describes itself as a 'residential library' and manages to combine seriousness of purpose with comfortable accommodation and good food. It stands in its own ground in an attractive village: you can stroll round the adjacent churchyard, which gives views over the countryside; or in the castle grounds at the other end of the village, with river banks and open pasture and trees. This year we had stunning weather, and there was lots of free time to enjoy it.

Then, the company. Several people commented on the joy they felt in being able to speak freely, knowing that others would share a generally 'progressive' outlook.

'I found the informal common room times and the mealtime sharing, a source of rich fellowship and accepting friendship. I felt that people wanted to know me, which is in my view, something right at the

heart of Christianity, and that others were very willing to open themselves to me for knowing'

'Times apart from the sessions could find people heads together, earnestly discussing interests well outside the context of the conference'

'It was interesting that I was at ease with the group at this conference as I am with my own PCN group. The quiet moments were comfortable too – one did not feel one had to be polite and start a conversation'

Above all, the seminars and the discussion which followed them. They were given this year by Professor David Catchpole, Emeritus Professor of Theological Studies in the University of Exeter, under the title 'Jesus of Nazareth in 2010'. Over four 1½ hour talks, followed by questions and discussion, he explored what the New Testament really says: examining such contentious and difficult issues as: the virgin birth (fact? metaphor? misinterpretation?); who Jesus felt himself to be (messiah? son of God? prophet?); the resurrection (with reference to the Jewish tradition); and Paul's role in 'inventing' Christianity (within an early church rather given to disagreements). David gave us handouts to

read, and it was only when I read them after my return home that I realised quite how generous he had been: they are both scholarly and readable, and give a basis for many of the views we hold dear in PCN, whilst challenging others. They are now available on the PCN website, though sadly you will not be able to access the wonderfully clear and witty expositions which brought them to life.

'I enjoyed David Catchpole's approach because he managed to project to all the people there – the use of the documents he produced for us pre-meeting I found most helpful. It must be very difficult to find a reasonable level when one has such a mixed audience with a group like PCN. It can be awkward because of the sensitivity of the material and beliefs involved. I was happy to just be able to understand what this very erudite and learned Bible scholar was saying for the most part'

'This was my first PCN weekend. I had not fully understood what it was going to be about and that it would be so academically based, but I did find it all very interesting. The adjective that I would use to overview this time, is "rich". The workshops, although challenging for me as I have no theological background, were a steep but rich learning curve. I could never have learned so much just through reading myself, and then to hear a wide range of comments and perspectives after each chunk again was richly illuminating and thought-provoking. It was good to hear people differing comfortably in their thoughts and views'

'He clarified much for me about the division in the early church and how amazing it was that Christianity managed to grow as it did. The reasons for the division all fell into place and became understandable. I found myself wanting to ask one question after another and I expect other people had this desire as well but time did not allow'

One member of the group referred to the difference between David's approach and that of Jack Spong, for instance. I found that quite thought-provoking. Maybe we need to keep challenging our own emerging 'PCN orthodoxies'?

One book David mentioned is 'The historical Christ and the theological Jesus' by Dale C. Allison. This is a slim and very readable book which addresses this question. He looks at different kinds of 'historical Jesus' that theologians of recent years have put forward, and ponders whether we find the Jesus that fits our gut feelings about what a good theology would be. Some of David's own scholarly conclusions are quite challenging in this way – and in the end that is surely the point of such a weekend, if we are to grow and develop in faith.

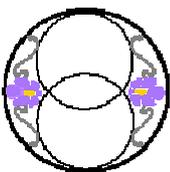
'The weekend came at just the right time for me as I found increasingly my inner spiritual life somewhat empty and lacking in content due in part to chucking out a lot of, for me, redundant doctrine and simplistic Christian teachings. Listening to David who has spent his whole life engaged in detailed scholarship and study of Christian thought has inspired me to sit up and take note and ask myself who is this person that I purport to believe in and want to follow. Who was He and what did He want to bring about? In other words the weekend has given me the jolt that I needed!'

'I am sure that friends who have asked me about my weekend away, and received my responses must have noted that I seemed enriched in spirit following this experience and I hope that I can look forward to more of these events'

Many thanks to those who organised the weekend.

Cerys Jones
(with comments from Diana, Pat, Dorothy, Bidy and others)

Forthcoming events



WHAT IS GOD?

led by Adrian B. Smith and David Usher (Unitarian Minister)
A Study day organised by CANA (Christians Awakening to a New Awareness) at the Sion Centre, 34 Chepstow Villas, London W11 2QZ
(020 7313 8286) on Saturday 23rd October 2010, 10.30am-4.30pm.

St Augustine wrote: "If you understand him, he is not God". The nature of the Ultimate Reality is indeed the Ultimate Mystery. The question of our day together is the key question underlying not only the different perspectives of Christian denominations, but it is that which divides the great religions of the world.

Since the Ultimate reality cannot be understood, we create not only the name "God" but create our own image of what Meister Eckhart calls "The God beyond God".

During the day people will share their own experiences of relating to the Ultimate Being.

The cost for the day, which is open to non CANA members, is £30.00. Please bring your own lunch. Tea and coffee will be provided.

To book, send your cheque (made payable to CANA) to Celia Storey, 102 Church Road,

Steep, Petersfield GU32 2DD (01730 265591), from whom further information about the nature of the day can be obtained.

RECLAIMING A RADICAL FAITH FOR THE 21st CENTURY: AN EXPLORATION TOGETHER

Saturday, 13th November, 1- 6 pm,

at Ladywood ARC, St. John's and St. Peter's Church, Darnley Road, Ladywood, Birmingham B16 8TF

(Good parking: see www.stjohnpeter.org.uk/Church/location.htm or No. 66 Bus from Queensway Priory Square in Birmingham city centre.)

A conference for Christians to learn from a personal understanding of both the Jewish and the Muslim faith.

Organised by the West Midland and Birmingham Group of the Progressive Christianity Network (PCN-Britain)

Introduction and Chair: Richard Tetlow
Speakers: Salma Yaqoob, Leader 'Respect Party', Birmingham City Councillor
Dr Margaret Jacobi, Rabbi, Birmingham Progressive Synagogue

Cost £5. Please bring your lunch, drinks are provided. Numbers are limited. Please apply a.s.a.p. to Richard Tetlow, 26, Sovereign Way, Moseley, Birmingham B13 8AT; 0121 449 4892; richardtetlow@btinternet.com

And also on that day

STUDIED IMPRESSIONS OF JESUS

Led by Adrian Alker

Saturday November 13th 10.00 to 4.00

South Craven Baptist Church, Holme Lane, Sutton in Craven, Keighley, West Yorks BD20 7LL

Cost £5 (includes refreshments but bring your own lunch) concessions for SCBC members/PCN Members

What image of Jesus do we carry in our hearts and minds? Is it the gentle Jesus meek and mild of Sunday School days? Or have we been overwhelmed by the crucified Saviour image of much devotion over the centuries? Do films like Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* or the Oberammergau production help us in forming those images of Christ? Can we get back to something approaching historical reality? Does this matter? Does Jesus matter? 'For two thousand years the person of Jesus has continued to fascinate Christians and non Christians alike.' Can the 'real' Jesus of Nazareth be rescued from the layers of tradition and doctrine and be once more a compelling figure for radical Christians today? Adrian Alker, believes this is both a positive and necessary exercise for progressive Christians. On this day we will be encouraged

both to share our impressions of Jesus - with the aid of a favourite piece of art if desired - and to see how Jesus the Man might also be considered the revolutionary Lord.

There will be three sessions to the day:
Jesus the Man
Jesus the Revolutionary
Jesus the Lord.

Car parking is available at the church. For more information, contact David Warrington
Tel No. 01535 637012

southcravenbaptistchurch@gmail.co.uk

Adrian Alker was Vicar of St Mark's Broomhill, Sheffield for twenty years and founded the Centre for Radical Christianity there. He is now the Director of Mission Resourcing for the Diocese of Ripon and Leeds and serves on the Management Committee of PCN Britain.

PCN at Greenbelt – stop press report



It was good to be at Greenbelt. A lot of festival-goers had never heard of PCN and seemed very pleased to learn that we exist. Many took away our list of groups as well as the latest PCN leaflet. We had the odd person who wanted to tackle us for not "believing the bible" but the vast majority were enthusiastic and, what's more, under 50! It will be interesting to learn whether group convenors receive any new contacts from people who came across us at Greenbelt.



Working the stall was stimulating and exhausting. We were in a large marquee with about thirty other organisations covering community building, overseas aid, international justice, church modernisation and personal growth. There was also Pru's kitchen, an invaluable source of hot drinks and flapjacks. The marquee was open from 10 in the morning, often until 10 at night – a total of 36 hours through the festival. Over 20,000 people attended the festival and the footfall through our marquee was fairly constant. We spent a lot of the time answering questions and comparing spiritual journeys with those who came to see us.

A word of thanks to the volunteers. The Gloucester group organised themselves to cover the main days of the festival. The team consisted

of Frank and Wendy Godfrey, Graham Partington and Mavis Wood. Two other PCN



members, Joy Stribblehill and Maureen Partington, who were attending Greenbelt as festival-goers, very kindly offered to cover us when we were short – which proved especially helpful at meal times and in the evenings. It was also a pleasure to be joined by a PCN committee member, Adrian Alker, who, although at Greenbelt for other reasons, was happy to take his turn behind the stall, as was my friend, Sarah James, who helped to prepare and pack up the stall.

In all, around four hundred leaflets and about 60 copies of *Together in Hope* were taken.

Among the highlights for me was a visit to the stall by the Baptist minister and author, John Henson. He chaired a charity called ONE for Christian Renewal, which like us carried the banner for progressive Christianity. Last year it folded and the charity's funds were transferred by the Charities Commission to PCN Britain as the organisation with the closest aims and objectives. So it was good to meet John and to acknowledge his work and our benefit. He is now a member of PCN!



Andy Vivian

Book reviews

I met God in Bermuda – Faith in the 21st Century by Steven Ogden

© Books 2009. pb 160 pp. ISBN 978-1-84694-204-4. £9.99 (£8.99 Amazon)



Reviewed by Liz Terry

I defy anyone not to pick this book up, if only to see what it is about. The title is both funny and intriguing, not to mention the cover

image of a man in a bowler hat, sitting on a chair in the middle of a deserted beach, gazing out to sea. What on earth is this book about? What does Bermuda have to do with it?

Dr Steven Ogden is an Australian Anglican priest, and with this book, he seeks to make his radical take on theology more accessible to the average reader, following on from a more academic text which he wrote in 2007.

I found this book extremely readable and the ideas in it fascinating. The book focuses on the nature of our experience of God, and how this experience helps us to form our image of God. It begins with the now traditional debunking of the “old man with a beard on a white cloud” myth, which any self-respecting liberal Christian will have long ago discarded anyway. Ogden calls this the “car park God” – the one who finds you parking spaces, intervening directly in your life when you ask him to. He argues that this God does not exist, and never has. Instead, he distils our experience of God into two aspects, presence and absence. We experience presence as a fleeting moment of spiritual awakening, where circumstances come together to invoke the sense of God being present at a given moment. The title anecdote set in Bermuda explains this feeling of presence very clearly, and I won’t ruin it for you by going into detail here. Suffice it to say that most of us will recognise these fleeting moments when we feel the presence of God (however we define him) in our lives. Absence is a much more difficult concept, and one which I struggled to comprehend when reading this book. I think what Ogden is trying to explain is that, if we accept that God does not intervene in a personal and direct way in our lives, we must also learn to live with this “absence” when we suffer or hear about the suffering of others. God does not cause a

natural disaster, for example, but equally, he cannot prevent it. He is, essentially, absent.

Using the theologies of two eminent German theologians, Paul Tillich and Karl Rahner, Ogden skilfully demonstrates that these two aspects of presence and absence can be seen throughout the history of the Christian faith contained in the Bible. In order to demonstrate this, he focuses on the very genesis of that faith, which he refers to as the “death-resurrection event”. He uses this title in order to emphasise the metaphorical aspects of the story, which he then explains cleverly according to his presence/absence theory.

My criticisms of Ogden would be that his writing can sometimes seem bitty, and he takes a long time to get to his points, valid and interesting though they are. He has a tendency to go off on tangents, and often resorts to “before I talk about this, I must explain that, but before I can explain that, I must tell you about the other”, which can get a little irritating after a while. It’s also clear that he feels, or has been told, that the best way to engage with a non-academic reader is to throw in some personal anecdotes. Some of the anecdotes he recounts (like the one in Bermuda, for example) are entertaining and enhance his theories, but some seem pointless and feel “stuck on”. For example, he refers to Tillich and Rahner as “our German shepherds”, which in itself is a little trite, but he then follows this up with a fairly irrelevant reference to a German Shepherd dog he once owned.

These minor criticisms aside, this book is an honest and contemporary attempt to bring us a new understanding of what “God” means in the 21st century. Ogden doesn’t claim to have found the answer, but he offers up a new and credible theory to continue the important “faith-journey” that we, and all people of any faith or none, must continue to travel in order to find spiritual relevance in this modern world.

His humanisation of Jesus particularly resonated with me. Like him, I tend to refer to myself as a “follower of Jesus”, rather than a

Christian. He gently questions the divinity of Jesus, regarding him as a wise and spiritual man who was way ahead of his time in his social and political attitudes. Above all, he accepts, and rejoices in, his humanity:

“...I hope this book will help Jesus find a place at your next dinner party. While he would ask

you challenging questions about social justice and inclusion, he would enjoy the wine, the food and above all, your company.” (Chapter 5, page 94)

What a lovely image that is.

Liz Terry August 2010

A Novel Approach

Putting Away Childish Things by Marcus J Borg

Harper One 2010. hb 352 pp. ISBN 978-0-06-188814-4. £16.99 (£11.89 Amazon)



Reviewed by Chris Avis

When an automated email arrived from Amazon's cyberspy investigator of my on-line shopping habits, inviting me to pre-order a new book that would soon be available,

my mental autopilot detected the name 'Marcus Borg' and automatically moved my mouse over the order button. I expected to receive another very readable Borg treatise, but not with the bonus of such appealing literary packaging that eventually arrived.

Putting Away Childish Things is the author's first attempt at fiction to encompass the very real enigmas and paradoxes encountered on any journey along Christian paths, whether we choose to acknowledge them or not. Marcus Borg has a justifiable reputation as a gifted progressive Christian teacher, well able to gather together many divergent theological threads and weave them into a thoughtful cloak of Christianity. However, this book demonstrates that he is also no mean spinner of a good yarn, with equally effective results.

His tale focuses on Kate Riley, a single thirty-something popular and liberal professor of religion at a modest arts college in the US who is pretty content with her life, including a regular draught Guinness and daily limited cigarette ration. She has had a study on the book of James published with fair success, followed by another more recently on the Jesus birth narratives, for the promotion of which her publicist has arranged a number of radio interviews. It is partly after one of these with the presenters at an extremely fundamentalist evangelical station that Kate's comfortable life begins to unravel, exacerbated by comments from some around her. Then she is offered a visiting professorship at 'Scudder', a prestigious seminary, which seems

perfect until Kate discovers that on the staff at Scudder is Martin Erickson, an older professor and author with whom she had an adulterous affair some years earlier.

Borg freely admits that his first novel is didactic, and in her dust jacket blurb Karen Armstrong writes that this technique is "a superb way of involving the reader emotionally and imaginatively in important issues". The convincing plot and characters create a compelling page-turner skilfully interwoven with conversations and discourses on familiar hot topics like the Bible, God, belief, miracles, sex, doubt and certainty. I am constantly made aware of gaps in my own 'religious database' caused by a mix of ignorance and forgetfulness, and found much of value within this story to both inform and remind me.

I was particularly interested in the incorporated potted biography of David Friedrich Strauss, of whom I had scant knowledge. When this 19th century radical German theologian wrote 'The Life of Jesus Critically Examined', its publication created a storm of hysterical protests (surprise, surprise) which cost Strauss his university teaching career. Remarkably, the English translation was produced by George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans) in 1860 when she was just twenty-four, having taught herself German to do so.

An interesting ethical dilemma arises in the story when Scudder finds itself offered a gift of six million dollars to endow a chair in theology, with just two conditions: the donor must remain anonymous and the chair must expose the college to 'a first rate evangelical mind'. When the college faculty staff meet to discuss this tempting offer, the reader is privy to a fascinating discussion on the pros and cons involved, including the ways that terms like 'conservative' and 'evangelical' can be defined.

The resolution of the predicament is itself an object lesson in applied wisdom.

When Martin Erickson gives Kate an update on the recent years of his life, it is hard to resist reading some of the author's own experiences into Martin's words: "...in some ways it's very nice to be a little bit known. People buy my books and ask me to sign them, and they're grateful... But it does have a down side... being a success [is] so time-consuming... I'm often not sure whether I have more of a life now or less of a life."

Reclaiming the death of Jesus

From the editor's chair

Progressive believers regularly back away from the death of Jesus. Understandably repelled by ideas of sacrifice and atonement, we choose just to set it aside. 'Jesus was a great teacher. Let us concentrate on that.' Well, he probably was; but I'm much less confident than many either that we know what he taught, or that we would like it if we did! I find *attractive* the Jesus re-imagined by Borg, Crossan and others, but I am not persuaded that this is the *historical* Jesus. I'm too aware of the words of George Tyrrell speaking of the 19th century liberal protestant Von Harnack. "The Christ that [he] sees, looking back through nineteen centuries of Catholic darkness, is only the reflection of a Liberal Protestant face, seen at the bottom of a deep well."

Many will be most aware of giving expression to our faith in Jesus (faith as *trust* in him, rather than things believed about him) in the way we try to live our lives. So teachings, and the way he demonstrated in deeds and actions what mattered to him, are important to this. Yet it is generally believed that when Jesus' earliest followers began to record his story, the first bit of it to be written down was an account of his dying. And week by week - to the chagrin of some! - the eucharist pulls us back into a remembrance of what Jesus did when he knew that *death* was near. Progressive believers should not ignore this. We need to reclaim the death of Jesus. It has much we can learn from, not simply in our final dying, but in those lesser deaths, the other experiences of being done to, not doing - which are part of the experience of living for most. It is another way in which we can seek to follow.

Of course there are many different tellings of it. In his book *The Stature of Waiting*, W H Vanstone pointed to two things in the account written by Mark. The first, how silent Jesus is as

This is an entertaining and engrossing book populated by believable characters debating potentially divisive issues with intelligent honesty (oh for more of that in real life!). Whether you are dipping a tentative toe into the waters of progressive Christianity or are a seasoned swimmer looking to float awhile for refreshment, this contemporary parable is for you. There's even a soupçon of sex - what more could you ask?!

Chris Avis

death draws near. After his capture in Gethsemane, he speaks just three times. A response to the question of the high priest, 'Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?' Two words to Pilate - three in English - "You say so". And just four words in Aramaic as his final cry. This absence of words is in the starkest contrast with the teaching and assertiveness in Jesus which is so obvious earlier in the gospel, not least when he was in Jerusalem.

This silence is just part of something else, something summed up in Jesus now being 'delivered'. That verb, Vanstone pointed out, is used 10 times in Mark's account of the passion. Again, it is in stark contrast with all that has gone before it in the gospel. As well as a person of words, Jesus has been busy with deeds and actions too - all those things that inspire us. He takes initiatives, he moves and commands and acts. But not now. Now he is handed over, and acted upon by others; now he becomes an object to whom - to which - things are done. He is made passive - which is the root of what the word 'passion' means.

Mark writes little about the details of Jesus' physical suffering. We are just shown a human being acted upon; accepting the indignities which are heaped upon him with a silent dignity, without either protest or attempt at excuse. Yet the effect and power of this portrait is quite devastating. Mark effectively strips Jesus of all the elements of miracle worker, healer and exorcist which might highlight his divinity, to leave the portrait of one who is human like ourselves. It is as one human that he stands before the High Priest as 'the son of the most high, the messiah'. It is as one human that he faces his death.

The portrait is both moving to us, but also frightening, for we fear the loss of control. It plainly frightened Jesus too, both in the garden

and at Calvary? “My God, my God, why?” Humans prefer to be the agents, not the ones who must suffer things done to them. We don’t want to submit.

So the later gospel writers, Luke and John, both changed this emphasis. For Luke, it mattered that the passion be understood as full of continuity with all that’s gone before, *not* something totally new which seems almost to set the past aside. Jesus remains active for good just as he was before. He heals the sliced off ear of the high priest’s slave, effects a reconciliation between Herod and Pilate, asks “Father, forgive them” for his tormenters, and promises paradise for the penitent thief.

John went further still. Jesus is in control of everything. Soldiers fall down at the sound of his voice. The cup that in Mark he prays may be taken from him becomes the cup that the Father has *given him*. Simon of Cyrene’s help of a weary Jesus to carry the cross is removed, and Jesus carries the cross ‘*by himself*’. The dying cry of despair – ‘my God, my God, why’ becomes a statement of completion, ‘It is finished,’ ‘it is accomplished.’ Jesus’ life is not *taken* from him. *He* bows his head. *He* gives up his spirit. He is the doer, not the one done to.

Both later writers present a picture of life lived by Jesus to the full, even in dying. Which invites us to see our discipleship as encompassing this

part of life as well. Still living the things that matter to us. Still holding to the truest ‘truths’ that make us the people we each uniquely are. Don Cupitt writes of this as ‘solar’ living. The sun holds nothing back. It pours itself out without restraint. It burns, and it will eventually burn out. But meanwhile it gives all – freely releasing energy and giving life with utter abandon and reckless generosity. It’s an invitation to us. Live like the sun; as Jesus the son, the human face of, God did. “Live fully, love wastefully, and be all that God intends you to be” is Jack Spong’s shorthand for the same thing.

The gospel writers contrast portraits of Jesus’ dying - the passive Jesus, the active Jesus - in their passion stories. But there’s probably good reason for thinking that both would have been part of what Jesus felt and experienced in the events which lie behind the story. And for us, except in the case of sudden and unexpected death, it will be the same. Sometimes able to outpour and give something of ourselves and the life of God within us. Sometimes reliant on the outpouring and giving of others, their sharing of the life of God incarnate.

The death of Jesus matters, and progressive believers ought not to back away from it or neglect it, for it is a crucial part of his enfleshing of that which we name as God. Without it, we would not be either hearing or telling his story.

Copy date for the next newsletter. The next newsletter must be at the printers by Friday 26th November, to be mailed out about 10 days later to arrive before Christmas. Contributions (including local group news) **must** reach the editor, Hugh Dawes by **Friday 19th November 2010 - at the very latest**, preferably a bit before. Email them please to hugh.dawes@pcnbritain.org.uk, or if you are posting them send them to Hugh Dawes, 28 Highshore Rd, London SE15 5AF (an address for the newsletter alone!) Contributions on Christmas – whether poetry, story, even theology – would be very welcome. New Year too. Thoughts on Borg. And you might care - he says yet again! -to pick up and respond to some of what’s in this issue. Please put **NEWSLETTER** in the header of any email, or on your envelope if you use post.

The Progressive Christianity Network – Britain (Registered Charity No 1102164) is itself part of a wider international network of progressive Christian organisations, and has links in particular with the Centre for Progressive Christianity in the United States. PCN Britain’s website is online at www.pcnbritain.org.uk, with information and resources. TCPC’s website also offers a wealth of material for open and progressive Christian understanding. Visit it at www.tcpc.org. You can email us at info@pcnbritain.org.uk, phone us on 01594 516528, or mail us at PCN Britain, 26 High Street, Newnham, Gloucestershire GL14 1BB.

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