JESUS, JUSTICE AND COMMUNITY
A PROGRESSIVE CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

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Who needs Jesus?, our Conference title asks. It's a rather pointed question, isn't it? Being needy isn't an attractive quality in our culture. Is the title suggesting that only someone who is somehow lacking would 'need' Jesus? Is it suggesting that we all grown up now? That we are self-sufficient, rational and evolved? Humankind come of age, living in the 21st century

So I'm going to answer this question quite boldly by saying I believe that the poor and the dispossessed need Jesus. The wealthy and the powerful need Jesus. The earth needs Jesus. And I believe, Jesus needs us.

Journeying with Jesus

I've had a long and complicated relationship with Jesus. There was the gentle Jesus of my mainline Presbyterian childhood. Sunday by Sunday, I heard the stories told about Jesus and the stories told by Jesus. They got under my skin. Then there was the evangelical-pentecostal phase during my teenage years (the emotional fervour of the "Jesus is my personal saviour and lord" phase, complete with chorus singing and, I confess, the occasional speaking in tongues). Then academic study of religion with Lloyd Geering and Jim Veitch at Victoria followed by theology at Knox in Dunedin. I relished the intellectual excitement of the demythologising of Christianity and embraced Lloyd's idea about the resurrection of Jesus as a symbol of hope. This liberal theological enthusiasm was accompanied, in my early twenties, by feminism and serious questions about whether a male saviour could save women. Was Christianity compatible with women's equality? At the end of 1980, I sent out Christmas cards with a picture of Mary holding the baby Jesus, under which I had handwritten, "It's a girl."

Then the liberation theology and feminist ethics of my post-graduate study at Union Theological Seminary in New York. I completely extricated Jesus from any idea of God and engaged with the Marxist social revolutionary Jesus of the brilliant Latin Americans Guitierrez, Miranda, Sobrino, and Boff; Black theologians like James Cone and Cornel West; and feminist theologians and ethicists like Carter Heyward and Beverly Harrison, who became my mentor and doctoral advisor. I related to Jesus as a human being who challenged the domination systems of race, gender, sexual orientation, and economic class. During that time, I was passionately involved in struggles for justice, but I only occasionally went to church. My Union community was church, and chapel services at Union were iconoclastic, creative and inspiring.

But it is only since returning to New Zealand from the US in 1995, that I have come to appreciate profoundly the experience of encountering Jesus in the liturgy, of standing with those who have gathered the people, told the stories and broken the bread across time and across space. It is from these perspectives of Jesus as a prophet of justice and the Jesus tradition embodied in Christian communities for over two thousand years that I speak today. It is within these communities and networks that I have come to encounter and understand that the risen Christ is borne by communities of faith in the process of re-membering. When I speak to the children in our community on Easter Sunday, I invite them to think about the fact that we are still remembering the story of Jesus nearly two thousand years after he died. They are sitting in the front row of the church and I ask them to turn around to see the risen Christ - and what

they see are people who remember and tell the stories, their parents, grandparents, their extended church family, and in all those who will be telling the story around the world that Easter day. Christ is risen in us, the community of faith. In liturgy we use feminist theologian Rita Nakashima Brock's naming of the risen Christ as Christa/Community. For the risen Christ is not bound by the maleness or the individuality of Jesus the Jew from Galilee.

The topic for the Conference "Who Needs Jesus? Life in the 21^{5}" Century" has got me thinking about what our world needs, and what our western world would lose without Jesus. For me, at the core of my continuing engagement with Jesus, are two concerns. The first is about justice, and the second is about community. And they are linked. For what I yearn for, and what I have begun to know in some people and places, is a community of justice-seeking friends. Friends who tell the stories of the tradition in order to question the powers of our time. Justice-seeking friends.

Progressive Christianity

Now I specifically locate myself within the progressive Christian movement. Progressive Christianity is a post-liberal stream of Christian thought and community, which has millions of practitioners especially in the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. My particular concern is that progressive Christianity keep in touch with liberation theology, with a passion for justice. It's not just about what we think or believe. It's about how we live.

Not the religious right

So what does it mean to talk about Jesus in the 21s' century in the context of Progressive Christianity? Progressive Christianity is in part a protest movement among Christians who refuse to allow Christianity to be exclusively identified with the religious right. The monopolisation of the Christian voice by religious conservatives has led to a situation where the name, language and ethics of Christianity have been co-opted by religious figures who have claimed that theirs is the only true Christian perspective and have sought to impose their views on everyone else. This is most apparent in the United States but in New Zealand conservative Christian groups have claimed their perspective on public policy issues such as marriage, civil unions, prostitution law reform and most recently child discipline legislation is "the Christian viewpoint." For a while the United Future Party took this view and it has also been represented by Destiny Church (back in 2004 when Brian Tamaki prophesied that NZ would be a theocracy under the Destiny Party within five years). Progressive Christians also engage politically around issues of climate change, economic justice, peace and non-violence.

Not liberal Christianity

But Progressive Christianity is not simply a reaction to the religious right. It is also a quite distinctive departure from liberal Christianity, which was the dominant theological position of late twentieth century mainstream churches in western countries, and also the genesis of groups such as the Sea of Faith.

The distinction between liberal and progressive Christianity is less clear than the distinction between conservative and progressive Christian thought. Progressive Christianity shares with liberal Christianity a commitment to making the gospel relevant in every age. It shares the view that reason, science, and democracy are not in conflict with Christianity. But there are differences. Delwin Brown, author of *What does a Progressive Christian Believe?* has written:

The liberals went wrong, from a progressive perspective, when reasoning based on (supposedly common) human experience became for them more than valued tools and tests to be utilized in shaping inherited Christian materials; gradually it (human experience) became also the source of liberal theology. As that happened, the "material" of historic Christian faith —its stories, symbols, ideas,

analyses, and imperatives — moved to the dim and largely optional margins of liberal Christian reflection. Liberal theology became something more akin to a philosophy of religion.[1]

The liberal project was important for the deconstruction of theology that was based on pre-Enlightenment world-views. It enabled people to remain within the broad Christian tradition without compromising their intellectual integrity. What progressive Christians are doing is recovering the material of Christian faith (stories, symbols, ideas, analyses and imperatives) as the basis for theologising in a 21st century context. In this paradigm, Jesus becomes not just an ancient sage but a dialogue partner, a story teller, and his story becomes a story which interweaves with our lives. And our faith communities are the bearers of memory: the memory of Jesus, and the community that surrounded him during life and carried his story forward after his death.

Of course, it the Jesus story not the only story that can illuminate human life on earth. There are other faith paths and there are secular philosophies. But in the end we all live within a story, a world-view. We can choose a story or have one chosen for us. We can go with the flow of the individualistic consumerism of late capitalism, or we can choose a different story that resists the status quo. For those of us brought up in the Christian tradition, we may choose to inhabit the Christian story because it has shaped us and it offers us a community that both inspires us and calls us to account. A community that calls us to live in resistance to the powers that be. If we choose it, this story guides and tests our contemporary life.

Modern/postmodern

We are always located in our history and it is very easy to be seduced by the times in which we live. Protestant liberalism internalised the values of the 18th century enlightenment with too little criticism. The Enlightenment affirmed the rights of individual against oppressive societies.

Contemporary progressive Christians continue to affirm this. But we now recognise that the Enlightenment tended to understand societies only as aggregations of autonomous individuals and lost the historic human wisdom contained in the biblical tradition and in other religious traditions that emphasised our collectivity and our connectedness. The political and economic systems that we have today continue to promulgate extreme individualism. As community life has been eroded, we have to come to appreciate it value and regret our acquiescence to its erosion. The church, at its best, is not an aggregation of individuals. We strive to recover Paul's understanding that we are members of one another, one body, dependent on one another for life. In a time of ecological crisis, individualism is killing us, our children and our planet.

Another way in which liberal Protestantism idealised the enlightenment was the understanding of human norms in terms of the experience of the Christian, European male. It did not value the diversity of patterns of human social organisation, arrogantly assuming that all cultures should emulate western models, and enforcing that belief system with the missionary and the coloniser working hand in hand. The consequences of this imperialism continue today in global economic systems that are destroying the poor of the third-world.

The Enlightenment heritage has been particularly harmful in its anthropocentrism and its dualistic understanding of humanity and nature, contributing as it has done to the global ecological crisis. This philosophy of anthropocentrism and dualism has also shaped the natural and social sciences and it has been deeply internalised in the liberal Protestant tradition.

Liberals were seduced by modernism and its accompanying belief that reason will reveal truth unconstrained by history. The limits of modernism have begun to be clear, especially its positing of universal theories and claims for universal truth. These have been brought into question by a postmodernism that relishes complexity, fluidity and plurality. As progressives we do not want to be sucked into postmodernism as liberals were to modernism, but it offers some useful correctives.

Firstly, postmodernism challenges the assumption that there exist universal principles, which can be discovered, and which reveal the true features of reality. Secondly, postmodernism challenges the existence of pure reason or objectivity that enables scholarship to make objective, neutral judgments independent of the historical context of the scholar. Thirdly, postmodernism denies that human beings are rational, independent subjects, capable of self-knowledge and autonomous action and judgment. Finally, unlike modernism, postmodernism has little faith in the ability of reason to bring about progress and the perfectibility of society.

All of these undermine the assumptions of liberal Christianity. It is all a lot more complicated than we imagined, and we might just begin to like that.

Zygmunt Bauman, a British postmodern theorist illustrates postmodern life in the following way:

> "one can think of postmodern life as one lived in a city in which traffic is daily rerouted and street names are liable to be changed without notice... In such a city one is well advised not to plan long and time consuming journeys. The shorter the trip, the greater the chance of completing it..."

The demythologising of liberal Christianity was a crucial process but liberals forgot that humans are story-shaped beings. Liberal Christianity was reduced to shared values and common beliefs indistinguishable from those of common morality. But it forgot the past: the inheritance of story and the practices of faith. Liberalism often neglected to "do theology" with the resources of faith (Christian understandings of creation, humanity, community, freedom, justice, hope, reconciliation, brokenness, healing, and the meaning of life). Liberalism often neglected to observe the practices of faith that anchor our lives in the story (eg. contemplation, hospitality, discernment, pilgrimage, worship, creating community, keeping Sabbath, and forgiveness).

Links with the evangelical left

Progressive Christianity has another surprising source. It also has links with the evangelical left, which sadly became a minority stream within conservatism in the late 19th and 20th centuries. In earlier times, the evangelical left, which emphasised social justice as much as orthodox belief, was involved in the abolition of slavery, supporting women's rights and poverty alleviation. But later the evangelical left retreated into a private piety and an emphasis on personal morality marked by abstinence. And in the early 20th century it was mostly subsumed under growing fundamentalism and anti-intellectualism.

However, in the 21stcentury the evangelical left is re-emerging, more tolerant of diversity, more open to varieties of biblical interpretation, and advocating for justice as strongly as ever. The most well-known leader of the evangelical left is Jim Wallis of the Sojourners community in Washington DC but he is one of many. Here is New Zealand, interesting developments are emerging among groups like Urban Vision and Servants Asia; and in congregations like Cityside Baptist in Auckland. These groups and communities are sometimes referred to as the emergent movement.

Post-liberal progressive Christianity also continues the 19'^{h} century evangelicals' commitments to racial, gender and class justice but within a more nuanced intellectual framework that includes theological reflection that is compatible with 21" century knowledge, including 21st century historical Jesus research. But like conservatives, progressives draw on the Bible and Christian tradition, recognising that the tradition of critical engagement, disagreement, fallibility, tension, reflection, correction and innovation that are present in the Bible is the distinctively Christian contribution that we bring to personal reflections on the meaning of life and to public conversations about the common good. It is not the only contribution. It demands an equal, not greater hearing, than other offerings.

Back to theology

Progressive Christianity reorients us from philosophy of religion back to the task of doing theology. Theology is exploring what is believed and why, the process of making those beliefs clear to test them and to identify reasons for holding them. As an ethicist, I believe that the way our beliefs must be tested is by their ethical implications and outcomes. Shaped by the Christian story, I ask of belief: Is it life-giving? It is justice-making? Does it create right-relationship?

Jesus central to the Christian faith

So from this progressive perspective, I return to the question: Who needs Jesus? I contend that if we wish to remain in the Christian tradition, Jesus is inevitably going to be part of our story. For it to be otherwise, would be to deny our history and our historicity. This is not to say that everything in the Bible about Jesus is historically accurate. Rather, the tradition of over two thousand years within which we stand (if we choose to stand within it) was initiated by people who were transformed by Jesus. The New Testament is a record of the interpretations that were given to this transformation. It attempts to tell us who he was, why he was significant to his followers, and why he should be significant for its readers. And it does this through a variety of formats and viewpoints.

Contributions of Historical Jesus Research

The work of contemporary biblical scholars engaged in uncovering what we can know about what Jesus said and did, and the geo-politics of Jesus' world, provides an important tool for progressive Christian communities. Jesus research shapes our faith mainly by changing Christian imagination, changing how we image or imagine Jesus.

Jesus scholarship has enabled refreshed pictures of Jesus as the Human One for progressive Christians. Jesus in this paradigm is not supernatural. (Divinity may be deeply natural rather than super-natural). No virginal conception, divine birth, supernatural miracles, resurrected body or heavenly ascension. Neither does it claim that Jesus saves us by atoning for our sins to satisfy a judging God. But nevertheless he was/is a window to the sacred, one of the human orres through whom God (sacred power) is known.

I won't go through all the interpretations of the difference between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith, the pre and post Easter Jesus, written about by scholars such as Marcus Borg, John Dominic Crossan and others who engage and inspire us. Except to say that many people in progressive Christian communities find their historical analysis fascinating and convincing. I am particularly drawn to the work of Crossan who is a wonderful complement to the liberation theologians who formed my theological thinking. Crossan uncovers the political edge to Jesus' teaching. For him, Jesus was more than a sage or teacher, teaching about life. The stories he told, and the actions he took, were powerfully subversive of the political and religious status quo. He spoke truth to power. It is the prophetic Jesus, the disturber of the comfortable, who inspires me still.

Limits of the Jesus Seminar Project

The diversity of the biblical accounts is a gift for us. It empowers us to draw on a variety of understandings to enrich, challenge and provoke our own interpretations of who Jesus was. No longer are we compelled to find the "one truth" of conservatism, which has emphasised a Pauline understanding of Jesus as an atoning saviour. But neither are we limited to the project of discovering what Jesus exactly said and what he did not. The whole tradition is open for engagement, question, discussion, debate, discernment. It speaks to us and we speak to it. No longer simply a unitary history, which must be stripped of later accretions, it is now free to be a religious text again. A story that binds together a community, with a binding that is both strong and flexible.

It is at this point, that I would suggest that the Jesus seminar "red letter" project, while offering incredible riches in understanding the earliest Jesus traditions, has its limits. It is helpful to know which words in the gospels are most likely to be authentic to Jesus, but that shouldn't limit our engagement with the other witnesses. For they bring insight into the process of dialogue with the tradition. They are doing what we are doing. Telling the story, and retelling the story, in ways that make sense in our context. Understanding the history and understanding the meaning are not identical.

Delwin Brown gives an example of ways in which the earliest understandings of an event are not always the most accurate or the most useful. His example is the September 11 terrorism attacks in the US. Were the first interpretations the best or most accurate? Initial interpretations included widespread misunderstandings about Islam and fear of religious minorities generally. On the day after the attacks, people were devastated. It was a time to grieve and for us to stand in solidarity with those who had lost friends and family, those whose cities were shrouded in fear and confusion. It wasn't the appropriate time for us to recall the history of US foreign policy in the *20*th century, including invasions, aerial bombings, and gross political interference, which had led to a huge rage against the west in the Middle East. But later we had to address these things as we sought to understand the phenomenon of terrorism. Everything that was written about terrorism a year or more after 9/11 is not somehow less meaningful than that which was written in the first year. Everything that was written about Jesus 100 years after his death, is not intrinsically less valuable than material written within thirty or forty years. It's all available to us to encounter, debate, and discern.

What does Jesus Mean?

The New Testament record relating to Jesus is not just "what he said" and "what he did." A great deal of it concerns "what this meant." And our question is "what does it mean, for us, now."

There are a number of possible responses from a progressive Christian perspective but all of them are grounded in a deep appreciation of the full humanity of Jesus. The traditional creedal statements of the church from the fourth and fifth centuries may not seem to be a likely resource for progressive Christians, but the councils of Nicea in *325,* Constantinople in *382,* Ephesus in *431* and Chalcedon in *451* were all struggling with understanding the meaning of Jesus. It wasn't a benign process. The Councils were used then, as now, as enforcers of orthodoxy and markers of inclusion and exclusion. The language of the creeds that emerged from them is alienating to *21*st century people.

Yet at that time the churches were discerning, as we continue to do today, who Jesus was for them. And they resisted, time and again, the call to limit or deny Jesus' full humanity. They based their deliberations on a framework of incarnationalism; the view that God was incarnate, or embodied, in Jesus Christ. Clearly our reading of the New Testament indicates that this was only one way of understanding Jesus in the early church, but by the time of the Councils it was the one that had gained ascendance.

There were among those who attended the Councils, men who wished to deify Jesus, to make his humanity of a different order to ours. There were others who wished to say that Jesus's divinity was of a lesser of different nature than that of God. But they concluded by refusing to give away either full humanity or full divinity for Jesus.

Delwin Brown sums up the theological conclusion of the counciliar process:

> "They assumed, first, that divinity, whatever else it is or does, is the source of salvation, and second, that divinity works by somehow becoming one with, joining with, that which it seeks to save… It is by becoming one with humanity that God makes our salvation possible. Since the Christian claim is that salvation is possible, then it was necessary for the councils to insist that the true God has taken on the true humanity."[2]

For us in the 21st-century, the doctrine of the incarnation may seem strange and pre-modern. But it is easy from our vantage point to lose sight of how radical it was and is and how liberating it still may be. The salvation that the New Testament speaks of is not personal salvation, it is transformation or transfiguration of the world. We see this in John's gospel in its claim that God so loved the world, and Paul's letter to the Romans, which speaks of the entire created order being saved. There is an understanding of interconnectedness that we could do well to recover.

Now I can imagine that some of you may be struggling with this use of God language. But I am not speaking of a theistic, personal, intervening God. But rather of God as energy or sacred power and the idea that all living beings are created by one force, one Spirit, one God and are inter-related and interdependent. This is wisdom that has been revealed in Jesus and other enlightened teachers and prophets over the centuries. It is one that science makes more of a reality for us every day. Once you begin to see the creation this way, everything changes.

John's gospel speaks of God being one with the world as its logos or organisational structure. Perhaps God is the pattern in the subatomic particles that make up the order of creation. What Christians have particularly claimed is that this logos, is made known to us in Jesus of Nazareth.

Delwin Brown proposes a theological basis for progressive Christianity:

> That we ground our progressive Christian vision in the bold good news of the christological councils, taken to its logical conclusion. The divine is at one with the cosmos and all that is in it. God is in and with the world God is with us and the rest of creation, too-fully God, fully world, fully one.

This claim leads us to a faith perspective that is unashamedly positive toward this world as our home. It means that we are open to science, that we share values with others, that we see God present in many cultures, arts and philosophies, that we seek the healing of the world, that we appreciate the religious insights and longings of people of other faiths.

In this sense "Christ" is not a title for Jesus, let alone his surname, which is how so many Christians read it. Christ is the name that Christians give to the logos of God. Our religious heritage and perspective does not need to be privileged over the other paths to the logos of God. But we can enjoy it, appreciate it, struggle with it and share it with others. With those of other faiths, we can offer what we find "saving" in our faith so that together we might appreciate one another's paths and traditions. For those who want no faith, we can affirm that there are other sources for meaning. For those who seek and hunger, we can offer our faith with invitation, hospitality and compassion.

Jesus: Justice and Community

So from this world-affirming theology, or Christology, I return to my initial concerns about justice and community and what I fear would be lost if we ignore Jesus in the 21" century. I do not believe that we can "extract" the essential Jesus, know his wisdom, and forget about the stories told about him and by him, and about the community of faith, which has borne those stories. Jesus doesn't work as an abstract wisdom teacher. He belongs with his stories and with his people. I think this is particularly an issue for white, western, middle-class privileged people. If we try to take Jesus out of his political and religious context and apply "the golden rule" to our comfortable lives, we will neglect to notice that for Jesus, the application of compassion came with the pursuit of justice that sought to turn the established order upside down.

Progressive Christian communities should be marked by pursuit of social justice, not just by individuals but also by the community collectively. The basis for this engagement is an ongoing conversation with the biblical tradition. The concepts of covenant, hospitality, and justice lie at the heart of the biblical witness and challenge the dominant social attitudes of power, responsibility and individual freedom.

The idea of covenant flows through the Hebrew Bible texts in the stories of Noah, Abraham, Sarah and Hagar, and Moses.

In the New Testament imagines the actions of Jesus in the world renewing the covenant between God and God's people to enjoy God's blessing, one in which the community is not only accountable to their kin and their God, but also to the their neighbours In stories like the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus challenges his listeners to remember that their hospitality codes and obligations require the inclusion of strangers, enemies and those who are in danger. In Matthew 25, he instructs his followers to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick, and visit with prisoners. He reminded people that the covenant required justice for the most vulnerable.

It is research about the politics of Jesus that progressive Christians are indebted to recent Jesus scholarship. One of features marking the renaissance of Jesus studies is the centrality of the social world of Jesus. Because meanings are embedded in a social world, if we are to understand and appreciate what Jesus said and did, his message and activity need to be located in his social world.

For example, Richard Horsley portrays Jesus at work in the renewal of community life at the local level, as part of his strategy for a non-violent social revolution. To this task, Horsley brings detailed knowledge about the geography and politics of Galilee, especially the imperial situation of Roman occupied Palestine.[3] John Dominic Crossan, who I mentioned earlier, uncovers the revolutionary nature of Jesus' programme and sets it in its contemporary background of a system of downward economic mobility where the crippling system of taxation and agrarian reforms caused peasants to lose their lands, to work as day labourers, always at risk of slipping into further vulnerability as expendables and beggars, and therefore excluded from the social life of the community as impure.

The social world of first century Palestine was organized around the contrasts or polarities of pure and impure, clean and unclean. These polarities applied to persons, places, things, times and social groups. Purity was also associated with economic class. Being rich did not automatically make one pure, but being abjectly poor almost certainly made you impure. To some extent, the association between being poor and impurity resulted from conventional wisdom, which saw wealth as a blessing from God and poverty as an indication that one had not lived right. And it arose because the very poor could not observe the purity laws.

The effect of the purity system was to create a world with sharp social boundaries: between pure and impure, Jew and Gentile, righteous and sinner, whole and not whole, rich and poor, male and female. The world of first century Palestinian Judaism was what Walter Wink has called a Domination Society. It was hierarchical, patriarchal, and authoritarian.

It is in the context of a purity system that created an order with sharp social boundaries that we can see the socio-political significance of the ministry of Jesus. In his message and activity we see an alternative social vision: a community not shaped by the ethos and politics of purity, but by the ethos and politics of compassion. He called his vision the Kingdom (Commonwealth, Reign, Domination-Free order) of God. The Levitical (Lev. 19:2) basis of the purity system "Be holy as God is holy" (Holiness meaning separation from everything impure and unclear) was changed by Jesus to "Be compassionate as God is compassionate." (Luke 6:36)

The challenge to the purity system not only in what Jesus taught but also in what he did. His ministry of healing disrupted the boundaries of the purity system. John Dominic Crossan has pointed out that medical anthropology has proposed a basic distinction between curing a disease and healing an illness. The leper who met Jesus had both a skin disease and a social illness, the personal and social stigma of uncleanness, rejection and isolation. Curing was not the issue. Jesus welcomed back into the human community those persons who were excluded.

Another activity of Jesus was an open and inclusive table. Sharing a meal with someone had a significance in the social world of Jesus that is hard for us to grasp. It was not a casual act. In a purity society a person did not eat with anyone who could be considered impure. Sharing a meal represented mutual acceptance. There were rules surrounding meals. The meal was a microcosm of the social system — table fellowship an embodiment of a social vision of a purity society of hierarchies, differences, distinctions, and discriminations.

The meal practice of Jesus therefore had socio-political significance. His open table fellowship became a form of cultural protest, challenging the politics of holiness that led to exclusion. It embodied an alternative vision of an inclusive community reflecting the compassion of God. Open commensality, as Crossan calls is, is the symbol and embodiment of radical egalitarianism, of an absolute equality of people that denies the validity of any discrimination between them and negates the necessity of any hierarchy among them.

The inclusive vision incarnated in Jesus' table fellowship is reflected in the shape of the Jesus movement itself. It was an inclusive movement, negating the boundaries of the purity system. It was what Walter Wink has called a Domination-Free Society. It included women, untouchables, the poor, the maimed, and the marginalized, as well as some privileged people who found his vision attractive. The Commonwealth of God is pictured as a new kind of meal arrangement. A non-discriminating table depicts in miniature a non-discriminating society, and this vision clashed fundamentally with the basic values of ancient Mediterranean society.

Resisting the purity laws in favour of compassion, healing by social inclusion, and the practice of open table are some of the many justice practices of Jesus and his community which must shape a progressive faith communities in the 21" century. They must shape how worship is conducted and how the life of the community is oriented toward the marginalised and the vulnerable.

The justice commitments of progressive faith communities arise from an engagement with these aspects of the Jesus tradition. The longstanding Christian interest in aiding those who suffer or are poor is continued in progressive Christianity in similar ways to liberal social justice programming and peace advocacy. In addition, however, there is a passion for environmentalism, including explicit attention to changing life style and consumer patterns in order to lessen the human footprint on the Earth.

Challenges to the purity system are furthered in progressive faith commitments to transgression of traditional gender boundaries. Progressive communities are overtly committed to feminism and affirmation of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people.

Jesus lived and taught not as an individual wise man but as a person shaped by and shaping community. As we create something new out of the post-enlightenment appreciation of community and relationship, we are inspired by Jesus as one in relationship. As central as Jesus is to the progressive Christian vision, he is part of a movement. He travelled with friends, shared food with friends and strangers. The tradition tells of negotiated understandings, sometimes heated negotiations, around the meaning of what they were doing together.

Spirituality and Community

One of the key marks of the progressive Christian movement compared to the old mainline liberal traditions is the nurturing of spirituality in the community. In the liberal tradition, experience and emotion in worship, were downplayed. I think the lack of attention to these is what drew me as a young person to the charismatic movement. Unfortunately it came with a package that was anti-intellectual and anti-world which I couldn't in all honesty sustain.

Now in progressive Christianity we see a spiritual vitality and expressiveness. Progressive Christians are not just social activists and intellectuals. They are expressing themselves spiritually in meditation,

prayer, artistic forms, and lively worship. Worship that is participatory, expressive and arts-infused. That is sometimes reclaiming discarded ancient Christian rituals, using a wide variety of non-Christian rituals and meditation techniques, and development of small groups for spiritual growth and nurture.

If we attempt to extract the essence of Jesus' teaching and continue to live as atomized individuals separate from real community, we are not able to be true to Jesus' vision. We need to be called back, again and again, by the stories of the tradition which are from a culture and time so different to our own that they can in a strange way cast new light on our current dilemmas.

Jesus Needs Us

At the very beginning of this talk, I said that I thought that Jesus also needs us. Religion is not fading away as a global phenomenon. In New Zealand the increasing number of people who are identify as of no faith, are an aberration within the global picture of religiosity. Some of the contemporary patterns of religions are not attractive to a progressive vision. I believe that at least some of us must stay within the tradition to continue to speak to its life giving vision. In my work at St Andrew's I have seen that secular folk seeking justice need progressive religious voices to be included in public conversations about issues of ethics, especially when conservative people of faith would deny the rights and full citizenship of minorities. If we leave the church to the fundamentalists we will lose a church, a Jesus community, which has much to offer the world.

Interfaith

Religion continues to be a vital aspect of life on earth, and religious diversity of our society is an increasing fact of life. In New Zealand we have growing numbers of people from minority religious traditions. They are often communities for whom religious identity is profound. To ensure their inclusion in our society, we need to be able to speak to them about their religious commitments and beliefs. It is easier for progressive Christian communities to do this than it for either conservative Christian people or secular people. The Jesus tradition brings us into dialogue and connection with people of the other great faith traditions of the world.

In the post-9/11 world, we can hold a view of the world that sees a clash of civilisations (and by implication religions) or we can foster an alliance of civilisations. Our post-enlightenment global, national and local government systems are beginning to understand that religion is not just a private and personal matter but has implications for how we live together, for whether we will survive as a species. Progressive religious people from all faiths can help provide bridges between religion and secular understandings of society. We can help interpret them to each other.

Communities of resistance and solidarity

In conclusion, it seems to me that we need Jesus, if we chose to need Jesus. Not because we are lacking something but because our ethical commitments are shaped by the story of Jesus and his people. The stories bind as a community, keep us coming back again and again to engage with text and tradition and to seek new ways of expressing the call to counter cultural living and public and political action. We simply cannot do this on our own. We need to be in community. Social change, social justice, the healing of the world, liberation, salvation, whatever you name it, only comes about when human beings work in community.

Progressive Christian community holds on to the dangerous memory of Jesus, tells it, argues it, celebrates it, ritualises it, shares it. It does not do this as exclusive community but as community that will form alliances with other people who share commitments for transforming the world for peace and justice. We do it by resistance, by a counter-cultural stand. We check our stands by deliberation in community and with other communities.

And we perhaps most counter culturally of all, we live with a vision. Forty years ago Lloyd spoke of the resurrection as a symbol of hope. It is our task to ensure that it functions as a powerful symbol, not an empty cipher. As progressive followers of Jesus we seek to be faithful to the hope, vision, alternative even its not "realistic" in the eyes of the dominant ethos of our world.

We all have a story that we live by, consciously or unconsciously. When we are unconscious it is the story of accumulation and consumption. Whoever dies with the most toys wins. To live with and within a different story, we have to be intentional. The Jesus story, told, retold, interrogated, and integrated has the power to enable us to live differently.

Endnotes

1 Brown, Delwin. What Does a Progressive Christian Believe? A Guide for the Searching, the Open, *and the Curious.* (New York: Seabury Books, 2008), 4f.

2 Brown, 35.

3 Richard Horsley, *Galilee: History, Politics, People*. (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1995.