

Embracing the Joy of New Discovery:

I am always fascinated by the verse in the second chapter of the gospel of Matthew where the writer is referring to the response of the wise men. He says that on seeing the star of Bethlehem they were, "Beside themselves with joy." How often do we become so excited by a revelation or discovery that we are beside ourselves with joy. What is it that excites the blood and sends the pulse racing for us?

Finding new ways of exploring traditional Christianity has become for many an exciting and fulfilling journey. Particularly for people who have become disenchanted with a dogmatic, fundamentalist Christianity that claims to be the only true path to God. Many of these people have left the traditional Churches but are still searching for meaning in their lives; these are the people Bishop Spong refers to as the 'believers in exile.' They are people who are seeking an answer to their spiritual thirst that is not quenched by the tradition of the earlier Christian Church.

There are others who have stayed with the Christian Church, but who have made compromises between what they believe, how they worship and how they act in everyday life. Some will tell you that they are caught in the moral dilemma of mouthing the words of prayers, doctrines and creeds that their intelligence tells them cannot be right. They have become moral pretzels twisted in on themselves, so that there is no longer a beginning and an end. People caught in this web are trying to justify Christianity as the only pathway to God and boxing themselves into a corner which cannot be defended.

In 2005 I read a book by Jim Burklo called "Open Christianity - Home by Another Road". Jim is a Presbyterian Minister from Sausalito in California and I met with him in October 2005 after attending a Conference in Santa Rosa. Jim's book is about the dilemmas being experienced by many congregations in the United States. These dilemmas we have been facing for some years in Australia, dilemmas about how to be true to our faith whilst being constructively critical about our theology and our public and private worship.

Jim suggests in his book that outdated theological concepts only tend to serve the separate identities of the various faiths and the only way forward is to accept that the Christian church's organizational structures of the future will need to be different. He says, '... the church needs to break free from its triumphal mission of dominating the planet, putting magnificent sanctuaries in every neighborhood, enlisting lots of members and raising lots of money.' He argues for a church with greater flexibility, more of a movement without walls than an organization with a more responsive and inclusive theology. Further, we need to accept that Jesus of Nazareth may be for us a gateway to God; but others will find other pathways.

There is no one form for the future church, no one size fits all, in fact there needs to be as many responses as there are needs. Jim particularly challenges

the language of the church as in need of reform, he claims that we need to use the language of the day if we are to communicate with people outside the church. When Matthew claims that the tax collectors and the prostitutes will enter the kingdom of heaven before and instead of the church elders it is quite possible he is insinuating that we can learn more about God's love and compassion from those outside the church. We can learn more from those considered to be the dregs of society, than the leaders of our faith community. Matthew also is alluding to the belief that the Jewish leaders of the day are hypocrites. Can these same accusations be leveled at us today?

Perhaps we need to ask ourselves the question, "If the church as we know it ceased to exist would God's work continue?" What is it that the church adds to our understanding of the society that makes for a better world?

These are the questions that we must honestly face and wrestle with if we are to be followers of Jesus of Nazareth rather than Jesus the Christ. Is it possible that by looking outside the square of traditional Christianity that has in many ways restricted us; we just may find the true soul of God? How compelling to contemplate such a proposition, but also how challenging. Does the proposition of such an exploration quicken your pulse and speed your blood? Are you beside yourself with joy?

Or!

Are you afraid of taking away something which is comfortable and secure, even if it is intellectually untenable?

John W H Smith.