

# Starting with Questions

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 29 October 2017

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Pentecost 21A

**Leviticus 19: 1-2, 15-18; Matthew 22:34-46; Contemporary Reading:  
Dorothee Soelle, "Mutuality" in *Against the Wind: Memoir of a Radical Christian***

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <http://www.pittstreetuniting.org.au/> under "Sunday Reflections" tab

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The gospel reading, in which Jesus speaks of the two great commandments, begins with a challenging question. What we say about God, Jesus, and Christian life has often – for the church - become a matter of doctrine; long, abstract versions of creeds or affirmations of faith. The church has so often been concerned about telling people how to think and what to believe.

But Jesus responded, not by telling people a list of things to believe, but by responding to the burning questions of his day. Often the context was the questioning of the oppressed crowds. But in today's reading the question comes from a religious leader.

Throughout Matthew's gospel, Jesus is both utterly orthodox and a profound threat to the religious establishment.

After his entry into Jerusalem and his prophetic attack upon the temple administration, the scribes and Pharisees become desperate. They publicly confront Jesus in order to discredit him. The question of the greatest commandment follows questions concerning the legitimacy of paying taxes to the Emperor. When asked which commandment is the greatest, Jesus quotes Judaism's most fundamental, ancient, and widely recited biblical passage, the Shema (Shema ah): "*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind*" (Deut. 6:5). Unwilling to leave it simply at that, Jesus adds another Scripture that is "like" the first: "*You shall love your neighbour as yourself*" (Lev. 19:18).

Jesus initiated a Reformation in Judaism, one that eventually caused a schism with the formation of the early Christ communities.

This weekend, all over the world, churches celebrate Protestant Reformation. One of the slogans of this reformation was *Semper Reformanda* – Always Reforming.

On October 31<sup>st</sup> 1517 a Roman Catholic priest named Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the door of the church in Wittenberg.

His theses enumerated the wrongs and the abuses of the church of his day. It included many theses reforming, but not removing, the selling of indulgences:

Thesis 41: Papal indulgences must be preached with caution, lest people erroneously think that they are preferable to the good works of love.

Thesis 42: ... the buying of indulgences should not, in any way, be compared with works of mercy.

Thesis 43: ... he who gives to the poor... does a better deed than he who buys indulgences.

Luther posted his 95 Theses on the door of the Wittenberg church, and the newfangled invention of the Printing Press ensured that his protests were reproduced for all of Europe to read.

Luther challenged the most powerful institution that his world had ever known.

The power of the Holy Roman Catholic Church rested upon an interpretation of reality that envisioned a God who sits in judgement upon a throne in heaven, a God who commanded a quid pro quo relationship with His (used advisedly) subjects; who sent His only Son to die as a sacrifice for the sins of humanity, saving them from the wrath of this God who had no other choice but to condemn sinners to eternal torment in the fires of hell. A God who established the church on earth to oversee the administration of the atoning power of Jesus on the cross, a church so powerful that they could sell you a piece of paper called an indulgence that would whisk you or your loved one out of the pits of Hell and up into Heaven into the Glory of the presence of God the Father.

Martin Luther's objections to the abuses of power that emanated from Rome were the culmination of many attempts to free people from the bondage created by images of God that served the needs of the institution that had claimed ownership of Jesus life and teaching.

But even though Luther railed against the church's selling of indulgences, he still approved of the threats of hell.

In Thesis 4 he says: *Christians should be exhorted to be diligent in following Christ, their Head, through penalties, death and hell.*

The threat of hell empowered the Church to hold all of Europe in its firm grip. The economic system undergirded by the sale of indulgences was cruel, but it was also effective. As long as God was in "his" heaven mere mortals had no choice but to obey God, to obey the church and to obey the earthly rulers of the State.

Jesus had lived and died trying to free people from images of God that were holding his own people hostage to the Law that was handed down to them from their ancestors, a Law based on images and ideas about God, the source of all that is; images and ideas that, at the time, were keeping Jesus' contemporaries hostage to the endless cycles of violence that had become their reality.

Jesus was born and died under the repressive regimen of the Roman Empire. The *Pax Romana* relied on the power, violence and wealth of the Empire. The oppressed had two choices: they could either obey or they could rebel.

Jesus offered a third way, non-violent resistance, peace through justice. He steadfastly refused to tolerate oppression, while also refusing to take up arms against his oppressors. Instead, he proposed a radical new way of being in the world, a way that insisted that the only way out of the endless cycle of violence was to love our enemies.

Jesus insisted that at the very heart of reality lay a power so pervasive and so persuasive that no earthly force could resist it. Jesus pointed to a God who is Love. Jesus lived and died convinced that the power that is the Source of Reality is Love. While insisting that God is Love, Jesus proclaimed that Love was available to us and that wielding the power of Love, we could establish systems of justice that would ensure peace – a just peace

Jesus' radical ideas changed the images his followers had of the Mystery that we call God.

By the time that Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the door of the institution that had thoroughly domesticated Jesus teachings, that institution had all but abandoned his radical way of being in the world.

Since the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, progressive theologians, aware of the approaching 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, have named aspects of their project in terms of a New Reformation. In 1998, John Shelby Spong developed twelve theses for the New Reformation.

In her book *The Great Emergence* Phyllis Tickle wrote that: *every 500 years, the Church goes through a rummage sale, cleaning out the old forms of spirituality and replacing them with new ones*. She points to Constantine in the late 4<sup>th</sup> century and early 5<sup>th</sup> century; the Great Schism between Eastern and Western churches in the 11<sup>th</sup> century; the Protestant Reformation in the 16<sup>th</sup> century; and now progressive and emergent Christianity in the Postmodern 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Former Catholic priest, Matthew Fox, is another voice of the New Reformation. In 2005, after being silenced by the Vatican, he looked around at the state of the church and decided it was time to return to the Cathedral in Wittenburg, where, with much fanfare, he posted his own 95 Theses for the 21st Century.

Fox began his protests with reimagining a post-theistic God:

1. God is both Mother and Father.
2. God is always new, always young and always "in the beginning."
3. God the Punitive Father is not a God worth honouring but a false god and an idol that serves empire-builders. The notion of a punitive, all-male God, is contrary to the full nature of the divine...
4. Quoting Meister Eckhart: "All the names we give to God come from an understanding of ourselves." Thus people who worship a punitive father are themselves punitive.
5. Theism (the idea that God is 'out there' or above and beyond the universe) is false. All things are in God and God is in all things (and I think that Dorothee Soelle's idea of mutuality – that God cannot give us anything unless we become bearers and givers of God's power – fits well with his understanding).

Fox claims that Original Sin is an ultimate expression of a Punitive Father God and is not a biblical teaching. But rather, Original Blessing (goodness and grace) is biblical.

He says that consumerism is today's version of gluttony and needs to be confronted by creating an economic system that works for all peoples and all earth's creatures.

He says that the dark night of the soul descends on us all at some time and the proper response is not addiction, such as shopping, alcohol, drugs, TV, sex or religion, but rather to be with the darkness and learn from it.

He says that authentic science can and must be one of humanity's sources of wisdom, for it is a source of sacred awe, childlike wonder, and truth.

He says that the three highways into the heart are silence and love and grief.

And the two highways out of the heart are creativity and acts of justice and compassion...

As Luther's theses were disseminated via the newly invented printing press, Fox used the 2005 invention of YouTube - where he posted a video of his experience of trying to post something in modern day Wittenburg.

*Semper Reformanda!* Here we stand, some five-hundred years after Luther shattered the images of the Mystery that we call God.

Once again we find ourselves trapped in a world that is rife with injustice with nothing but an image of God who seems incapable of leading us to victory and so there is no peace.

What needs reforming once again is our image of God, and Jesus's echoing and radicalising of the Jewish commands to love God and neighbour, calls out across the millennia to shape and reorient our theological imaginations.

How can we re-imagine the contours of the Energy that lies at the heart of reality?

Always reforming, what images can we conjure up of this Mystery that we call God?

What if the whole point of Christianity is to set us free from the idols that we have come to worship? What if that Essence that lies at the very heart of reality, that Mystery that is the very core of our consciousness, what if that wondrous Energy that runs through all Creation, what if that Being that lies beyond our ability to imagine, that thing that we call the Divine, is so much more than we can even begin to contemplate. We will never know this deep reality until Luther's god - the God of hell and judgement - the god of the Reformation is dead.

When the theology of the Reformation, the punitive father and the fear of hell is overcome we can open ourselves to the Mystery to which Jesus was pointing.

We may live fully because it's in the living that we can learn about that thing that lies at the heart of reality, that Mystery that is at the core of our consciousness, that thing that our ancestors experienced as so marvellous that they refused to even speak its name.

We may live fully as people loving God and loving one another, caring for this precious creation, passionately tending to the Earth and its creatures, living fully, discovering, learning, experiencing it all and helping others to do the same.

*Semper reformanda*, always reforming, this is new life.

Let us celebrate the source of our being, God who is Love beyond our ability to imagine, Love that lives and breathes, always changing, always reforming us in the image of Love.

May we let it be.

Let it be.