



Auckland Community Church

Hatching of the Heart

Given by Hugh Kempster on the 2nd April 2006

🌀 **Readings** : Jeremiah 31:31-4

It doesn't hit the headlines too much any more, but the truth is that the world-wide Anglican communion has entered into a period of cold war. In good Anglican fashion, it is a war full of brittle smiles and carefully nuanced rhetoric, but it is a war none-the-less. Last year the lines were drawn, when the Anglican top-brass issued the following statement, reprimanding and effectively suspending two rogue provinces from the communion:

we request that the Episcopal Church (USA) and the Anglican Church of Canada voluntarily withdraw their members from the Anglican Consultative Council for the period leading up to the next Lambeth Conference [in 2008]. During that same period we request that both churches respond through their relevant constitutional bodies to the questions specifically addressed to them in the Windsor Report as they consider their place within the Anglican Communion. [[Anglican Communion Primates Meeting Communiqu, Feb. 05](#)]

Their sin - need we be reminded? Installing a gay bishop, and sanctioning the blessing of same-sex relationships.

The conflict reaches far beyond the confines of the Anglican church of course, and Biblical scholar, Marcus Borg, terms it a tale of two Christianities (The Heart of Christianity [Harper Collins, 2003], p. 15). In one corner is an earlier understanding of Christianity that views the Bible as a divine product, a kind of holy encyclopaedia in which one may look up authoritative information about God (p.8). So, there are a handful of passages in the Old and New Testaments that pass judgement on homosexuality, and therefore this is God's moral revelation on the matter for all time, end of story.

For those of us whose experience of life and thought cannot be reconciled with this earlier literalistic paradigm, there is an emerging form of Christianity that challenges the earlier approach - thank God! Emerging Christianity sees the Bible for what it is - a human response to God rather than some magical divine product. From this angle the Bible is seen as a valuable source of historical and metaphorical inspiration. It is full of damn good stories, and nuggets of profound wisdom. But it can in no way be relied upon to offer talisman-like utterance on every question and dilemma we face. The Bible points towards God, but it is not the literal Word of God that has magically come down from heaven in a ray of light, like Mr Bean from the sky (have you seen the opening sequence to the series?).

The war between these two forms of Christianity is a very real one, with very real consequences for those who take part. Some of you may have been at the funeral of Bishop Godfrey Wilson last week, when Sir Paul Reeves spoke movingly of the arrows that had been fired Godfrey's way as he took public stands in support of the ordination of women, or against the Springbok tour, or advocating for homosexual law reform. Jack Spong's autobiography, *Here I Stand* (Harper, 2001), is full of similarly rousing stories of a general's experiences on the front line.

Sadly the silent casualties of this spiritual conflict far outnumber those of the high profile warriors. There are stories to be heard at most dinner parties of parishioners and priests who have given up the fight and left the church to its own bigotry. Mark Henrickson's [Lavender Islands research project](#), although uniquely strengths-based, makes sombre

reading. Of the 2,269 lesbian, gay, and bisexual people surveyed, 72.8% were raised Christian, and 73.1% now report no religion. The study reveals that lesbian, gay and bisexual people are leaving New Zealand churches at nine times the rate of the general population.

So what sacred utterance is there in the scriptures for the battle weary among us this evening? The book of Jeremiah speaks into a time of war and grief, when Jerusalem was destroyed and many of its people forcibly exiled into slavery. Walter Brueggemann describes the book as a multi-voiced meditation of faith for these dispossessed battlers (*An Introduction to the Old Testament* [Westminster John Knox, 2003], p.177). Hear again one of these ancient meditations, penned some 2,700 years ago:

The days are surely coming, says God, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah . . . I will put my law within them, **and I will write it on their hearts**; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. [Jer. 31:31,33 - *emphasis mine*]

The Biblical metaphor of the heart is peppered throughout the Old and New Testaments (see Borg, p.150). Chris Pugsley's book *Scars on the Heart* (Bateman, 1996) documents the Auckland Museum's war exhibit of the same name. The name is well chosen. It is hard, when at war, to guard one's heart. Others hurt us, we hurt others. It is easy, it is natural, for one's heart to become scarred, hard, bitter, angry.

The Greek word for this condition is *sklerokardia*; when our heart hardens we develop, if you like, sclerosis of the heart. Sclerosis of the heart affects our whole selves. We become blind to what is around us, we deceive ourselves, we forget how to be grateful, we lack compassion, we can become insensitive to the mystery and awe of life and love. Hardness of heart comes out of war and conflict, but it's also quite simply a symptom of growing up. Sclerosis of the heart is an adult disease, I don't think most of us had it as young children.

American poet Billy Collins lucidly describes this hardening of heart in a poem entitled *On Turning Ten* (Borg, p. 115-6):

The whole idea of it makes me feel
like I'm coming down with something,
something worse than any stomach ache
or the headaches I get from reading in bad light -
a kind of measles of the spirit,
a mumps of the psyche,
a disfiguring chickenpox of the soul.

You tell me it is too early to be looking back,
but that is because you have forgotten
the perfect simplicity of being one
and the beautiful complexity introduced by two.
But I can lie on my bed and remember every digit.
At four I was an Arabian wizard.
I could make myself invisible
by dinking a glass of milk in a certain way.
At seven I was soldier, at nine a prince.

But now I am mostly at the window
watching the late afternoon light . . .

This is the beginning of sadness, I say to myself,
as I walk through the universe in my sneakers.

It is time to say good-bye to my imaginary friends,
time to turn the first big number.

It seems only yesterday I used to believe
there was nothing under my skin but light.
If you cut me I would shine.
But now when I fall upon the [footpaths] of life,
I skin my knees. I bleed.

What cure is there then for this adult disease, this sclerosis of heart? Alan Jones posits a wonderful therapy - hatching of the heart (Borg, p.154). For our hearts to soften, we need to tap at the shell of grumpy self preoccupation until it breaks, and then, for a moment, we see the world again through child-like eyes. I'll never forget my daughter's face the first time she saw the wind blowing in the branches of the trees outside her window. It was as if it was the most amazing thing in the world had just taken place. My heart well and truly hatched that day.

But hatching the heart is a daily discipline, and there are many ways we can tap it to check how soft, or not, it is. Coming to church is an important way of hatching with others - a bit like battery farming, all in rows! Journal writing, or walking the labyrinth are other ways. Acts of compassion, or social protest are other ways.

What ever ways you choose, do attend to your heart. Tap it every now and again to see if it needs hatching. Listen to others, they'll certainly tell you, if you are open to listening, that you need hatching.

And as your heart hatches, don't forget to sing a song of praise, and give thanks to God for life and love and new beginnings.

Amen.