

ST MARK'S CENTRE FOR RADICAL CHRISTIANITY

Newsletter No 20: Winter 2011/12



Report from the Secretary's desk.

I am writing just before our Autumn conference when we welcome Marcus Borg back to Sheffield - our largest conference for many years so we are experiencing a heady mix of excitement and fear! The team are buying plenty of coffee, biscuits and cups and ensuring the church photocopier is kept busy is not overworked!



Unless someone comes forward to take over the reins. I will soon be starting my third year as CRC secretary. Meanwhile, Jane Padget is standing down as CRC Chair, though remaining on council for another year. I look forward to welcoming a new Chair and working with them as we embark on another busy CRC year, with exciting and engaging events that will help us on our spiritual journey. You will see from the events news in this newsletter that our plans for 2012 are well underway. We are eagerly anticipating thought-provoking and engaging Spring and Autumn conferences with Tariq Ramadan and Douglas Davies as well as three stimulating library evenings.

We hope that, following the 2011 AGM, we will be able to create a CRC executive group, comprising the current officers: Secretary, Chair, Treasurer and Vice-Chair plus 2 other council members, the Vicar of St Marks and the CRC administrator. This group will be the 'business' part of the council ensuring that the wheels keep turning on the CRC bus.

We plan to hold an 'away day' in January 2012 for the new CRC council to do some forward planning and to take a look at the broader development of CRC. Future plans include revisiting the mission statement, creating a new CRC leaflet and modernising the website. We also wish to strengthen our links with the other progressive groups and be part of a progressive Christian stall with Modern Church and Progressive Christianity Network at Greenbelt next August.

As ever, we really appreciate the support and contributions that the CRC membership make by serving drinks at conferences, offering short pieces for the newsletter and writing information to be posted on our website. Please send any ideas and contributions to me at info@stmarks crc.co.uk

Tanya Ralph - Honorary Secretary, St Mark's CRC

2012 CRC CONFERENCES



CRC Spring Conference 28 April 2012 with **TARIQ RAMADAN**

We are delighted that Tariq Ramadan has agreed to be the speaker at next year's Spring Conference. Currently holding a number of professorships around the world, Tariq is based in Oxford where he teaches in the Faculties of Contemporary Islamic Studies and Theology. Through his publications and teaching, as well as through his willingness to engage critically and constructively on the public stage with his own faith tradition and others, Tariq has established an international reputation for advocating a deep and meaningful dialogue between different religious traditions that reaches beyond tolerant co-existence to embrace mutual respect and enrichment.

His searching analysis of the challenges involved in creating pluralist societies as well as his equally insightful assessment of areas of common ground informs a radical and progressive vision for how faith traditions could not only bring the best out in one another, but also become a force for good within the world. Tariq is a prophetic voice who speaks intelligently and eloquently, with passion and conviction.

The title for the Spring Conference is *The Quest for Meaning: Developing a Philosophy of Pluralism*. Further details are available on the website.

CRC Autumn Conference 3rd November 2012 with **DOUGLAS DAVIES**



Douglas Davies is Professor in the Department of Religion and Theology at Durham University. He will lead our November 2012 conference on 'Ritual'. He is President of the British Association for the Study of Religion .

The date is Saturday 3rd November and he will stay and preach on the Sunday.

For further information & booking details

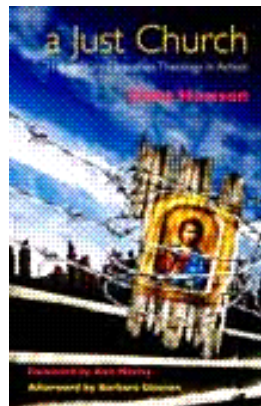
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Get out there!

Reflections on a Library evening with

CHRIS HOWSON,

Author of 'A Just Church'



If Christians commit themselves to establish the Kingdom, can they accept the savagery of war, the existence of weapons of mass destruction, persecution of racial and religious groups, incredible differences in wealth, the exploitation of poor people? No doubt you can add to this list. If the answer is “No!”, then what should the followers of Jesus’ vision do about these evils? At the CRC Library Evening at St Mark’s on Wednesday, 28 September 2011, the answer given by Chris Howson was ‘non-violent action’.

Chris related examples of campaigns and actions he had been involved in: the proposed replacement of Trident nuclear submarines, the commemoration of 50 years of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament at Aldermaston the recent international arms fair in London and Barclays Bank’s unusually small bill for corporation tax. A common theme in all these actions was the use of imaginative humour.

The inspiration for non-violent action comes from Liberation theology: the application of Jesus’ vision by Martin Luther King, anti-apartheid campaigners and those confronting dictatorial regimes in Latin America.

After discussing these ideas with the person sitting next to us, questions were asked about employing actions that broke the law and the value of pursuing existing democratic paths such as meeting MPs and Chief Executives.

Chris Howson is City Centre Mission Priest for Bradford. He has taught Liberation Theology and Social Justice in a wide range of colleges and courses, and has links with Christian Aid, SCM, Trident Ploughshares and CND.

Planning House Groups for the New Year.. maybe in Lent?

Take a look at two ***Together in Hope*** publications, by John Simmonds ***Walk the Jesus Walk & Jesus - Then and Now***. Stimulating and inspiring for progressive Christians. Recommend them to your church.

Both are 2.95 plus postage. Available from St Mark’s CRC or PCN Britain.

Introducing future **LIBRARY EVENINGS**

Library evenings provide an opportunity to browse the CRC Library, borrow books and engage with a particular book and its author. Typical evening programme:

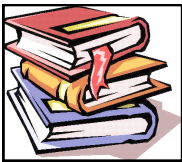
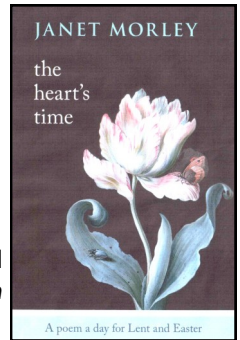
6.00 – 7.00 pm	Coffee, tea and biscuits served in the lounge.
7.00 – 8.30 pm	Speaker
8.30 – 9.00 pm	Time to chat, browse, borrow, return library books.

Next meeting: Thurs 26 Jan 2012: 6.00 – 9.00 pm

‘The heart’s time’ by Janet Morley

JANET MORLEY offers her own commentaries on a fascinating themed sequence of both familiar and unexpected poems, including works by Margaret Atwood, Charles Causley, Emily Dickinson, Carol Ann Duffy, U. A. Fanthorpe, Seamus Heaney, George Herbert, Elizabeth Jennings, Roger McGough, Adrienne Rich, Christina Rossetti, R. S. Thomas and Rowan Williams.

Janet is a writer and trainer who has worked with Christian Aid and the Methodist Church. She is author of *All Desires Known* (SPCK, 2005) and *Bread of Tomorrow* (SPCK, 2004).



FURTHER DATES FOR LIBRARY EVENINGS IN 2012

Wednesday 13 June: 6.00 – 9.00pm

Wednesday 3 October: 6.00 - 9.00pm

Topics to be announced in due course

St Mark's CRC Library

Please check our website (www.stmarkscrc.co.uk/resources/library) for details of the huge selection of books available in our library. These can be ordered from the office and posted out to you. Please contact the CRC office for more details.

Jesus the Jew – Oh, really?

Robin Story writes

Does everybody subconsciously construct a portrait of Jesus determined by their own world view and needs? Does this process involve glossing over or attempting to explain “inconvenient” episodes, parables and sayings recorded in the Gospels? Of course whoever the Gospel writers were, each had their own agenda too. It would not be surprising if most Biblical scholars throughout the ages had also succumbed. If the actual historical Jesus stood up, would anyone recognise him?

At a recent **CRC Library Evening at St Mark’s**, Dr James Crossley of the Biblical Studies Department, University of Sheffield, refreshingly challenged scholars and critics, some of whose portraits of Jesus had been skewed to make them consistent with Western liberal market-driven democracy while others had to fit with socialist or even Marxist philosophies.

James outlined the political and socio-economic state of Palestine during the few years of Jesus’ ministry. Why was this period so brief? The building of the cities of Caesarea by Herod the Great and Sepphoris and Tiberias by Herod Antipas, the Tetrarch, was financed by heavy taxation on already poor and probably starving people. When some rioted, the first thing they did was to destroy the tax records. The rich ruling class and the tax collectors were severely condemned. The stories of Dives and Lazarus and Jesus’ encounter with a rich man teach that no rich person will “enter the Kingdom”- none of them at all.

Did Jesus as a good Jew encourage his followers to break Sabbath laws? The stories of plucking grain on the Sabbath and the dispute about not washing hands before eating were in fact topics argued about among the various Jewish sects of the period: there were no agreed rules about many issues of this sort.

Other fascinating material was covered in the evening’s talk, including religion and violence in the modern world and a critical look at the neo-atheists.

Among the discussion that arose from questions was “How did a Jewish movement inspired by Jesus spread into the Gentile world and flourish?”. Although most credit goes to the much-travelled Paul, the fact that the gospels were written in Greek and not Aramaic or Hebrew made them accessible to a wider public.

If any of the 21 people present had come imagining that Biblical scholarship was an objective art, they would have their minds changed by this refreshing, deep and wide-ranging discourse.

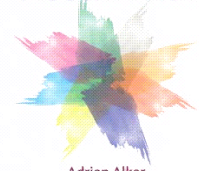
James is the co-author of "How Did Christianity Begin?" by Michael Bird and James Crossley; he recommends "Jesus of Nazareth" by Maurice Casey for further reading.

CHRISTMAS : ANCIENT MEANINGS, MODERN FAITH.

by Adrian Alker (St. Mark's CRC Press Sheffield)

Reviewed by Helen and Peter Fisher

Christmas:
Ancient Meanings,
Modern Faith



Adrian Alker

Together in Hope –
Resources for Christian Faith Today

This is a valuable book which punches far above its weight; it is the latest in the **'Together in Hope'** series. Those who read it should find their eyes being opened to see the Gospels in a completely new way, written as proclamations of faith – faith in the sense of *believing in* rather than simply *believing that*. They are writings of commitment; the Gospels are all about changing lives .

The book makes several observations that are crucial in understanding the Gospels. These are Jewish books, 'written in the main in the Midrashic style of the Jewish sacred storyteller'. Midrash is commentary, written to bring out meaning; what we would take these days as historical accuracy is not the first concern of these writers. Using Myth, History, Poetry, Story, Prophecy and Song, the story tellers describe God's dealings with the people of Israel .

So it is with the Birth Narratives in Matthew and Luke. They are prologues to the Gospel. They use Old Testament stories to set the scene for the Good News and show us how to understand the central significance of Jesus.

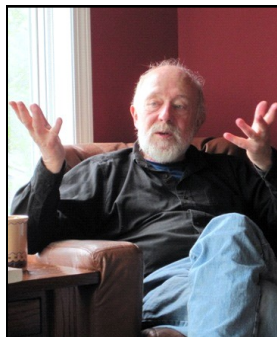
We are given a further pre-condition for a better understanding of the Gospels – 'being aware of the context in which the story is told'. Many of us will hear Dominic Crossan's voice here, telling us that, 'if you get the History right, the Theology will follow'. For whom were the evangelists writing? How would the audience understand certain words and phrases – for example, the title 'Lord'? To speak of the 'Lord' in first century Palestine was to speak of the Emperor Caesar Augustus; Caesar was Lord whether the people liked it or not! To say 'Jesus is Lord' was tantamount to an act of rebellion .

Adrian emphasises the timeless themes that emerge in the stories which still speak to us today – whether we are Christian or not . A major theme is 'Light in the Darkness', with the symbolism of light used specifically in relation to the Birth of Jesus; the theme has particular power at the darkest time of the year. The Birth Stories also introduce the themes of Conflict, Power and Humility; they run through the Gospels, reflecting our fears, hopes and dreams, and our need to bring light into dark places. The final theme is 'Christmas Joy, Love and Goodwill': "Central to the celebration of Christmas that God is Love and that in Jesus we see God's love perfected".

Each section of the book ends with a group of questions: there are also ideas and resources for services, dramas and prayers. Members of St. Mark's CRC are used to being given the opportunity to question and challenge ideas. This is not the case with many Church communities and this book will be a blessing to many people who struggle alone to find a credible faith for today. This is a challenging little book and it is very readable .

3 Seminars at St Mark's CRC

'DIGESTING BORG'



Following Marcus Borg's recent conference at St Mark's, you are invited to share in three seminars which will explore further the ideas and issues raised by Marcus. Each will be facilitated by a member of the CRC Council, with a good opportunity everyone attending to contribute.

Seminars will take place on Sundays in the upper room at St Mark's Church, Broomhill, Sheffield from 5.00 pm - 6.30pm. Entrance is free and open to anyone interested in the continuing impact of Jesus on Christian faith. Refreshments will be served.

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| 20 November | Reclaiming Christian Language,
Facilitated by Ian Wallis |
| 4 December | Reclaiming the God of Jesus: God and Atheism
Facilitated by Sue Hobley |
| 11 December | Reclaiming the God of Jesus: God and Jesus
Facilitated by John Simmonds |
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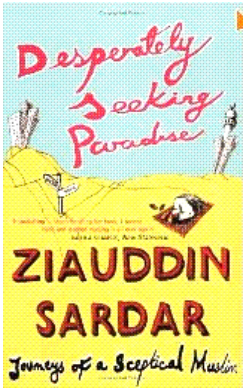
Recent CRC Library acquisition.

The Greatest Prayer: Rediscovering the revolutionary message of the Lord's Prayer; John Dominic Crossan pub. SPCK 2011

Every Sunday, the Lord's Prayer echoes in every church around the world. It is an essential element of the faith. It is the way Jesus taught his disciples to pray, encapsulating the basic beliefs and attitudes that every Christian throughout the ages, has tried to follow. Here, John Dominic Crossan, widely known as one of the world's greatest writers on Jesus and his time, explores the rich depths of this foundational prayer, line by line.

This is quintessential Crossan, providing just the right amount of historical detail and literary insight to enhance our understanding of the prayer in its original setting, and drawing out the transformative power of its words for all who follow Christ today.

John Dominic Crossan is Professor Emeritus at the DePaul University, Chicago. He is the author of several best selling books, including *The Historical Jesus* and *Jesus : A Revolutionary Biography* and three written with Marcus J. Borg: *The Last Week* (2006), *The First Christmas* (2007);, and *The First Paul* (2009).



PAUL KING RECOMMENDS

Desperately Seeking Paradise

By Ziauddin Sardar:
(Granta Books, 2004)

Are you a sceptical Christian on a journey? Then 'Desperately Seeking Paradise; Journeys of a Sceptical Moslem' – by Ziauddin Sardar, may be just the thing for you.

Why? Because it is a candid personal account of one Muslim's quest for 'paradise'. With a family background in Pakistan and a devout mother, but brought up in Hackney, Ziauddin goes through some of the same learning experiences as many an adolescent Christian.

Whisked away to be an enforcer-evangelist in Glasgow, he quits, in the temporary company of a disaffected young woman, who has also been inveigled into the project.

He tries Sufism, hoping it will in turn show him 'paradise', but finds that some Sufis are not all they are cracked up to be. So he tries Moslem Campus Crusade and Quakerism, where will he turn next? Surely post-revolution Iran and Shariah have the answer? No? Then how about a decent, liberal, critical journal? Great for a while, but it needs funding – available only from authoritarian sources, who cut off the credit when independent views are written up.

Does this sound familiar? How many 'cradle Christians' get suck(er)ed into this and try that, and join an under-funded project and are eventually tempted into a single, simple, one-cause organisation which bites the dust after a year or two of promise. Desperately seeking The Kingdom?

Ziauddin has seen it all – Satanic Verses, several Haj pilgrimages, hope and despair, travel throughout the Moslem world, Shia and Sunni – the complete range. And, like many a PCN supporter, still looking. A Moslem can be sceptical, as numbers of Christians are. We can surely learn from each other's journeys?

Ziauddin Sardar is one of the leading Muslim intellectuals in Britain, author of more than 40 books on science, religion and culture.