

This is the first in a short series of articles in which Community Companion Peter McDowell reflects on

Living the Questions – Who is it that you seek?

The faith journey that I am on is a journey into an experience of exile stimulated by changes in the world around me and consequent changes within me. This is both an enriching and an unsettling journey. If you had spoken to me several years ago I would have said that faith was about providing answers to very important questions: about God, about humanity, about who Christ is, about how we relate to God, etc. I would have considered a faith that did not provide answers to be woolly, intellectually inadequate and without direction.



I have, however, now come to a different understanding of questions and answers. The problem with a focus on answers is with their finality. They give an impression of having arrived at the answer; that once the answer has been found we now possess the Truth. There does not then seem to be much room for progression, nor any desire for movement. Not only does this not sit well in the current cultural climate, but, more seriously, it seems to leave no room for the mystery and incomprehensible nature of God.

Rowan Williams' statement, 'Christ indeed answers our questions; but he also questions our answers' describes the paradox that I have come to live with. I am left asking if it is possible to have a faith in which there is room for

Welcome to the Summer edition of Caim!

Caim never sets out to be a commentary on our times, but rather a celebration of all that God has given us in Community. Nonetheless, as Roy Searle's leading article reminds us, there has rarely been a time of such political 'unrest' and threat to our communities as we are living through just now. We must listen for - and be - the voice of peace and compassion at such a time as this. Enjoy this issue of Caim! Jeff & Ingrid

progression and movement, but is not woolly, intellectually inadequate and without direction?

As a Companion of the Northumbria Community I have come to appreciate its emphasis on 'living the questions'. *The best we can do is to talk about living the questions at the heart of our life as a response rather than an answer. Answers give finality whereas we want to convey life still being lived, discoveries yet to be made, exploration and adventure being real.*

(from the article 'Mulling Over the Questions' by Trevor Miller)



The questions that the Northumbria Community has chosen to live by are:

- Who is it that you seek?
- How then shall we live?
- How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?

Asking the right questions is an important skill. For example, a key element in any research project is to frame the research questions. These questions provide the framework for the research. They set the direction for the entire project and, amidst the vast amount of data that can be accumulated, ensure that the researchers keep focused and are not distracted by interesting but irrelevant information.

Similarly, I have found that the Northumbria Community's questions can become the basis for a life of faith that is not woolly, intellectually inadequate or



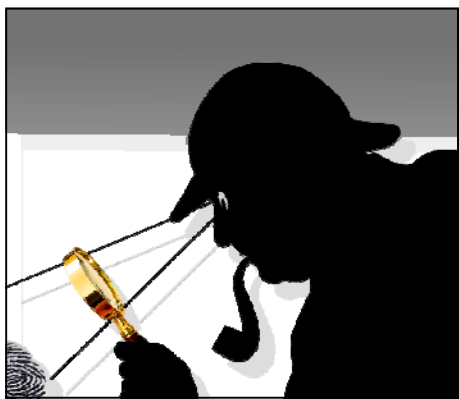
without direction. On the contrary, they can become the basis of a life-long exploration and deepening understanding, in which each new insight is never the end of a process, but a

milestone on the way to even more understanding. They also serve to maintain focus and direction on the journey.

Who is it that you seek?

This is a question that does have an answer. We are seeking God, through Jesus Christ.

Yet this is an answer that immediately raises other questions. Who is Jesus Christ? What is the connection or relationship between Jesus and God? Why Jesus and not one of the many other religious figures we could choose from?



At this point I find Lesslie Newbigin's description of 'Christ as the clue' helpful. He describes Christ as, 'the clue to history, its source and its goal'¹ and after his first encounter with

Christ, he writes of the cross:

*I was sure that night, in a way I had never been before, that this was the clue that I must follow if I were to make any kind of sense of the world. From that moment I would always know how to take bearings when I was lost. I would know where to begin again when I had come to the end of all my own resources of understanding or courage.*²

Newbigin is proposing that the life, death and resurrection of Jesus can be the foundation of an entire worldview, a way of understanding the world and, therefore, how to live appropriately within it.

The decision to take Christ as the clue is an act of personal commitment and involves an element of risk. It is similar to a detective who in light of the evidence must select a line of inquiry. In doing so she must commit resources that cannot then be assigned to other lines of inquiry. There may be various possible lines of inquiry, but at some point a decision must be made to commit to one, rather than the others. The detective will be aware of the other possible interpretations and be willing to present her reasons for following this particular line of inquiry.

Taking Christ as the clue, or as the foundation of a worldview, is an appropriate stance for an exile seeking to live faithfully. It is a statement about 'absolute truth', since if Christ is indeed the clue for understanding God, the world and myself, this must be true for all people. Yet stating it in this way recognises my personal commitment and that there are other 'clues' to which other people are equally committed in seeking to understand and live in

the world. Thus, space is created for a dialogue in which the genuine truth claims of each other are neither disrespected nor diminished.

Although taking Christ as the clue is helpful, it is obviously not a fully adequate description of what it is to seek Christ. The most obvious difference is that seeking Christ is a personal relationship. Although a detective following a line of evidence is committed to that line, it is not the same commitment that is involved in a personal relationship. As soon as the balance of evidence shifts a detective will move to a new line of inquiry. The commitment involved in a personal relationship is more demanding, particularly the commitment of faith as seen in scripture and in the history of the church. This is the personal commitment that continues to seek even when the evidence appears to be lacking, through the experience of the long dark night of the soul. As one person of faith facing personal and national disaster put it:

Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Saviour.
Habakkuk 3:17-18

(Artwork by Mary Fleeson)



Asking 'who is it that you seek?' has led to affirming Christ as the clue to understanding the world. The next two questions, 'how then shall we live?' and 'how shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?', look at some of the practical implications that lead on from this.

Peter McDowell

¹Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1989), 123.

²Lesslie Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda* (Edinburgh: St Andrews Press, 1993), 11.

