

# **finding naasicaa**

*letters of hope in an age of anxiety*

charles ringma

REGENT COLLEGE PUBLISHING  
Vancouver, British Columbia

For

a new generation:  
bearers of hope for a newer tomorrow;

for a past generation of parents:  
whose spiritual faith fractured with the collapse of  
Christendom;

and for an older generation of grandparents:  
whose life is marked by anxious prayer.

# contents

Preface		1
Letter One	An Opening Word for Naasticaa	3
Letter Two	The World Without and Within	7
Letter Three	Life's Meaning and Uncertainty	19
Letter Four	The Doing of Good and the Persistence of Evil	32
Letter Five	The Story of God and the Human Predicament	45
Letter Six	Faith and Doubt in a Perilous World	60
Letter Seven	The Sign and Contradiction of the Community of Faith	74
Letter Eight	Symbols and Countersigns of Spirituality	91
Letter Nine	Themes of Life and Threads of Decay	111
Letter Ten	Passion, Commitment and Disillusionment	125
Letter Eleven	Gratitude, Wonder, Creativity and the Dulling Power of Conformity	140
Letter Twelve	Mending and Bending	151
Letter Thirteen	Work and Play in a World of Inequality	162
Letter Fourteen	The Reign of God and the Human Enterprise	171
Letter Fifteen	The Galilean Prophet and the Timeless Christ	182
Letter Sixteen	Time, Finitude, Death and the Power of Hope and Transcendence	190
Afterword:	<i>Letter Seventeen</i>	199
Endnotes		203

# **work and play in a world of inequality**

## *letter thirteen*

I am sure you will have noticed, Naasicaa, how the work we do is often used as a descriptor of our personhood. The first question one gets asked in the company of strangers is, 'What work do you do?'

In other cultures this is very different. The first question is not regarding your job, but who you belong to. Your family or your tribal group is a key indicator regarding who you are.

What the above question in a Western cultural setting indicates is that work is important and work is regarded as a status symbol. Both of these dimensions come as no surprise. The West holds high the value of productivity. Our work, therefore, is a participation in producing, building and maintaining all that sustains a society and produces economic well-being and wealth.

That work is also a status symbol flows from the fact that society rewards unevenly the work that humans do. There is a world of difference between what a CEO of a major corporation earns in contrast to a casual waiter or the garbage collector. And because the economic rewards are different, the impression is given that the person with the 'good' job is somehow a better human being. Or, if that is stretching things just a little too far, at least the person with the good job is regarded as a more capable and effective human being. Work matters.

You have already given some thought to this. The subjects you have chosen at school and now at university reflect your concern to head in a particular career trajectory. And you are hopeful that your initial choice will reflect something of your creativity, interests and abilities. You are also hopeful that this is a good choice in the current job market.

Many other things in this regard are going on for you as well. You hope to make a success of your work and you hope that your work will contribute to the well-being of society, although for some the latter dimension is of little concern.

You will have noticed, Naasicaa, how often I have used the word 'hope'. This is appropriate, for the current work environment is hardly characterized by certainties.

The major societal paradigm shifts from agrarian to industrial and to our current post-industrial realities, together with the development of the global market, have resulted in ever changing demands and opportunities in the workforce. So in writing to you about this matter I am touching on something that is both intrinsic to who we are as human beings and something that is fragile and challenging, given our current economic realities. Work constitutes a large slice of our waking hours and therefore it is a topic that clamours for consideration.

## **a personal reflection**

My Reformed heritage gave me the Protestant work ethic. This view maintained that socially good work was to be done to care for one's family, benefit the company, and prosper society, and all was to be done for the glory of God.<sup>1</sup> One was to work hard, live carefully, save and invest and also use a small proportion of these blessings for the benefit of others. This was largely to be done through the diaconate of the church. This view advocated job stability, economic prudence and social conservatism. My family of origin and extended family lived this vision of life.

While I believe that there is much good in this vision, I did not live its central tenets. This was due to a growing understanding that the Christian faith yields a more radical understanding of the world of work than the one advocated by the Protestant work ethic.

My letter to you will attempt to make clear what I mean by this alternative vision. But at the heart of the matter there lies the idea that living for God in the light of the biblical story places us in an ambivalent relationship to the world of work and its central motivations.

To get ahead of myself, but to make a basic point, what does Jesus' call to Peter to leave his fishing nets and to follow Jesus have in common with job stability, economic prudence and social conservatism? Very little, I would suggest. But, of course, there is much to this story. One can't build a whole set of values on one biblical example.

## **a theology of work**

The starting point for a theology of work lies with God 'himself'. The God of the Bible is not some indolent, disinterested and remote Being, locked into some form of ultimate introspection. Instead, Yahweh, Israel's Creator

God, calls the world into being out of the fullness of 'his' love and deeply concerns 'himself' with all that 'he' has made.

It is important to note that the biblical picture is not only that God creates, but also that God sustains, maintains, nurtures and cares for all that has been called into being.

The larger preoccupation of the biblical story is focussed on God's re-creative activity. With things having gone wrong in God's universe, the work of reparation becomes an important dimension. And so we speak of the *work* of salvation—God's redeeming, healing and renewing activity.

Humans made in God's image have been given the joy and the task of imaging God. That means that in conforming to God and becoming godly, we are to reflect the being, joy, will and purposes of God. And at the heart of these purposes is the sustenance and the re-creation of all that God has made.

I think that you can see, Naasticaa, that this has implications for the way we work in the world. Work, in the light of this vision, has both maintenance and transformational dimensions. We work to sustain life. We engage in meaningful activity to earn our living and care for those within our sphere of responsibility. And this meaningful activity has general benefit for our society. The little part that we play contributes to the greater good of the company we work for and this in turn contributes to the general good in society. Thus work has to do with building and maintaining the human community. This is living the vision of the Genesis mandate (Genesis 1:27–28).

Sadly, something of this perspective tends to be missing among Westerners. We think of work as benefiting me—my career, my security and my family. We seem to have little sense of how we are contributing to a larger

whole. And even if we did have this perspective, it would not give us much satisfaction and joy.

So the work of maintenance and sustenance is one dimension of a theology of work. There is, however, more to the story. There is also the work of re-creation, healing and restoration.

There are several important dimensions to this. The one sees living this biblical vision primarily in spiritual terms. What this means is that our work is not only that of banker, lawyer, farmer, office worker and motor mechanic; our work is also that of witness.

This work of witness in all the places we find ourselves, including the workplace, is to draw people's attention to the good news which our forebears have all but forgotten. This is the good news about God's redeeming love in Christ, which makes God present to our lives, spreads the fragrance of grace and goodness into the very fabric of our being, brings us into the freedom of forgiveness and brings healing to the inner woundedness of our lives. Clearly this is not the whole story of spiritual healing and renewal. But it is the core, and I have written to you about this before.

But there is more to the story of re-creation, healing and restoration. It has implications for all of our horizontal relationships. Businesses, organizations and institutions also need renewal. This renewal should not be understood merely in economic terms. Renewal in relationships, more just practices, greater fairness and equity may be some of the dimensions of an organizational healing process.

This work of healing also needs to take place in our fractured families and in our neighbourhoods, where community is so frequently absent. This restorative work can be one's paid employment as social worker, community advocate, clergy person, or organizational consultant. But it can also be something one does within one's job as banker, educator or carpenter.



But there is a third dimension to a theology of work—there is also the work of resistance. Sadly, it is not true that healing and renewal are always welcomed and embraced. So often the work of transformation is resisted. People don't want change. They want the *status quo* to continue. This can occur at all levels in a society. As a consequence, the work of resistance comes into play—a resistance to traditions that stultify impulses for change and renewal. This is visionary and prophetic work.

This work may need to occur in the church when spiritual or ecclesiastical renewal is called for. But the work of resistance is also needed in the political and economic dimensions of life. While maintenance says 'more of the same' and renewal is a loud 'yes' to change, resistance is the emphatic 'no'. No, we will not support this idea, this measure, this strategy! No, we will not cooperate with this policy! No, we will not give our political allegiance to this ideology!

The work of resistance is probably the most difficult work: It is walking the road of the cross.<sup>2</sup>

### **career and vocation**

I think you will have noticed, Naasicaa, that the above theology of work modifies the more traditional understanding of the Protestant work ethic, which tends to focus on the maintenance dimensions of the role and task of work. I am suggesting that the vision of work needs to be re-sculpted to include the transformational and prophetic dimensions of work. In the light of this, I wish to talk with you about the matter of career.

As you know, we speak a lot about carefully choosing one's career path. This means that a person knows what he or she wants to become and then consistently works in that direction. It all has to do with careful strategizing—the

right schooling, good pre-employment experience, the right contacts, entering a good employment situation, further training and as a consequence, becoming an expert in one's field of endeavour. This is a good and reasonable scenario, but let me raise some counterpoints to this evolutionary trajectory.

First of all, as a young person, you may not always know what you would like to do career wise. And so you may find that in the midst of moving along a certain trajectory you discover a different work priority and field of endeavour. A lawyer becomes a writer. A business person becomes a clergy person. A medical doctor becomes an artist. In our current fast changing work environment one may end up having four or five different careers in a lifetime.

Secondly, not everything comes to us by way of careful planning and strategizing. We also 'fall' into things. A 'chance' meeting might open up a door of opportunity we had never anticipated.

Thirdly, major life changes will have an effect on what we wish to do with our lives. An accident. An illness. A broken relationship. An inheritance. A new relationship. A spiritual conversion. Any of these or other changes may significantly reorient us in such a way that we begin to explore different employment options.

Finally, as we go through the life cycle from youth to aging, a different sense of what is important and worthwhile may begin to enchant us so that we go into a different vocational direction.

When one operates within a Christian frame of reference, I think it is inappropriate to speak of one's career. It is better to speak of one's vocation, for the orientation then is not so much what I want to do with my life. The focus is different. It is, 'What is God calling me to be and do'? It is, 'How is the Spirit leading me regarding work and service'?

The focus then becomes finding an answer to the question, 'How can I in my work honour God, bless others and serve the wider community'? And this question remains the same for the Christian movie star, politician, business person and clergy person. Answers to this most basic of directional questions won't fall out of the sky. They may well come to us through careful thought, fervent praying, wise advice and the gentle nudges of our intuition.

To do one's work—no matter how great or small, paid or voluntary—out of a sense of calling that seeks to bless the wider community and endeavours to honour God is meaningful work indeed!

### **the politics of play**

Work is indeed important. It is intrinsic to who we are. It is an outworking of having been made in God's image. It is linked to the task of imaging God and making our contribution to the shape and welfare of the community.

But we are not only workers. We are also dreamers. We are also relational creatures. And we know something of the joy of play and the grace of relaxation.

While our society places a lot of emphasis on work, it has also created a huge leisure industry. And healthy work practices know something of the importance of recreation and 'down time'. Thus our secular world, in its own way, practices some aspects of the religious notion of Sabbath, although it has not really understood it.

Let me attempt briefly to explain why I think this is so. The secular world knows the importance of rest, which is one dimension of Sabbath, but it has missed the rest of the meaning. In our society rest operates primarily as a means unto an end—that we will be renewed and empowered for further work. The religious notion of Sabbath, by way of contrast, sees Sabbath as an end itself. Sabbath is not

simply 'down time'. It is instead entering 'new time'. It is a reorientation from the demands and challenges of daily existence to contemplation and worship.<sup>3</sup>

Sabbath is a refocusing on God as Creator and Sustainer of all things. It is celebrating God's redemptive activity within the community of faith. And it is a symbol to remind us that grace precedes law, that receptivity precedes giving and that contemplation precedes service.

Within a religious frame one begins the week with Sabbath and from that fundamental starting point moves into work. This means that worship, contemplation, playfulness, listening, and receptivity are foundational to being human, and that work is the outflow of this. In the secular sphere, by contrast, one begins with work and ends in much needed rest.

Thus life is not just about work. It is also about gazing, dreaming, playing, hoping, praying. I believe that the politics of play are essential to human creativity. Contemplation and playfulness allow us to disconnect from the tyranny of ever demanding work. These disciplines of the inner being allow us to see things differently and help us to overcome the pressures of our compulsive and frenetic world.

# **the reign of god and the human enterprise**

## *letter fourteen*

I am back in Manila for a few weeks teaching several courses at Asian Theological Seminary. I am in touch with friends who continue to work with Servants to Asia's Urban Poor, seeking to bring hope and blessing to a number of slum communities in this amazing city with its extreme contrasts.

Being here provides a good setting to begin to probe one of life and faith's difficult questions: 'How much change for the good may we expect in our world'?

The reason the Philippines provides a challenging setting in pursuing this basic question is because it, like so many other Third World countries, seems to experience so little change, despite significant aid and development strategies and despite the role of the church.

One seems to gain the impression that the way of the world simply continues. Despite the many signs of goodness

in every sphere of life, which call for celebration and thankfulness, the old way and its problems persist. Poverty continues. So do unjust work practices and inadequate wages. So do corruption and cronyism. So does the reality of an uneven playing field in the global economy and the pain of foreign debt servicing. The story of pain seems to go on and on, not only at the national level, but also at the personal.

It is against this backdrop that I would like to speak with you about the Reign, or Kingdom, of God. In particular I would like to explore how this language may or may not be helpful given the above scenario—that so little change for the good seems to be happening in our world, and in particular in the Third World.

What makes this discussion all the more difficult and challenging is that the Reign of God does not seem to be immediately accessible and evident in our world. Powerful nations are in view. The power of large corporations is evident. The influence of the media is well-known. There are famous and influential persons. But how is the Kingdom or Reign of God evident? How can we know it or see it? And if it can be known, is it really all that significant and powerful?

### **the kingdom of god and the church**

There have been periods in the church's long two thousand year history where it has been a powerful institution. Popes were as powerful as Kings. It would have been rather easy during those times to have said, 'Yes, I can see the Kingdom of God. I can see it in the power and influence of the leaders of the church. I can see it in the magnificence of the cathedrals. I see it in the way the church is influencing politics, education, the sciences and the arts'.

It should, therefore, come as no surprise that the idea of the Kingdom of God became synonymous with the power of the church. The theology of the Kingdom was reduced to ecclesiology.

But there are obvious problems with this kind of vision. Can we simply reduce the presence of God and the purposes and power of God to what the church is and does? The answer to this would have to be a clear, 'NO'!

There are many reasons for such an answer. First, God is always greater and different than who we are and what we do. We are at best a poor reflection of God's ways, and the Christian witness in the world is first and foremost not a self-witness. The church does not point to itself in terms of its power, faithfulness and goodness. Instead, it points to God's love, grace and forgiveness.

Secondly, the church is always less than what it is called to be. While it is called to be the faithful servant of the Kingdom of God, the church stumbles in its belief and praxis. Even when the church was such a powerful institution it did not always use its power well. Instead, it became at times oppressive and self-serving.

In the modern world the church has also been less than what it was meant to be. The way the church in Germany largely embraced Nazi ideology is but one indication of the way the church has failed to be a sign of the Kingdom of God. Instead it embraced an idolatrous political ideology that was morally bankrupt. To equate the Reign of God with the church is to emasculate the nature of the Kingdom of God, and this gives power and status to the church which it should never receive.

The Kingdom of God instead is all about the nature of God as creator and redeemer extending 'his' love, care and goodness to all creation. The church is too small a vessel to contain all of this beneficence. Moreover, it is never the *source* of this goodness—only God is. So the church at most

is but a sign, servant and sacrament of the Reign of God. The Reign of God is always far greater than the church.

All of this, of course, is not to suggest that the Kingdom of God has *nothing* to do with the church. I am only saying the two cannot be equated. What should be said is that the church is only truly church to the degree that it conforms itself to the Reign of God. What that looks like I will come to a little later in this letter.

### **the kingdom of god and the inner life**

Those who embrace the more mystical traditions within Christianity have never been enamoured with the idea that the Reign of God can be expressed in terms of the power of the church. For them, the Kingdom of God is *only* an inner mystical reality experienced by people who have embraced the love of God in Christ Jesus and who live a life of inner piety through the Holy Spirit. Thus whether the church is doing poorly or well, the Kingdom of God is not primarily to be found there. It is to be found only in the inner life of individuals.

The appeal for this perspective is found in Jesus' exclamation, 'The Kingdom of God is within you' (Luke 17:21) and his further assertion before Pilate, 'My Kingdom is not of this world' (John 18:36).

Unlike the previous perspective, where the Reign of God is most visible in particular ways, in this vision the Kingdom of God is invisible. It lies hidden in the hearts and minds of people and in their personal practices of prayer and piety. The Reign of God is thus a religious psychological form of inwardness. It is personal and mysterious.

Clearly there is something valid in this vision of the Kingdom of God. The presence of God through the Holy Spirit at work in the heart and lives of individuals is part of the manifestation of the Kingdom. But it's not the whole



mosaic. And the extent to which this is so will soon become clear.

### **the reign of god and utopia**

There has always been a propensity on the part of individuals in renewal movements to believe that they are the last and fullest manifestation of the Kingdom of God and that the end of the world is at hand.

To some extent this perspective is close to the first vision with its identification of Kingdom and church. Only in this case, it is not the identification of traditional church and the Kingdom but the renewed church and the Kingdom. And the implication of this perspective is that the Reign of God is now most fully revealed in this renewal movement. This is where it is all at!

Now I need to point out that not all renewal movements are utopian. Many renewal movements spring up when there is a revitalization of personal faith and piety and the church is more vibrant in its worship, teaching, discipleship and service. Thus we have had renewal movements such as the Montanists in the early centuries of Christianity, the Waldensians in the Middle Ages, the Wesleyan renewal in eighteenth-century England and the charismatic renewal movement in the 1960s. There are, of course, many others.

But some are utopian. The central idea in these movements is that heaven comes to earth; here and now the fullness of life with God is possible and a whole new social order can come into being.<sup>1</sup> The Russian Leo Tolstoy held such ideas,<sup>2</sup> and the nineteenth century Oneida Society in the USA practised a religious utopianism.<sup>3</sup>

While it is very understandable that a group of people can envisage a perfect world within history, this is ultimately marked by idealism and escapism. The persistent

worldliness of the world, the on-going reality of evil and the lack of justice in our divided world can hardly be denied.

Utopian movements always become perfectionistic and legalistic. They soon become cultish in orientation. And instead of reflecting the wideness of God's mercy and grace in a wounded world they become judgemental and are soon irrelevant.

### **the reign of god and eschatology**

One of the ways that Christians have thought about the Kingdom of God has been to cast it wholly into the future. The present is not the time of the Kingdom. It is the church age. It is that period where Christians touched by the grace of God live in anticipation of the full coming of the Reign of God.

Thus the Kingdom is not substantially present. It lies in the long-awaited future. As a result, little can be seen now, and little can be expected. We are in an interim zone where the promise of the Kingdom awaits its fulfilment, and we live with the surety of what will come in the future with only present scraps from God's banqueting table. This becomes an attractive idea particularly when the church in the Western World is not doing well. While the utopian idea says that all can be well now, the eschatological vision says that all will be well in the future.

Now it is true that in the future God's reign will fully be revealed. But God is also with us now. God's grace is for this life. God's healing presence is with us here. And the good continues to sprout even in the asphalt of our social existence.

Future, yes! But present also, even though this presence is not the fullness of what will yet come.<sup>4</sup>

## **a biblical vision of the kingdom of god**

The themes regarding the Reign of God—apart from the utopian version—belong together to form a mosaic. But these theological ideas don't give us a concrete enough picture regarding the Kingdom. To gain that we must turn to the biblical story.

In the Old Testament there is an emphasis on God's Kingship over Israel. But there is also a recognition that Yahweh's rule is over all. 'The Lord has established his throne in heaven and his Kingdom rules over all' (Psalm 103:19). This rulership is redemptive. God reigns in order to bless, to renew, to make whole and to uplift the poor and bring forth justice.

In the New Testament we note that the Kingdom of God remains an enduring theme. It is central to the preaching Jesus. "The time has come", he said. "The Kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!" (Mark 1:15). It is key to the mission of the disciples. 'He sent them out to preach the Kingdom of God and to heal the sick' (Luke 9:2). It is the focus of Jesus's post-resurrection appearances. 'He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the Kingdom of God' (Acts 1:3b). It is at the heart of Paul's preaching. 'Boldly and without hindrance he preached the Kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ' (Acts 28:31).

And finally, the Kingdom of God and its full manifestation is central to God's final future. 'The Kingdom of the World has become the Kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ and he will reign for ever and ever' (Revelation 11:15).

So what happens when the Kingdom of God draws near and breaks into our lives and our world? What are the signs that mark its coming? What is its melody? What sort of goodness does it bring?

Central to any manifestation of the Kingdom of God is an experience of the love of God and the forgiveness of sins (John 3:3, Mark 1:15, Luke 5:20). Linked to this is the healing power and presence of God and the banishment from our lives of the forces of darkness and oppression (Luke 7:18–23, Luke 11:20). Thus wherever and whenever the Kingdom of God comes to us there is the joy of salvation, the grace of forgiveness, the wholeness of God's healing presence and the manifestation of God's liberating work in pushing back the forces of darkness.

The One who brings this home to us is the go-between God, the Holy Spirit. The Spirit takes the blessings of Christ and flings them into our lives and world. Thus one of the signs of the in-breaking of the Reign of God is the presence and power of the Holy Spirit (Luke 24:49, John 14:15–17, Acts 1:8). When the Spirit comes there is an exposure of sin, there are healing gifts, there is abundant joy and the rigid and dry places are renewed with the showers of God's goodness (John 16:5, 11; 1 Corinthians 12:9, Isaiah 61:1–3).

The presence of the Kingdom of God is evident when reconciliation occurs, when communities of faith come into being or are renewed, when unity finds a common expression, when brotherhood and sisterhood, in the bonds of love and in common service, forms and grows. The Reign of God, while embedded in the life of the individual person, comes to expression in the *people* of God as a worshipping, teaching, sacramental, fellowshiping and serving community of faith (Luke 8:1–3, Galatians 3:26–28, Ephesians 2:14–22).

One of the signs of the Kingdom of God is when the love of God is translated into the love of neighbour in such a significant way that the poor and the enemy become the recipients of care and forgiveness. When God's care for the poor becomes our concern for the poor then the Kingdom

of God is breaking in amongst us (Proverbs, 22:9, Isaiah 58:7, Luke 4:18-19, Matthew 26:34-40).<sup>5</sup>

In many parables Jesus speaks about the nature of the Kingdom of God. And besides its mystery and its growth, he refers to its subversive nature. Things are turned around. Things are turned the right side up: the poor are blessed and the meek inherit the earth.

The parables of reversal reflect this subversive activity of the Reign of God. The small, the stranger, the outsider—those we normally ignore or reject—become the models of the ethics of the Kingdom of God. A Samaritan becomes the bearer of the love of God (Luke 10:25-37) and a child a sign of the working of God (Matthew 18:1-6).

Mary's Song, or the Magnificat, most clearly expresses the ethics of reversal:

He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty. (Luke 1:51-52, NRSV)

The Reign of God comes to us when the poor are seen as recipients of God's love and we respond in serving the poor and washing the feet of the world. This love for the poor involved Jesus in boundary breaking behaviour. Not only did Jesus reject current practices regarding Sabbath laws and not only did Jesus elevate the role of women, but Jesus invited all sorts of cultural outsiders including the poor, to his banqueting table (Luke 8:1-3, Luke 19:1-10, Matthew 22:1-4).<sup>6</sup>

## a reflection

From the above it should be clear that the coming of the Kingdom of God amongst us does not look the same as someone having political or economic power. The Reign of God is not the same as the power a political party wields, even when that party claims to be essentially Christian. Nor is the Kingdom of God the same as the political, social and moral influence of the church. Moreover, the Kingdom of God is not something *we* build. Our activities of social justice in our broken world do not equate to a full manifestation of the Kingdom.

The Kingdom of God is the rule, blessing and beneficence of the Master of the Universe. It is the fruit of God's creative and redemptive activity. It is what God does in 'his' sustaining and healing activity. It is God's mending all of creation. The Kingdom of God is God's blessing and goodness spilling over into our lives, churches and our social institutions.

But what we do when *we* pray, share the good news, work for reconciliation, build communities of faith and do the work of justice can intersect and interface with God's Kingdom activity. A synchronicity can occur. God takes up the work of our hands and uses it for 'his' purposes. And what we do can be a reflection of the heart and purposes of God. But more often, God has to convert our actions into the grace and goodness that 'he' alone can bring forth. This perspective requires great humility on our part and a profound openness to the leading of the Holy Spirit.

So how much good then is possible in our world? Great good is possible, for God's heart is ever towards the world, seeking its transformation and healing. But we are not always humble servants of the King. We often build human religious kingdoms instead.<sup>7</sup> And the world has its own way of saying 'no' to the wisdom and grace of God.

My hope for you, Naasticaa, is that you will experience the grace of the Kingdom of God and seek to live as a sacrament of the Reign of God.

# **the galilean prophet and the timeless christ**

## *letter fifteen*

As you know, Naasicaa, we are living in the eastside of the city of Vancouver. We are happy to live in this interesting neighbourhood. It is very multi-ethnic and we have Italians, Greeks, Portuguese, Asians as well as First Nations people living in this part of the city.

We are part of a church, Grandview Calvary Baptist Church, which seeks to serve this neighbourhood. We deliberately moved into this area to be part of this church because it seeks to be an incarnational presence of Christ to the people that live here, including many who are poor, have disabilities or are political refugee claimants.

If you asked me, 'Why do you do this?' I would answer, 'Because of Christ'. But this of course needs further explanation.

The cold January weather has brought a dumping of snow, transforming the neighbourhood into a white



fairlyland. I am thankful for our warm and snug basement apartment. It is from there that I am penning this letter.

### **the early witnesses**

My main reason for starting my letter about Christ in this way is to highlight that for me and for millions of others, Christ is a present living reality rather than someone who only lived some two thousand years ago.

That a person called Jesus of Nazareth lived so long ago is beyond reasonable doubt. Not only do the writings called the gospels of the early church attest to this person, but Jewish and Roman authors of that time, who were more than skeptical about this Christ, also make reference to him.<sup>1</sup>

The challenge for us is not so much his historical existence, but the nature of who he was and is, and what he came to do. And for this we can only turn to the sources of early Christianity. In other words, we are invited to accept the testimony of the early followers of Jesus. Thus we are presented with an insiders' perspective, and we are asked to believe what they have to tell us about this person from Galilee.

The immediate concern that this brings is whether this prejudices their testimony. Can we trust the witness of persons who are already committed and who believe that Jesus is the Messiah, God's answer for a wayward humanity?

I think such a testimony is reasonable. No person who shares a testimony is neutral. But just as the words of commendation by a spouse about her husband are worth listening to, so the witness of Christ's followers is worth a careful hearing. This is particularly the case since their witness was in the public arena and in the midst of enemies and skeptics. Moreover, the witness of the early church was

to people who had seen Jesus, heard him speak and had seen him crucified as an agitator with supposed subversive intent.

The witness of the early Christians is well summarized in Peter's public speech:

Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders, and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. This man was handed over to you by God's set purposes and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead . . . (Acts 2:22-24a).

The hearers are then invited to believe that Jesus is the promised Messiah and the Saviour of the world. They are invited to believe this message and to 'repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit' (Acts 2:38).

In the light of the life he lived, the words he spoke, the healings he performed and his resurrection, Jesus was seen as more than a miracle worker and prophet. He was worshipped as Son of God, as God made manifest. This is clearly expressed by the Apostle Paul: 'in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself' (2 Corinthians 5:19a).

All of the writings of the New Testament are testimonials. They speak of God's saving and healing activity in Christ as well as the call to faith in Christ expressed in a life of worship, prayer and obedience. They speak of participation in the community of faith and a life of service in the world.

## **the many witnesses**

Early Christianity began as a renewal movement within Judaism and developed its own ethos as a separate movement. It remained a marginal religious movement in the Roman Empire for the first several hundred years of its existence.

It was both tolerated and persecuted during these decades. But while vibrant in its beliefs it remained an absolute minority grouping. Scholars estimate that in the second century, with a population of some forty million in the Roman Empire, there were only some 200,000 Christians. This later changed when the Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity and it became the majority religion of the Empire.

There are many witnesses in the story of the church in history. Part of this remarkable story is the way Christianity moved onto foreign soil: from Palestine to Rome, to Persia, to India, to China, to barbaric Europe from 600 to 1000 A. D., to the Americas in the 1500s and from the 1800s on from the West to the rest of the world, leading to the present dominance of global Christianity in the Two-Thirds World. Some seventy percent of Christians live in the majority, i.e. the non-Western, world.

This story, Naasticaa, as I have written to you earlier, is a mixed story. There were times when the church was an exemplary witness to God's good news in Christ. At other times the church's witness was shameless, as in many of the Crusades from the years 1000 A. D. to the 1200s.

In this very long march of the church in history there are many witnesses whose faith and lives have passed into historical oblivion. But the witness of others has endured right up to the present, and you can read their writings: St. Augustine, St. Francis, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Teresa of Avila and John Wesley, just to mention a few. And

there are many contemporary witnesses to encourage us to live the life of Christ with fidelity: Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Desmond Tutu, Mother Teresa, C.S. Lewis and Thomas Merton.

The testimony of many witnesses is important. This shows us how very different women and men, in different times and places, and in different groupings and traditions within the global Christian church, have sought to follow Christ and bring his goodness into the world.

### **my witness**

I am happy to talk about my experience of Jesus, the Christ. Mine is but a little witness. And that is true for so many people who live 'ordinary' lives as spouses or singles, clergy or laity, artists or economists. And within the framework of family and friendships and work and play, they live out the love and vision of Jesus.

One's relationship with Jesus, mine included, is multi-textured. It is not one-dimensional, such as an intellectual orientation only. It is existential, intellectual, spiritual, communal and missional. And these dimensions are not stages but are part of the one picture.

By existential, I mean an encounter with Christ that touches the core of who one is and reorients one's life. This is a faith experience. It is also called conversion. In many ways this is a mystical experience. It is becoming aware of who Christ is and responding to Christ's presence so that Christ becomes experientially close.

I experienced this as a seventeen-year-old while going through an identity crisis accompanied by a deep search for an awareness of God. The words of John's Gospel, 'But to all who received him [Jesus], who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of

God' (John 1:12–13), came home to me like a shaft of light and a loving invitation.

While I have had my ups and downs in the spiritual life, including several experiences of the dark night of the soul, where God seemed very absent, this initial encounter with Christ, who came to save me and make me whole, has been the foundational impulse of my life.

One's relationship with Christ also has an intellectual orientation. What I mean by this is that one's faith in Christ seeks understanding. We are invited to be reflective regarding our relationship with Christ. This involves engaging the various witnesses of scripture and the long tradition of the church.

One's existential encounter with Christ cannot be a mere emotional experience. It needs to have a confessional shape. The witnesses of the biblical story do this. They experience and testify, and this testimony has an intellectual dimension. Listen to St Paul: 'It is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me' (Galatians 2:20b, NRSV). And the further testimony: 'He is the image of the invisible God, the first born of all creation . . . in him all things hold together' (Colossians 1:15–17, NRSV).

The main reason why I completed seminary training was not so much to become a clergy person. It had to do with a desire to grow in my understanding of the Christian faith. Thus theology is important. We are invited to love God with all of our mind, not simply with our heart.

The intellectual dimensions of one's faith also involve thinking about the implications of one's faith for one's involvement in society. But I will say something about that under the missional dimension.

The Christian faith and life is a particular form of spirituality. And at its very heart this has to do with the Spirit. Christ is present with us through the Spirit. Not

only 'were we all made to drink of one Spirit' but 'to each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good' (1 Corinthians 12:13b and 7, NRSV).

Thus living the Christian life involves a Christomysticism where Christ is made real and present to us by the Holy Spirit, and this Spirit shapes us into a Christ conformity so that we manifest the fruits of love, joy and peace and the gifts of healing and prophecy, among other gifts and graces. I experience my relationship with Christ not in terms of self-effort, but more as gift and blessing. The Spirit sustains and empowers me in this.

While the experience of Christ is personal, it is also communal. Christ is not simply my personal treasured possession. It is more the other way round. I am his. And in belonging to him, I also belong to all the others whom he has graced and called. And through Christ I belong to humanity as a witness and servant of Christ. Thus I am part of the community of faith because Christ has called diverse women and men together to share a common life of worship, teaching, sacrament, fellowship and service.

This, as I have pointed out in another letter, is a big challenge for us today. Marked by Western individualism and a consumer mentality we find it difficult to live the communal aspects of our faith. But the testimony of the early church is clear: 'We are all baptized by one Spirit into one body' (1 Corinthians 12:13a).<sup>2</sup>

What this means is that I experience the presence of Christ both in my personal reflections and prayers and also in my joining with others in the common journey of faith. It also means that in joining hands, the community of faith can be involved in communal witness, care for others and the work of justice.

This is what I mean by the missional dimension of the Christian life. Christ's blessings are for all. Yet not all are predisposed towards Christ. Some find him irrelevant.

Others don't care. Thus as both the gathered church and as the scattered church we are called to be little lights of the Great Light, Jesus Christ.

### **the sign of his presence**

Naasicaa, Christ comes to us at both the regular and traumatic intersections of our life. His is a seeking presence. Sometimes he comes in the full light of his power and love. Sometimes he comes in disguise in the forgotten and vulnerable ones in our society.

The signs of his presence are everywhere: the comfort of a stranger, the goodness of a teacher, the blessing of a parent, the prayer of the unknown, the challenge of a friend, the grace of the sacrament, the silence of the seeking heart. 'Come, all you who are thirsty . . . Seek the Lord while he may be found . . .' (Isaiah 55:1a and 6a).

The snow is falling again, ever so softly, ever so gently. It covers all and wraps everything up in virginal purity. So it is with the Spirit of Christ: falling upon us, ever so gently, bringing us new life.

# **time, finitude, death and the power of hope and transcendence**

## *letter sixteen*

While I am not preoccupied with the subject of death, I do think quite a bit about it. I hope this does not mean that I am morbid.

I was born in the midst of World War II, so from that fact alone, it is not surprising that death has been close to home for me. And as a young man working in several Aboriginal communities in Western Australia, death was all around me—not only the cultural ‘death’ of a people, but also physical death due to a very high infant mortality rate. And death of grandparents and parents are part of this textured story.

As a young boy growing up in Holland, my first concrete encounter with death was the serious illness of my grandmother. My father broke the news to me that she



was sick and needed my prayers. I refused to pray and soon afterwards she died. For years I felt to blame for her death. I have also felt guilty about working overseas while my parents were aging; I was not there for them, not even in the weeks and days before they passed away.

I am quite sure, Naasicaa, that you must be wondering where this is going and why I am writing to you about this. When one is young one tends not to think about time, finitude and death. Moreover, our contemporary culture is in a state of avoidance regarding these matters. Ours is a culture that venerates youth and beauty. But the faith traditions do deal with these subjects, particularly as they explore the power of hope in the face of tragedy and death.<sup>1</sup>

### **keeping time**

Like all of us you are aware of chronological time. You possibly also complain that there is not enough time, particularly when you are out with friends and having a good time. The fact that we speak of having a good time also means that there are other forms of time. When time creeps along. When we are bored. When we have to do things we don't enjoy and time seems to drag endlessly by.

Thus while chronological time ticks regularly along, our experience of time varies significantly. Kissing and having a cuddle with one's boyfriend can turn seeming minutes into an hour. In a similar way, artists, musicians and writers can lose all sense of time. So can daydreamers.

In practicing the disciplines of the spiritual life it is also possible to have a very different sense of time. Worship, prayer, the practice of solitude and meditation may all be experienced more as a 'timeless' now rather than as ordinary chronological time.

What makes the topic of time even more fascinating is the sense we have that 'now is the time' to do something. The Greeks knew this as *Kairos*. Whether this sense of time comes through rational calculation, intuition, divine guidance or through circumstances coming together, it matters little. We have a hunch, sometimes a strong belief, that *now* is the time to go somewhere or to make a certain commitment. We know that we have to seize the day!

Thus there is such a thing as auspicious time. This time is all about timing. We sense that now is the *right* time. This has many ramifications. We talk of a good time to visit, the right time to make an apology, an opportune time to start a new business venture.

Much less exciting is the idea of wasted time. We go and do something or visit someone with certain expectations and come away disappointed. It all turned out differently than we had expected. It was somehow unproductive. Thus wasted time is lost time, we think.

The above comments suggest that our experience of time is rather complex. And possibly the greatest complexity is that we hold together in our very being both a sense of the past, the experience of the present and our leaning into and anticipation of the future.

## **the past**

Our personal past is important. It has shaped us. Both the good and the bad have been the anvil on which our lives have been forged. For the good we are invited to be thankful. For the bad we are called to be forgiving. But the bad, while it may have wounded us, has also shaped us. Much of life is both overcoming and compensating for what has pushed us down and hurt us. This does not mean that we should dwell on the past or make endless archaeological expeditions into

our inner being. But awareness of our past rather than its denial is important for our growth and wellness.

From a spiritual point of view it is important to see the signs of God's care in our past. The ultimate expression of this is God's shaping hand at the very genesis of our being. The psalmist exclaims, 'My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place' (Psalm 139:15a).

The depth of the presence of God in our past is evidenced by its reality when we were not even looking, when we were not aware. Hosea the prophet knows something about this. 'When Israel was a child I loved him and out of Egypt I called my son. But the more I called Israel the further they went from me' (Hosea 11:1-2a).

Far better that the opposite occurs, that our past is marked by the appreciated and celebrated presence of God and 'his' goodness. Better that we can confess with the psalmist, 'Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life' (Psalm 23:6a, NRSV).

While both our personal history and the general ethos of our time shape us, we are not wholly bound by these. Our past can be reframed or reconfigured. Or to use religious language, it can be redeemed. What I mean by this is that from the place of distance and greater maturity and through the gentle gift of forgiveness, we can come to the place where we make better sense of the folly and brokenness of our past.

But the process of reappropriating our past with the oil of healing is not the only way that we break free. It is also our anticipation of an envisaged future that reshapes us.

### **facing the future**

As human beings we lean into the future. We have plans, hopes and dreams. We see possibilities of what we may do and become. While some of this may be

mere wishful thinking and will soon evaporate under the blighted sun of realism, not all dreams come to nothing. In fact the opposite may occur. We can begin to live our dreams in the now and lay a tenuous foundation for their future realization. Future hopes become particularly potent if we have a sense that this is the direction for our lives or that God is leading us in this direction.

## **finitude**

It usually does not take a person too long to realize that we human beings live our lives within a certain boundedness. We experience that we are never wholly free nor always full of energy. The rhythms of life—of activity and rest, work and sleep, eating and playing, thinking and doing—express this boundedness. We also soon realize that we live with all sorts of limitations. We are not in every way beautiful or handsome, not always smart and not always wise. Nor are we as powerful as we might wish to be. This invites us to embrace our finiteness and our vulnerabilities.

The psalmist knows something about this blatant realism. He confesses, 'For all our days pass away under your wrath; our years come to an end like a sigh. The days of our life are seventy years, or perhaps eighty, if we are strong; even then their span is only toil and trouble; they are soon gone and we fly away' (Psalm 90:9–10, NRSV).

But why should I think about this, you may well ask? My response is most basic: we need to embrace our finiteness lest we live our lives with an unhealthy striving that catapults us into the sphere of the gods, but which has us crashing to the ground when we least expect it.

Let me first come at this existentially and later theologically. Between an unfortunate passivism and an unhealthy egoism lies an intermediate zone of human

action and endeavour that celebrates our giftedness and accepts our limitations. In this zone, one can work hard and strive to achieve certain goals, create beauty, produce certain goods and do some of the myriad of things we human beings busy ourselves with. But our activism is consistent with our being, so that we are not doing violence to ourselves by radically over-extending ourselves and working outside the sphere of our giftedness. Put most simply, we are not trying to be other or more than what we are.

When we look at professionals who are burnt out and many workers who are experiencing stress-related illnesses, then we realize that this is no trifling matter. Our life depends on embracing a sanity about who we are and what we do.

Theologically our propensity to seeking to become more than what we are is explained by our loss of the perfection of the Edenic garden and our non-arrival in God's final future. In between these two visions we long for perfection and completion. To put all of this much more particularly, the original temptation was, 'You will be like God' (Genesis 3:5b). And humanity's restless striving is evidenced by the quest for greatness and power. This has led to endless forms of demagoguery.

I would like to propose, Naasicaa, that the embrace of our finiteness and limitation is a great blessing. It is a grace because it rightly situates us. We are not God. We are creatures of worth, dignity and creativity. But we are also limited and less than perfect. We make mistakes and do wrong. We can also do much good.

So rather than soaring to be among the gods—which are usually the gods of our own making anyway—we are called instead to inhabit more deeply our own being. We can become 'at home' in our own skin. And we can then rightly acknowledge God for who God is and become

'godlike' through God's transforming and healing presence rather than through our own efforts.

## **death**

The marks of death are already inscripted on our fragile hands at the moment of birth. Death is a given in the journey of life.

And death, when it comes, is something we need to face rather than scramble to avoid. This of course is not to suggest that we should not resist the forces of death through good health practices, the use of medicine and availing ourselves of spiritual healing ministries.

I have already spoken to you, Naasicaa, of many forms of 'death'. We can speak of leaving as a 'little dying'. Relinquishment is a form of death. So is a spiritual surrender to the will and purposes of God. But here I am speaking about the end of our life.

Is there hope in death? Is there life beyond death? While many people see death as the end, Christianity holds before us the hope of the resurrection and a new life in the world to come. The Apostle Paul puts this most clearly:

So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body (1 Corinthians 15:42–44).

So what about that, one may well ask? Death is far away. And once I am gone, I am gone. Does belief in an afterlife have any importance?

I would like to propose a strong 'yes', for a variety of reasons. But my 'yes' has nothing to do with a form of

escapism in which one says, 'Never mind about this life, there is a better life to come'. This leads to a world-denying form of Christianity and leaves one passive in our world.

I would like to reorient the phrase to read as follows: because there is a life to come, we can live this life in faith, with risk-taking and with prophetic radicality. To put that differently, because in Christianity there is a vision for the healing of all things, the resurrection and the expectation of new heavens and a new earth, I can live my life differently in the here and now.

Let me suggest some perspectives. The first is that the hope in the life to come means that what happens here is *never* the last word. God has the last word and 'his' is the final future. This relativises our ideologies and our projects. The human word, the human project is never the ultimate perspective. And historically we have seen again and again how political systems and social ideologies have claimed an ultimacy and have become idolatrous.

Secondly, hope in the resurrection and faith in the life to come mean that what I do and become is not the ultimate meaning of my existence. If this was the case I would surely be disappointed. Many great people have lived messy lives. And famous people and world leaders have become quite disillusioned with their own achievements.

The idea that God loves me for who I am rather than for what I achieve is a liberating concept. And it is a blessing, indeed, that my future lies not in what I have done or become but in God's new future of a transformed self in a new 'world'!

Thirdly, the challenge in living the Christian life is to anticipate this final future. We won't ever do this fully. But God's final healing of all things can find expression now in the healing of our lives and communities. God's Kingdom of *shalom* means that we can work for peace now in our families, communities and the wider society.

## **a personal reflection**

I am back in Brisbane. It's hot. And the sky is sultry. It is full of the promise of much needed rain.

I will soon be in a major transition again: leaving Canada in order to give more attention to working in Asia. Leaving is a form of 'death'. I do transitions with difficulty and always feel torn.

This to some extent is a small foreshadowing of the great tearing that will take place: torn from family and friends and torn from this life. This is always an act of violence. But in being torn asunder lies the gift of new life.

Paul knew this well. He writes, 'Do you know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life' (Romans 6:3-4, NRSV).



## afterword

### *letter seventeen*

I have enjoyed writing these letters to you, Naasicaa. I had first thought that I would be able to write them fairly quickly. But this has not been the case. It has stretched out over several years. As a result of this drawn out process I have had to go back and reread my letters to you. And while I am generally happy with what I have written, I am a little bit disappointed as well.

There are things that I have not touched on. If it is true that faith has implications for all of one's life then everything needs to be thought about. I have not covered everything—this is impossible—but I do wonder whether I have missed some of your more pressing issues and concerns.

What also worries me is whether I have been courageous enough in tackling various issues or whether I have simply re-stated more traditional religious positions. This could reflect that I am much older and have settled for a more traditional religious faith and set of perspectives regarding

the world. So even though I have tended to regard myself as a more 'radical' Christian I may be fooling myself.

My greater sense of disappointment, however, lies elsewhere. I don't think that I have been able to tell the story of faith with the winsomeness and joy that it deserves. I often feel stuck for words. Within my own being I sense the beauty of God's presence and see the world with eyes of faith and hope. But I can't bring this sense of wonder and enchantment under words. And maybe I am not emotional enough as well. My more austere Reformed upbringing does not help in finding the language of ecstasy.<sup>1</sup>

So at best these letters are but a meager offering. And maybe that is all that one can do. The mystery of God is beyond us. The life of faith, like a floating iceberg, remains partly hidden even from ourselves. The way that God works in the world through and apart from the community of faith is also always the way of surprise.

This afterword therefore cannot redeem what I have failed to do in my letters. But I do wish to say a few things by way of closure.

I have no way of knowing what will unfold in our world regarding the search for faith and spirituality. What is clear is that secularity does not eliminate the human quest for spiritual meaning and transcendence. Neither the secularity of state communism in the former Soviet Union and the present China, nor the secularity of capitalism have answered the human desire for ultimate meaning rooted in faith and love.

What is also clear is that the collapse of Christendom in the Western World and the present serious credibility challenges facing the church are not the end of the story. The church has previously experienced various 'dark ages' and is re-experiencing one now. It will again, I am sure, rise like a phoenix out of its own ashes. This renewal is never automatic but rather has everything to do with God's

renewing and revitalizing Spirit. The part we are called to play is one of faith, humility, prayer and service.

So in closing and in wishing you well as you ponder these letters, let me again state the heart of the matter of the matters of the heart.

I believe that we cannot live well simply within the ethos of a rationalistic and scientific worldview. Yes, these perspectives have their place as we seek to explain things and make things work. But we are also creatures who hope, love and dream. We may be rational, but we are also intuitive. We may be scientific, but we are also artistic and imaginative. Therefore, I think we may safely say that spirituality is as much a part of who we are as is our physicality. We not only have a body, we also have an inner life.

In these letters I have sought to talk about Christian spirituality. I believe that while there may be disinterest in the West regarding this form of spirituality, unlike the great interest in the Majority World, there are great riches that may be re-discovered there. The most central idea in this spirituality is that a loving and healing God seeks us out in Christ through the Spirit to renew us and make us whole. This is the good news of the gospel that 'God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life' (John 3:16, NRSV).

The presence of Christ with us becomes the joyous comfort and centre out of which we live. The good news of the gospel and the whole biblical story becomes the framework for guiding our thinking and acting. The community of faith sustains us in the journey of following Christ's way. And whether one is a house spouse, farmer, carpenter, artist, economist or politician, one seeks to live and serve in such a way that the things we do are life-giving to others instead of death-dealing.

This way of living includes a special attentiveness to the vulnerable, the marginalized and the poor. This is also the way of Christ, as is the practice of peacemaking and the work of reconciliation.

The experience of the presence of Christ does not come by way of coercion or method. It comes by way of seeking and revelation, but more importantly, it comes because Christ is the seeking God.

## notes

### **Letter One**

1. See in particular the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer, especially his *Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976).

2. See Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

### **Letter Two**

1. See N. Wolterstroff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983).

2. See R. J. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983).

3. P. Berger & T. Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (New York: Doubleday, 1966).

### **Letter Three**

1. See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (London: SCM Press, 1962).

2. See Zygmunt Bauman, *Post-Modernity and its Discontents* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997).

3. See Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000). See also my *Seize the Day with Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Colorado Springs: Pinon Press, 2000).

4. See J.M. Washington, ed., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Harper San Francisco, 1986). See also my *Let My People Go with Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Colorado Springs: Pinon Press, 2004).

5. See in particular Erik Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (New York: Norton, 1963).

6. See Max Weber, three volume *Economy and Society* (New York: Badminster Press, 1968).

7. See Jacques Ellul, *Hope in Time of Abandonment* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1973). See also my *Resist the Powers with Jacques Ellul* (Colorado Springs: Pinon Press, 2000).

#### **Letter Four**

1. See J. Grant-Thomson, *Jodie's Story* (Sydney: Anzea, 1991) for something of this story.

2. See Mende Nazer, *Slave* (London: Virago, 2004) as an example of contemporary slavery.

3. See R. Bellah, et. al., *Habits of the Heart* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

4. See E.A. & J.D. Whitehead, *Community of Faith: Crafting Christian Communities Today* (Mystic: Twenty-Third Publications, 1992).

5. See Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* (New York: Bantam, 1968).

6. For one person's downward mobility see Henri Nouwen, *The Road to Daybreak: A Spiritual Journey* (New York: Doubleday, 1988) and my *Dare to Journey With Henri Nouwen* (Colorado Springs: Pinon Press, 2000).

7. See Rollo May, *Power and Innocence: A Search for the Sources of Violence* (New York: Norton, 1974).

8. See Leonardo and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1988) and my *Cry Freedom with Voices from the Third World* (Sydney: Albatross Books, 1998).

#### **Letter Five**

1. See my good colleague's work on this topic: R. Paul Stevens, *The Other Six Days* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).

2. See Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989).

3. See Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

4. See the discussion on Feuerbach in Colin Brown, *Philosophy and the Christian Faith* (London: IVP, 1973).

5. Consult J. Hick & P. Knitter, eds., *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* (London: SCM, 1987).

6. See Thomas Wolf's telling *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (New York: Bantam, 1988).

7. See T. R. Henn, *The Bible as Literature* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1970).

8. See J. S. Croatto, *Exodus: A Hermeneutics of Freedom* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1981).

9. See my book *Life in Full Stride* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2004).

10. See Robert Banks, *God the Worker* (Sydney: Albatross Books, 1992).

11. See Sally McFague, *Metaphorical Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982).

12. You may wish to read Colin Gunton, *The Promise of a Trinitarian Theology* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997).

13. See Athol Gill, *Life on the Road: The Gospel Basis for a Messianic Lifestyle* (Sydney: Lancer, 1989).

14. See her *One Heart Full of Love* (Ann Arbor: Servant Books, 1988). Also see my *Wash the Feet of the World with Mother Teresa* (Colorado Springs: Pinon Press, 2004).

15. See Donald Kraybill, *The Upside-Down Kingdom* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1978).

16. You might like to read this amazing story in J. L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity: The Early Church to the Present Day* (Peabody: Prince Press, 2004).

17. See Henri Nouwen, *Sabbatical Journey: The Diary of his Final Year* (New York: Crossroad, 1998) for a discussion of this kind of vulnerability.

### **Letter Six**

1. See F. Copleston, *A History of Philosophy* (New York: Doubleday, 1985), vols. VII–IX. For a discussion on Hegel, see pp. 159–247.

2. See R. Bendix, *Max Weber: An Intellectual Portrait* (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1962), 49–79.

3. Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or, Vol. II* (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1959).

4. See Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Bluff* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990).

5. See A. T. Hennelly, ed., *Liberation Theology: A Documentary History* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1990).

6. One book that reflects something of that very varied movement is Arthur Blessitt, *Turned on to Jesus* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1971).

7. See Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (Norfolk: New Directions, 1961).

8. Here you may wish to read Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1971) and my *Seek the Silences with Thomas Merton* (London: SPCK, 2003).

9. For a helpful statement of theological themes within the Evangelical tradition, see Stanley Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2000).

10. Here the writings of St. John of the Cross may be helpful. See particularly his 'Dark Night of the Soul' in *The Complete Works of St. John of the Cross* (Westminster: The Newman Bookshop, 1946).

11. Karl Rahner *Theological Investigations* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1971), 7:15.

12. See Malcolm Muggeridge, *Something Beautiful for God* (London: Collins, 1972) and Mother Teresa, *No Greater Love* (Novato: New World Library, 2002).

13. See Dietrich Bonhoeffer's classic, *Life Together* (London: SCM, 1954).

### **Letter Seven**

1. See my *Catch the Wind* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2005).

2. See Darrell Guder, et. al., *Missional Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

3. See Alan Jamieson, *A Churchless Faith* (Wellington: Philip Garside Publishing, 2000).

4. See Karl Rahner, *The Shape of the Church to Come* (London: SPCK, 1974).

5. See Emil Brunner, *The Misunderstanding of the Church* (London: Lutterworth, 1952).

6. See Edwin Judge, *The Social Pattern of Christian Groups in the First Century* (London: Tyndale Press, 1960).

7. See Bengt Holmberg, *Paul and Power* (Lund: CWK Gleerup, 1978).

8. See R. & J. Banks, *The Church Comes Home* (Sydney: Albatross Books, 1996) and L. Boff, *Ecclesiology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1986).

9. Quoted in D. F. Durnbaugh, *The Believer's Church: The History and Character of Radical Protestantism* (London: Macmillan, 1970), 23.

10. See D. J. Gouwens, *Kierkegaard as Religious Thinker* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).



11. You might like to read the challenging small book by E. Arnold, *Why We Live in Community* (Farmington: Plough Publishing, 1995).

12. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (London: Collins, 1971).

13. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of Reconciliation* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1962), IV/3, II.

14. N. Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983).

15. Jacques Ellul, *The Presence of the Kingdom*, 2nd ed. (Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1989).

16. D. Kraybill, *The Upside-Down Kingdom* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1978).

17. See my 'Lower the Drawbridge: Bring Social Justice Home', *Renewal Journal* 3 (1994), 3–9.

18. You may wish to read Thomas Merton, *The Monastic Journey* (London: Sheldon Press, 1977).

19. See also Jean Vanier, *From Brokenness to Community* (New York: Paulist, 1992).

20. John Drane, *The McDonaldization of the Church* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2000).

21. To gain some sense of this regarding Latin America see G. Cook, ed., *The New Face of the Church in Latin America* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1994). For Asia see S. Athyal, ed., *The Church in Asia Today* (Singapore: Asia Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, 1996).

22. See D. W. Ferm, *Third World Liberation Theologies: A Reader* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1986).

23. You may wish to read J. O'Halloran, *Small Christian Communities: A Pastoral Companion* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996).

24. See the little classic by Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1980).

25. Craig van Gelder, ed. *Confident Witness – Changing World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

26. A good read of the Bonhoeffer story is R. Wind, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Spoke in the Wheel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992).

### **Letter Eight**

1. See R. Paul Stevens, *The Other Six Days* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).

2. I touched on some of these themes in my book *Seek the Silences with Thomas Merton* (London: SPCK, 2003).

3. See L.S. Cunningham & K.J. Egan, *Christian Spirituality: Themes from the Tradition* (New York: Paulist Press, 1996).

4. For a brief discussion, see Diogenes Allen, *Spiritual Theology: The Theology of Yesterday for Spiritual Help Today* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley, 1997) 86–89.

5. For the general setting of early Christianity see S. Benko & J.T. O'Rourke, eds., *The Catacombs and the Colosseum: The Roman Empire as the Setting of Primitive Christianity* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1971).

6. See my *Whispers from the Edge of Eternity: Reflections on Life and Faith in a Precarious World* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2005), 113.

7. St. John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul* (New York: Riverhead, 2002).

8. Rollo May, *Power and Innocence* (New York: Norton, 1974).

9. Fredrick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy* (New York: Doubleday, 1985), 7: 404.

10. See J. Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

11. See Henri Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1975).

12. See the wonderful little classic of Evelyn Underhill, *The Spiritual Life* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1937).

13. You may wish to read about the Desert Fathers. See Helen Waddell, trans., *The Desert Fathers* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998).

14. Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1969).

15. S. Chan, *Pentecostal Theology and the Christian Spiritual Tradition* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000).

16. See J.D. Faubion, *The Shadows and Lights of Waco* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

17. M. Scott Peck, *People of the Lie* (London: Rider, 1983).

### **Letter Nine**

1. G.E. Ganss, *Ignatius of Loyola: The Spiritual Exercises and Selected Works* (New York: Paulist Press, 1991).

2. H-G. Gadamer, *Heidegger's Ways* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 63.

3. D. Keirsey & M. Bates, *Please Understand Me: Character & Temperament Types* (Del Mar, CA: Prometheus Nemesis, 1984).

4. D.R. Riso, *Understanding the Enneagram* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1990).

5. An interesting read is the theologian Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (London: Collins, 1962). And a writer who was very helpful to me in younger days was the Swiss psychiatrist Paul Tounier. You would enjoy his *The Meaning of Persons* (London: SCM, 1957).

6. See my *Gadamer's Dialogical Hermeneutic* (Heidelberg Universitätsverlag: C. Winter, 1999), 44.

7. You may wish to read the interesting book by Janet Hagberg, *Real Power* (Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1984).

8. You may enjoy his *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer* (London: Fontana, 1964).

9. D.M. Thomas, *Alexander Solzhenitsyn: A Century in his Life* (New York: St Martin, Press, 1998).

10. Henri Nouwen, *With Open Hands* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 1972).

11. M. Scott Peck, *In Search of Stones* (New York: Hyperion, 1995).

### **Letter Ten**

1. You may want to read A. Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987).

2. For two thoughtful books about living life with passion and commitment, see Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (London: SCM, 1959) and Donald Kraybill, *The Upside Down Kingdom* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1978).

3. For something of the history of this see J.J. Suurmond, *Word and Spirit at Play* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

4. A helpful book that sets out the prophetic vision of the Old Testament is Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1978).

5. Harry Blamires, *The Christian Mind* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2005).

6. The person who has written well about this is Segundo Galilea in his book *Following Jesus* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1984). See my *Wash the Feet of the World With Mother Teresa* (Colorado Springs: Pinon Press, 2004).

### **Letter Eleven**

1. One of the books that inspired us was Edith Schaeffer, *Hidden Art* (London: The Norfolk Press, 1971).

2. One of Jacques Ellul's helpful books is *The Presence of the Kingdom* (New York: Seabury, 1967).

3. You may want to check out Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Seabury, 1975) about the power and possibility of questions.

#### **Letter Twelve**

1. See M. Kelsey, *Encounter with God* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1972), 110–117.

2. Letty Russell, ed., *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985), 139.

3. L.S. Cunningham & K.J. Egan, *Christian Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1996), 123–142.

4. M. Battle, *Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1997).

5. P.D. Hanson, *The People Called* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986).

6. G. Hancock, *Lords of Poverty* (New York: The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1989).

#### **Letter Thirteen**

1. See R. Banks, *All the Business of Life* (Sydney: Albatross Books, 1987).

2. See my *Resist the Powers with Jacques Ellul* (Colorado Springs: Pinon, 2000).

3. M.J. Dawn, *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly: Ceasing, Resting, Embracing, Feasting* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989).

#### **Letter Fourteen**

1. See the classic by N. Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (London: Paladin, 1970).

2. Leo Tolstoy, *The Kingdom of God is Within You* (New York: Noonday Press, 1961).

3. Bryan Wilson, *Religious Sects: A Sociological Study* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1970), 181–184.

4. For the above themes and emphasis regarding the Kingdom of God, see H.A. Snyder, *Models of the Kingdom of God* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991).

5. R. Kinsler & G. Kinsler, *The Biblical Jubilee and the Struggle for Life* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1999).

6. A. Gill, *The Fringes of Freedom* (Sydney: Lancer, 1990).

7. See Jacques Ellul, *The Subversion of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986).

**Letter Fifteen**

1. N. Perrin, *The New Testament: An Introduction* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974), 283–284.
2. R. Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community* (Sydney: Anzea, 1979).

**Letter Sixteen**

1. J. Moltmann, *Theology of Hope* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993).

**Letter Seventeen**

1. See my *Seek the Silences with Thomas Merton* (London: SPCK, 2003).