

Talking Cents

April, 2017

Talking Cents is an ecumenical group charged by the Auckland Anglican Diocesan Council to promote an alternative to current economic and political thought, and to encourage debate within the Church. Ministry units are encouraged to distribute these articles. This article is contributed by the Reverend Peter Bargh tssf, from the Auckland Anglican Social Justice Group.

The Great Emergence from the Long Lent

This year marks not only the beginning (and perhaps the end) of Donald Trump's presidency but also 500 years since the Reformation.

On All Hallows' Eve, 1517, Martin Luther nailed his theses to the door of a church in Wittenberg and so began the Reformation, or so the story goes.¹

Phyllis Tickle's thesis in *The Great Emergence* is that the Reformation is one of a series of events which she sees as analogous to garage sales, times when the church "cleans out its attic" as well as taking on new treasures. These events happen roughly every 500 years, beginning with Gregory the Great solidifying monasticism in the 6th century. This was followed by the Great Schism in 1054, the Reformation beginning in 1517 and then what she terms the Great Emergence, the unfolding changes in Christian understanding dating back over the last couple of decades.

This thesis is interesting from a religious perspective and it has formed an integral part of our Lenten studies series in the Whangarei Anglican church. It has broader implications, however, and Tickle teases out economic, political and social shifts that prepare the ground for religious change.

As these four factors – the religious, economic, political and social – are related to each other, it is worthwhile considering whether there are signs of change in these other spheres, too. The Reformation took place in a time of major change in Western Europe, with the disappearance of serfdom as centralized kingdoms and principalities

arose. Older, feudalistic social and economic models gave way to a cash-based proto-capitalism with an emergent family-centered middle class and the beginnings of the nation-state.

Tickle observes, particularly commenting on North America, that the recent years of the Great Emergence have been marked:

*by increasing restraints upon, or outright rejections of, pure capitalism; by traditional or mainline Protestantism's loss of demographic base; by the erosion or popular rejection of the middle class's values and the nuclear family as the requisite foundational unit of social organization; by the shift from cash to information as the base of economic power; and by the demise of the nation-state and the rise of globalization.*²

These observations date from nearly a decade ago and were about North America. They are recognizable enough today across most of the Western world. Sally McManus, the new Australian Council of Trade Unions secretary, picked up on many of these themes during her recent speech at the National Press Club. McManus noted that the reason for these changes, and the ongoing need for change, was the failure of the previous, and still present, paradigm; she concluded that neoliberalism has "run its course."³

The question for those like McManus is whether those earlier tools, such as the union movement, which have worked well at resisting the capitalist class, remain effective today. If introducing a Universal Basic Income is an effective way to

¹ Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why*, (Grand Rapids, MI: BakerBooks, 2008) 43. Luther's action, regardless of whether he nailed his theses to the door or mailed them to the archbishop, proved a catalyst for the Reformation that was to follow.

² *Ibid.*, 51-52. Tickle comments elsewhere that there is always a strong reaction to the garage sales, something

that may be seen in the Tea Party movement and Donald Trump in the US context.

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2017/mar/29/neoliberalism-has-run-its-course-says-actu-boss-sally-mcmanus>

respond to increasing automation and technological disruption, will unions, long the champions of workers' rights, be supportive?⁴

These are the sorts of challenges which we face today, all while trying to reduce our impact on the environment. As is clear from our collective lack of satisfactory response, we are not well-equipped to respond to these challenges.

Beyond the ongoing technological changes seen with increasing automation and resulting job losses in labour-heavy sectors, it is also worth considering changes in terms of communication. The development of the printing press in the 15th century was a significant precursor to the spread of the Reformation in the 16th century. So, too, with the advent of the internet last century, we see a radically changed world with a degree of interconnectivity hitherto unimaginable.

To respond effectively to these changes requires adaptive leadership.⁵ Whether we are seeing this in New Zealand, or elsewhere, remains to be seen. The recent budget policy announcement by Labour and the Greens, to continue the economic status quo of low levels of government expenditure, a commitment to staying in surplus and paying down debt, has met a mixed response as it is widely seen as a shift to the right. The title of this *NZ Herald* article, "Have Labour and the Greens sold out?" gives a sense of this.⁶

Tickle argues that in garage sales things get thrown out. This announcement marks an intentional shunning of the political left's past policies, often seen as being anti-business.⁷ The question remains whether this marks part of the emergence of future national political discourse or if it is merely politically expedient.

⁴ The Universal Basic Income would diminish unions power and relevance by providing a guaranteed, unconditional basic income.

⁵<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QfLLDvn0pI8>
Ron Heifetz is the author of *Leadership Without Easy Answers* and speaks of how adaptive leadership leads to innovative changes in ways which simply seeing problems as technical challenges does not do.

⁶http://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=11826337

⁷ It is uncertain whether shifting the political centre to reflect right-wing orthodoxy will benefit the left or simply confirm the right as holders of that ground.

As the government's current approach is not leading us towards the "best economic opportunities," making decisions to align with the status quo might seem less than sensible.⁸ Yet, as Rod Oram commented about the reports by the OECD and Vivid Economics on the environment in New Zealand, there is hope for our future if "government, business and civil society...work together over the next three decades."⁹

If the Great Emergence takes place in social, religious, political and economic terms, then it pays to look for signs of hope-filled adaptive changes being made across the spectrum. To be able to offer care for neighbor and for creation attests to Christian hope. There is hope in knowing that if we make changes, being prepared to live into that emerging world, then "we can meet our climate responsibilities in ways that deliver a much healthier environment, a much stronger economy and a greatly enhanced international reputation."¹⁰

As Christians we know our calling is to be an Easter people. We often, however, focus more on Lent, as there are different things to do during that penitential season, which has traditionally been one of privation.¹¹

Tickle regularly refers to the Reformation as the *Great Reformation* in order to tease out the link with Gregory the *Great*, the *Great Schism* and the *Great Emergence*. These last few years, this period before this Great Emergence, feels like it has been a long time – perhaps it is a Long Lent.

As Christians, we know that Easter follows Lent. As Easter people we called to be hope-filled and future-oriented. Let us live our lives attesting to that calling.

⁸ <http://www.stuff.co.nz/business/opinion-analysis/90775378/rod-oram-chasing-a-perfect-chance>

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid. The OECD and Vivid Economics reports speak of the need for greater collaboration to enable things such as cost effective clean technologies and higher value agriculture to become reality.

¹¹ The March 2017 *Talking Cents*, contributed by Mary Betz, "Lenten conversion through fasting, prayer and giving: A fresh take on the tradition," offers some great ideas on Lenten practices.