

Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ

The Rev. Dr. Scott Couper

Sunday, March 14, 2021

Fourth Sunday in Lent



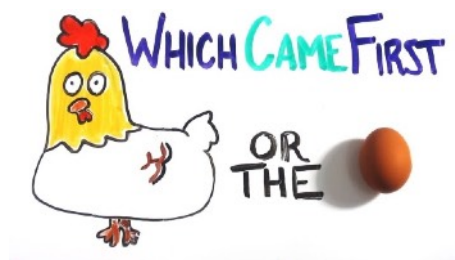
“Transformative Theophany”

Fourth of six in a series during Lent entitled

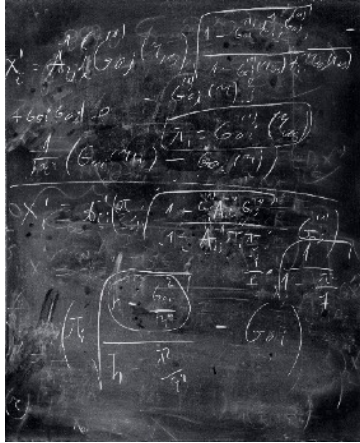
“Biblical Optometry: Discerning Our Church's 'Corrective Vision'”

Scripture: Isaiah 6:1-8

After visiting people in their homes, preaching is my favourite ministerial responsibility. I love preaching because, each time I prepare a message, I learn something new.



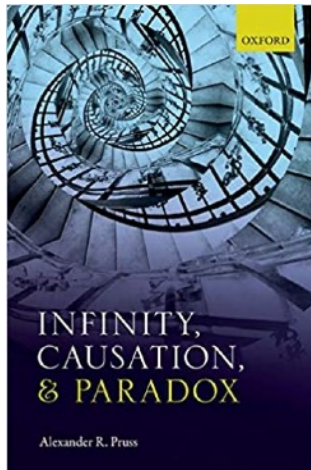
For example, this week I solved the age-old paradox “which came first, the chicken or the egg?”. Ancient Greek philosophers used the paradox to describe the problem of determining cause-and-effect.



The answer, according to theology, which is my field of expertise, and according to quantum physics, is that *both the chicken and the egg came first!* Physicist Dr. Jacqui Romero from the ARC Centre of Excellence for Engineered Quantum Systems said that in quantum physics, cause-and-effect is not always as straightforward as one event causing another.



She said, "The weirdness of quantum mechanics means that events can happen without a set order. Take the example of your daily trip to work, where you travel partly by bus and partly by train. Normally, you would take the bus then the train, or the other way round.



In our experiment, both of these events can happen first. This is called 'indefinite causal order'.¹

This morning, I suggest to you, theologically speaking, that 'indefinite causal order' applies to the source of our spiritual inspiration. I encourage the Long-Range Planning Team (LRPT) to discern our church's vision for the future with the idea of 'indefinite causal order' in mind.



¹ University of Queensland. "Quantum weirdness in 'chicken or egg' paradox," *Science Daily*, September 4, 2018. Found at: www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2018/09/180904114733.htm, <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2018/09/180904114733.htm#:~:text=The%20'chicken%20or%20egg'%20paradox,determining%20cause%20and%20effect.&text=%22This%20is%20called%20%60indefinite%20causal,observe%20in%20our%20everyday%20life.%22>, accessed March 13, 2021.

Our scripture from Isaiah suggests to us that the ‘egg’ comes before the ‘chicken’, that is, personal, individual, spiritual transformation (what I term ‘effective devotion’) occurs before social transformation (what I term ‘effective justice’). The argument goes something like this: ‘Before our world can be transformed, our hearts must be’.



In what is an intense Lenten reading, we hear of how Isaiah experienced a profound theophany with the Trinity. Isaiah endured a gobsmackingly intense vision. There was a definite ‘order’ to his encounter. First, Isaiah acknowledged his uncleanness: “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a [person] of unclean lips”. This is a moment of *tremendum mysterium*, ‘tremendous mystery’. When humans encounter the triune God, feelings of guilt and shame arise. It is from this Lenten-like spiritual transformation that Isaiah became lowered. Isaiah was purified, cleansed. Isaiah was then elevated.



He heard the call “Whom shall I send?” and he responded, “Send me”. From there, Isaiah stepped into the people, into the world, to transform them and it.

Yet, my experience in life, and perhaps yours as well, it was the ‘chicken’ that definitely came before the ‘egg’. That is, ‘it was my involvement in mission, social transformation, ministry, or simply it was my relationship with others, that led to my personal, individual spiritual transformation’. The argument goes something like this, ‘I encountered the world to transform it and thereafter my heart was forever transformed’.



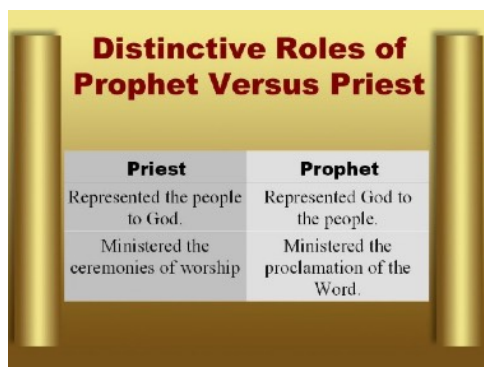
For two years in the Kingdom of Lesotho, I monitored human rights abuses while governments constructed the second largest water diversion project in the world.



I saw the plight of indigenous people being displaced, drowned, diseased, impoverished, and stolen from. My advocacy, in part, pressured the World

Bank to halt the oppression caused by multinational finance and engineering companies. This social transformation caused within me a personal, individual spiritual transformation. Many of you have travelled to El Salvador to visit our sister parish and contribute to the *Luz del Mundo* scholarship Fund. I am quite sure your exposure to our brothers and sisters in Christ transformed you spiritually so that you have a compassion, an empathy, a love that you previously did not have. And I know that passion remains with you today.

Today in church, we often discuss the ‘chicken and the egg’ paradox.



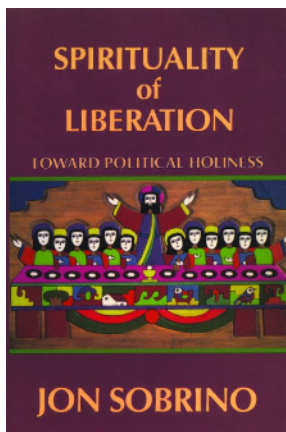
Priest	Prophet
Represented the people to God.	Represented God to the people.
Ministered the ceremonies of worship	Ministered the proclamation of the Word.

New people are drawn to our church because I preach a gospel whereby ‘social transformation’ – politics – leads (prophet) to ‘personal transformation’ (priest). Many faithful in our church, who I dearly love and who dearly love me, wish me to preach more of personal individual ‘spiritual transformation’ and suggest this must be first, and thus primary. Neither of us are wrong. Or, one can be first for one person and for another it can be second.



Quantum physics, and apparently theology, teach us that *both* can come first.

What the LRPT must do is preserve this paradox in its visioning, and not allow us to artificially solve it. Both spiritual transformation and social transformation come first. These two transformations, the personal and the social, are inherently related.



The true nature of spirituality is what Jon Sobrino calls ‘political holiness’.

Sobrino, who I read twenty-five years ago in divinity school, said, “Spirituality today in the absence of the practice of liberation is purely generic, evangelistically impossible, and historically alienating. Liberation practice

without spirit is generically good, but concretely threatened with degeneration, diminution, and sin”.²



As a church our vision ought to be to transform souls, our own especially, *and* to transform the world. And I don't care which one comes first. Or rather, I don't give a fig if they both come first! But, Centre Church is called to do both.

This is the word of God, and it was delivered to the people of God, and the people of God responded, "Amen".

² Kee Boem So, "First Sunday after Pentecost (Trinity Sunday)", in *Preaching God's Transforming Justice (A Lectionary Commentary, Year B)*, eds. Ronald Allen, Dale Andrews, Dawn Ottoni-Wilhelm, (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster Press, 2011), 263.