



# *John J* LEWIS

GRACIOUS PROPHET

Wesley Historical Society New Zealand

John J. Lewis – Gracious Prophet

**WESLEY HISTORICAL SOCIETY**(New Zealand)  
A Society within the Methodist Church of New Zealand

# Rev. JJ LEWIS

MA, BD, PhD, Fellow of Trinity College

**16 December 1917 - 25 May 2000**

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## FOREWORD

J J Lewis was a respected spiritual guide both within Methodism and beyond, in ecumenical circles. He was recognised as one whose words should be listened to. Though his presence was quiet and gentle, one came to see that his contribution could never be ignored. The impact he had on generations of Methodist and Anglican theological students continues to be evident in ministries in many parishes around the country.

The Living Word was at the centre of JJ's life. Through careful attention to the text, he had gained a profound understanding of the biblical story. But it never remained there. He had opened his life to being summoned and challenged, interrogated and enticed by the God revealed in Jesus Christ. Scripture was never experienced as restricting, but always as liberating encounter.

In the life of this scholar, language was a constant source of delight. Word derivations and etymology occupied time and research. He wrote as he spoke, with insights made his own, polished over the years in memorable phrases. Poetic images illuminated sentences and brought to life streams of devotion and prophecy.

It was not surprising that JJ made the vote of thanks to visiting speakers a work of art. He distilled the content, identified learnings and expressed indebtedness. He was free to be generous.

There is no doubt that his convictions were deeply held. Yet he offered them readily without any sign of stridency. He never insisted that his was the only way of seeing, nor did he give the impression that his was the last word. What we received as students was truth embraced and known and lived.

It was characteristic of the way of JJ to encourage. He saw gifts and longed for them to flower. He would seek out individuals and be eager to hear how their ministry was developing. I remember him at Synod listening attentively to one exploring the possibility of further study abroad. There was always warm support and the sense that he at least had confidence in you.

Categories such as liberal and conservative seem to have little meaning in regard to Dr. Lewis. His sympathies were too broad for shallow labels. Central to his thinking on the church was its catholicity, incorporating diverse spiritual traditions, cultures and peoples as richness rather than threat.

Through his exploration of the Inter-testamental literature he came to an awareness of the Jewish crucible for Jesus' life and ministry. He taught that, without a lively appreciation of the fertile movements within Second Temple Judaism, it was impossible to see Jesus of Nazareth in his true context. This led him to commend a sensitivity in relations between the church and the synagogue, especially in the light of the history of hostility and persecution.

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For JJ Christian faith had a dynamic that disturbed conventional ways of thinking and introduced possibilities for transformation. The Spirit of God was ever active in human lives and in the life of societies. In a presentation on "Spirituality in Biblical Perspective" at a retreat in Wanganui in 1983 he said simply that "to know God is to enter the life of God's new age." There was always the eschatological dimension that unsettled the present.

There is no doubt that there were things within the contemporary church that worried and exasperated him. He had pondered the mysteries of life in this world at depth and there were some questions that he wanted to address to its author. But throughout he was faithful to the call and covenant that had been opened up to all peoples through the gospel of Christ. We rejoice that we have seen God's grace at work in his life.

*Terry Wall February, 2001*

*(The Reverend Terry Wall, a Methodist presbyter, is Maclaurin Chaplain at The University of Auckland.)*

## **EDITORIAL**

Our paths never crossed. I knew of Dr Lewis, faintly, as the Principal of Trinity College - until the task of facilitating the publication of this small book fell to my lot.

During the process of editing the tributes and lectures, reading some of JJ's writings and collecting memorabilia I have developed a profound respect and admiration for the gracious prophet.

My thanks go to all who willingly assisted in various ways with the production of this publication. It is a tribute, not a biography, hence no attempt has been made to precisely chronicle every event that marked Dr Lewis' career.

One of our authors has suggested that the academic aspect could be the subject of a masterate thesis. Such treatment would inevitably include biographical detail.

*Bernie Le Heron*

## TRIBUTE by Rev. Tony Stroobant LTh.

John James Lewis, or Dr Lewis, or Jack, or JJ, as he was variously known - but with equal affection - was born at Utiku near Taihape in 1917, the son of a headmaster, grandson of the Rev. J. J. Lewis, brother to Valerie, Evan and Graeme, and part of a family with its roots in NZ Methodism.

A distinguished academic career through Napier Boys High School and the University of Auckland culminated in 1941 in his graduating MA with honours in English.

In 1945 John and Grace married. Two daughters, Deirdre and Barbara, of whom John was always proud, followed. And in time grandchildren - Andrew and Stephen, Maia, David and Richard -whom he loved, and who loved him in return.

In his retirement tribute John wanted mentioned his gratitude for the support and inspiration of Grace and the rest of the family through many years of demanding ministry.

Eleven years in Circuit ministry - Avondale/New Lynn, Mission Bay, Milton/Lawrence and Kingsland - led to a part-time appointment as lecturer in Biblical studies at Trinity College and on to full-time involvement with theological education over a total of thirty two years, the last nine as Principal.



Trinity student magazine prior to JJ's departure, London, for PhD (awarded 1958) – Kinder Library

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In 1945 he received a Melbourne BD, and in 1958 a Doctorate in Philosophy from the University of London for his thesis on intertestamental literature.

In 1969 the Conference honoured him by electing him President.

In 1980, as a recognition of his distinguished service to Trinity College, he was elected a Fellow of Trinity College.

His ministry included being part-time SCM chaplain at Auckland University and the Teacher's College, twenty-eight years as examiner for the University of Otago in Old Testament, and serving on a number of important Connexional Committees, most notably thirty-two years on the Methodist Faith and Order Committee.

*Editor's Note:* He acted as chairman of the Wesley Historical Society 1987-90.

Passing mention, at least, also must be made of numerous overseas trips, teaching, and on international church consultations, not to mention nearly two dozen published books and articles.

But perhaps John Lewis will be most widely remembered for his involvement in the ecumenical movement. From its inception he served on the Joint Commission for Church Union and was Convenor of its Faith and Order Committee. He also served as Methodist representative on the Joint Working Committee of the National Council of Churches and the Roman Catholic Church. One of the first fruits of the Joint Commission for Church Union was the establishment of the Joint Board of Theological Studies which drew the Colleges of five denominations into close association and established the Licentiate in Theology as a common standard for those training for ministry.

Here is part of a Senate Minute of Appreciation from Knox Theological Hall, Dunedin, dated September 1980, that not only gives us some idea of the importance of John's contribution to ecumenism in general and ecumenical education in particular, but also begins to move us from the externals to who John Lewis was as a person.

The Senate Minute reads:

*In a formative period in the history of the ecumenical movement in NZ, Dr Lewis has been one of its key figures. He was a valued consultant in matters relating to theological education. It might be said, indeed, that it is in this sphere that the most tangible results of ecumenism have been achieved in NZ, and it may be that Dr Lewis has been the most important single figure in this. In any case, he was an ideal person to serve on inter-church committees: he is well-informed and has a balanced judgement, he never gets rattled, and is both firm and conciliatory.*

The Senate Minute continues:

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*The climax of these varied ecumenical activities came with the uniting of Trinity and St John's Colleges (which), too, involved hours and hours of patient negotiation, as well as years of tactful daily work with colleagues. There can be little doubt that, taken over the whole period. Dr Lewis has been the most creative figure in the continuing working-cut of this union in practice. In a situation full of potential misunderstandings, a calm, courteous and persistent person like Dr Lewis is essential. It has been said that it is almost impossible to quarrel with him, hut no one has ever concluded that this means that he will compromise on anything he considers essential.*

To these qualities of personal integrity and tenaciousness I would like to add generosity. My children were beneficiaries of John's rock and shell collection when we lived next door to each other at College. And one student at least -probably representing hundreds more like himself - will be eternally grateful for John's generosity of spirit as he struggled to understand the Hebrew scriptures.

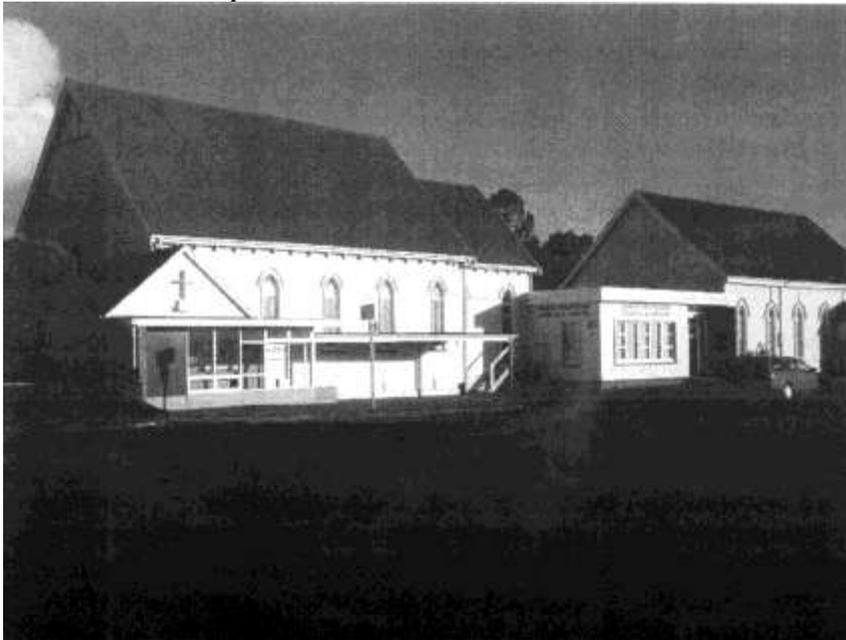
Along with rock-hounding, John's other 'spare time' interests included music, photography, stamps, woodwork, reading, writing, Maori and Pacific Islands culture and, in his retirement, a love of the beach and of the garden. John's interests had breadth as well as depth!



**Milton Church.**

*Photo: Dave Roberts*

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**Kingsland Church.**

*Photo: Dave Roberts*

And in the midst of all these, and his massive programme of pastoral ministry, study, teaching, and administrative leadership, John Lewis never lost the graciousness, gentleness, humility and sensitivity of spirit which, throughout his ministry, endeared him to all of us - family, friends, students, fellow presbyters and lay people alike.

In the truest sense, he has been a gift of God to the life and ministry of the Methodist Church of Aotearoa/New Zealand and the church beyond.

The final words rightly, I think, belong to John himself.

Firstly, from the last chapter of his book *The Trinity College Story*.

It is a personal reflection:

*... finality never is reached. Each phase has its dreams and its disappointments. In the Christian way, though human aspiration is changing and transitory, the dream, after all, is God's and brings its own life.*

And then the very final line of a poem that closes John Lewis' book *Beginning from Here*:

*Real living is in the loving.*

Amen

# TRIBUTE

by Rev. Dr Lynne Wall

I offer this tribute to a man who has shaped my own life and thought and that of many here today. His physical stature was matched by a spiritual stature expressed in personal integrity, gentle strength and a deep, lively faith. It is with a keen sense of loss and yet deep thankfulness for what his life has meant to so many that I offer these reflections of the Rev. Dr John Lewis as:

Creative Scholar and Teacher  
Visionary Leader and Principal, and  
Compassionate Pastor and Mentor.

## Creative Scholar and Teacher

Dr Lewis' intellectual gifts were recognised and affirmed early in his life. As we have heard they resulted in high academic achievement - yet for colleagues and students alike it was his ability to bring the fruits of scholarship to the tasks and struggles of daily life and ministry which marked him out as a creative teacher of the scriptures. He wrote:

*Studied as any other piece of literature, the Bible finally is not like any other book. Inclusive of the widest range of personality and experience, the Bible reaches into every human situation. It meets us at depth and the relationship is reversed. No longer are we examining the Bible, since we are the examined and, in its illumining, it becomes the medium of the Word to us.*

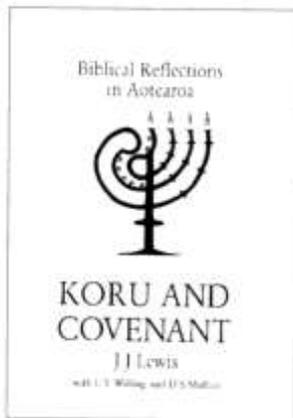
- *End or Beginning?* (p.37)

Dr Lewis' scholarship and teaching were characterized by clarity of thought and an ability to express deep and complex ideas with a deceptive simplicity. Who can forget his classes on Second Isaiah where the original intention of creation is recaptured in a new act, that of liberation and reconciliation? He wrote, "Where people cut across the very grain of the universe, they bring on themselves their own suffering, but out of it God sets free what is creative." *Koru and Covenant* (p.81). Or who can fail to remember his exposition of the suffering servant who wills wholeness for all the people through redemptive suffering? Again he wrote, "Suffering which is accepted for the sake of others can be spiritually fruitful.... Revelation comes through one but always for the many." *Koru and Covenant* (p.82).

His ability to communicate biblical truths was clearly rooted in the context of Aotearoa/New Zealand and its peoples. Capable of speaking Maori on formal occasions, Dr Lewis reflected deeply on the relationship between Hebraic and Maori world views. The fullest integration of his study of the scriptures over many years with life in Aotearoa was wonderfully brought together in his book *Koru* and

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Covenant written in collaboration with Len Willing and Dave Mullan. Then he wrote, "Polynesian and Hebraic mythology cannot experience the world without finally speaking of the divine and its reverence for life." *Koru and Covenant* (P. 16).

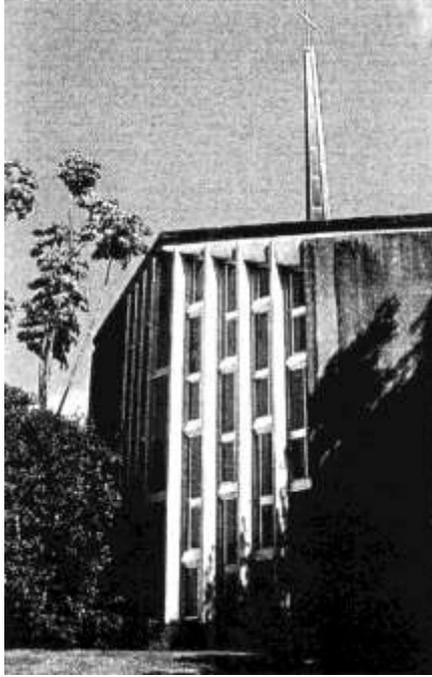


**Visionary Leader and Principal**

The years of Dr Lewis' principalship of Trinity Theological College began at the high point of the ecumenical movement. His involvement in the Student Christian Movement, both as a student with Grace, and as part-time chaplain, and his participation on the Joint Commission on Church Union prepared him well for the challenges which lay ahead. The Lund Principle "of doing all things together that were possible without loss of principle" was a motivating force within the hopeful climate of those days which was moving toward church union.

Exciting new initiatives were explored for greater co-operation between the churches in theological education. In the Spring of 1970 Canon Raymond Foster, warden of St Johns College, invited Dr Lewis "to enter into discussions concerning future developments" between the Anglican and Methodist Colleges. By 1973 Methodist and Anglican students were sharing classes taught by a joint faculty on the St John's site. One cannot underestimate the significance of the visionary leadership offered by Dr Lewis during those years. He offered gifts of patience and diplomacy, wise counsel and tolerance yet without compromise of his own vision for a truly ecumenical form of theological education which respected the needs of both partners.

How fitting, that on the day of his death, this ecumenical partnership was being reaffirmed. Shared theological education between Anglicans and Methodists is one of the most fruitful expressions of the ecumenical journey of the last century in this country. It owes much to the vision, commitment, and passion for unity in the body of Christ which Dr Lewis brought to his work.



MacLaurin Chapel, University of Auckland  
*Photo: Gottfried Boehnke ITSS. Univ. Auck.*



Chapel interior, Trinity College  
*Photo: The Trinity College Story*

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## Compassionate Pastor and Mentor

Dr Lewis' innovations in theological education were not limited to the ecumenical sphere. His desire that the formation of students for ministry be relevant to the changing needs of communities resulted in several new initiatives. These included action/reflection models and the introduction of five-week field placements in parish and community for students at the end of the academic year.



The Chapel of St John the Evangelist, St John's College.

*Photo: Derek Olphert*

The priority of worship in the life of Dr Lewis speaks of the deep wellsprings from which his compassion flowed. The pastoral care offered to students was sensitive and always full of encouragement so that the uniqueness of personality was affirmed and the potential within each one drawn out. This care was often expressed within the hospitality offered by Grace as students were invited to meals at their home.

Dr Lewis' ministry was characterized by a quiet gentleness which took seriously each concern or trouble. His correspondence, as well as his conversation, were marked by thoughtful, perceptive analysis, carefully chosen words of wisdom, and always the offering of hope for that 'new thing' which God might do in a person's life.

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*Photo: The Search for Unity*

**MEETING OF THE JOINT COMMISSION ON CHURCH UNION AT CHRISTCHURCH COLLEGE, CHRISTCHURCH, 11-13 FEBRUARY, 1969**

*Back row:*

**Rev. D.L. Woolf, Rev. R K J Clarke, Rev. G D Rose, Mr D M Wylie. Rev. W Harford, Mr R W Beadle, The Ven. W M Davies, Rev. D. Glenny**

*Middle row:*

**Rev. P A Stead, Mr R T Garlick. The Ven. S F N Waymouth, The Most Rev. N A Lesser. Rev. D. A Connor, Rt Rev. H W Baines, Rev. R D Rakena, Rev. C D Clark. Rev. W F Ford. Rev. C L Gosling, Mrs J M Anderson, Rev. G F McKenzie, Rev. Canon J D Rymer. Rev. Dr. J J Lewis. Rev. A K Petch, Mr H J Voice. The Ven. A R Anderson**

*Front row:*

**Rev. D J Brown, Rev. E R Vickery, Rev. J F Stewart (Secretary), Rt Rev. A H Johnston. (Chairman). Rev. W J Morrison, Rev. D C Evans, Rev. J M Bates.**

## JJ LEWIS: CONTOURS OF THOUGHT

Douglas Pratt<sup>1</sup>

### Preface

The Rev. Dr John James Lewis, known affectionately as 'Jack' or simply 'JJ', was a widely respected Methodist minister, ecumenist, educationalist and biblical scholar. The former Principal and subsequently Fellow of Trinity Methodist Theological College was renowned for his gracious sagacity, his integrity and his humility. His quietly spoken, carefully considered, words of wisdom have been welcomed by people in a wide variety of contexts. He was also a mentor to many, including myself. So it gives me great pleasure to present this paper wherein I can, in some small way, repay a personal debt of gratitude for his unfailing support and encouragement of my own vocational and academic developments.

My task in honouring Jack Lewis in the context of this Wesley Historical Society lecture is to sketch what I see, albeit rather provisionally, as the 'contours' of his thought. And it will be but a sketch; we can go no further than contours or outlines. There is a task awaiting a research student to recover, analyse, and delve more deeply into the intellectual contribution of JJ Lewis. The reward, I am sure, would make the effort most worthwhile.

For this present task I have consulted published work and archival holdings of personal documents and papers of JJ Lewis held at the library of St John's College, Auckland. JJ Lewis' work was marked by economy of expression and clarity of idea. What have I found? How have I constructed the contours of Jack Lewis' intellectual contribution?

### Introduction

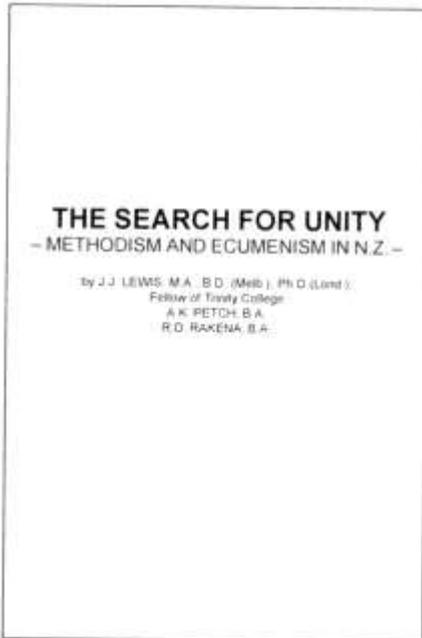
There are a number of headings that suggest themselves as appropriate for the task of outlining the contours of Jack Lewis' thought but, before I come to them, let me deal with two items. The first is that such was his humility that in two important works the nature of co-authorship masks, to a substantial degree, the thought and work clearly attributable to JJ Lewis himself. The second has to do with the fact that there are historical items which, whilst reflecting another dimension of Lewis' intellectual

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<sup>1</sup> The Reverend Canon Dr Douglas Pratt, in 1974 Methodist Senior Student when JJ Lewis was Principal of Trinity College, is Senior Lecturer in Religious Studies, University of Waikato, and Honorary Lecturer in Theology, University of Auckland. He became an Anglican priest in 1998 and serves as an Honorary Priest Assistant and Canon Theologian at St Peter's Cathedral. Hamilton.

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interests and activities, are, by their very nature, likewise not able to be primary sources for the task I have set myself: nonetheless they need to be noted.



The almost self-effacing manner wherein, at times, Lewis submerged his own thought and contribution within and to a greater whole as he saw it, whilst laudable from one point of view, nonetheless makes the task of recovering his actual thought difficult, although not impossible. Unfortunately, however, the two works which are particular examples of this are significant, both for their particular content and contribution to New Zealand religious history and theological thinking, as well as for what they might reveal of the thought of JJ Lewis. These two are *The Search for Unity*<sup>2</sup> and *Koro and Covenant*.<sup>3</sup>

*Koro and Covenant*, whilst arising initially out of Lewis' own work, was a co-authored production wherein, as one of the authors, Dave Mullan, records, "with characteristic modesty and great determination Jack minimised his extensive and sensitive exposure to Maori language and culture. He insisted that his writings should be developed by

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<sup>2</sup> *The Search for Unity: Methodism and Ecumenism in NZ.* (JJ Lewis, AK Petch and RD Rakena). Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society. Auckland, No. 41. June 1983

<sup>3</sup> *Koro and Covenant: Reflections on Hebrew and Maori Spirituality in Aotearoa* (JJ Lewis with LV Willing and DS Mullan) Orewa: Colcom Press, 1995

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someone else so that his own work would be seen only as 'incidental'."<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless Lewis permeates this book and it reflects, as Mullan himself notes, that Jack Lewis "had an abiding interest in the relationship between mythology and theology and the parallels that he sensed between the Hebraic and Maori world views."<sup>5</sup> It gives us a clue as to the depth, breadth, and nature of Jack Lewis' thinking-biblical, cultural, theological.

Ecumenical concerns and thought were, as we will see, of critical importance to JJ Lewis, and at so many levels. Without a doubt he permeates the historical review reflecting upon the story of Methodism and Ecumenism in New Zealand. But, in the end, direct citation is really impossible: we are left with but inference and indirect evidence, albeit reliable enough. But this also further suggests an awaiting academic task of quarrying, sifting, and arriving thereby at informed scholarly judgement as to what constitutes the fullness of JJ Lewis' thought. Our present task is but the more, indeed the merely, suggestive one of discerning contours.

Jack Lewis' historical interests found further expression in a substantial work of painstaking research, undertaken in retirement, and focussing on a family missionary connection. With characteristic modesty he states, in the Preface to *Wind in the Palms: Mission in the South West Pacific 1817-1872*, that it is an historical "window upon missionary life and endeavour".<sup>6</sup> I suggest it is considerably more than a mere window. Certainly it contrasts with an earlier historical work on Trinity College which is more in the genre of a useful chronicle.<sup>7</sup> But in the epilogue to *Wind in the Palms* we are able to find additional clues concerning key elements that variously feature in much of Lewis' work. There are so many questions to be asked, he said, "concerning the life of the people, the character of the indigenous church, the real problems in translation, the responses made to biblical story and expression, the place of land in thought and feeling."<sup>8</sup>

So what are the headings, the markers, which enable me to talk in terms of contours? I have come up with seven, that can be roughly sub-divided into two groups. The first group has to do with Jack Lewis the biblical scholar and teacher; the second with his various roles and interests in wider pastoral and church matters. Thus we have, firstly, biblical realism, theological liberalism, academic thoroughness, and intimations of a dynamic hermeneutic; and secondly, philosophical and reflective interests, ecumenical elements, and ecclesial concerns.

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<sup>4</sup> **ibid., p.9**

<sup>5</sup> **ibid., p.8**

<sup>6</sup> *Wind in the Palms: Mission in the South West Pacific 1817-1872*. Orewa: ColCom Press 1991

<sup>7</sup> *The Trinity College Story*. Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society. Vol 31: Nos 3 & 4. October 1978

<sup>8</sup> **op.cit., p. 109**

## Biblical Realism

Without doubt the grounding orientation and primary resource for Jack Lewis was the Bible. He was steeped in the biblical narrative. He lived and breathed its language. He ever saw its contemporary relevance and points of application. But JJ Lewis was, of course, no naive literalist or bible-believing fundamentalist: his grasp of the Bible, and its grasp of him, was firmly in the context of a profound scholarly appreciation of biblical realism and a solidly liberal interpretation. He provides a model of what it means to pay attention to socio-historical detail within, and thus the appropriate situating of, the biblical text. The interweaving of biblical cross-connections, of historical-critical and linguistic knowledge, and theological observation, were hallmarks of his work. In the Foreword to *Between the Vision and the Word* we find what, indeed, could be Lewis' own position statement:

*Biblical exploration is not a matter of excavating a fixed deposit of truth to apply a blueprint to the future. Neither does it mean faking a glance at the literature in some contrived context, thus prejudging its message. ... There is always an interaction between actual biblical study and the conditioning of one's own situation and experience. Much depends upon the particular purpose and theological stance we bring to our search. ... Where there is openness of mind one/spirit, the Bible is left free to speak.*<sup>9</sup>

In an earlier publication Lewis quite straightforwardly asserted that the "biblical record is not a computer programme but a very earthy and human series of responses of a people stumbling through the centuries."<sup>10</sup> The biblical record contains "a paradigm for the human pilgrimage"<sup>11</sup> with universal applicability. The Bible is a record of real encounter with the divine and real struggles of a frail humanity: it is this very reality that guarantees its universal applicability and its contemporary value.

The perspective of biblical realism is further evidenced in Lewis' assertion that the *Bible* "gives a tragic reading to human history. Only too well does the Twentieth Century identify with this, but humanity is not left there, as if to be forever identified with its sickness. The story is set within the context of grace."<sup>12</sup> And, as he reminds us still, the biblical record demonstrates that "no area of human existence stands outside the concern and claim of God".<sup>13</sup> But if confidence in this comfort is real, so too is the challenge to action and change, for the *Bible* also demonstrates that:

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<sup>9</sup> *Between the Vision and the Word*. Auckland: College Communications, 1986. p.5

<sup>10</sup> "The Future of Religion in New Zealand in Biblical Perspective" in Kevin J. Sharpe, ed., *Religion and New Zealand's Future*. Palmerston North: Dunmore Press. 1982. p.57

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Across the Biblical Way*. Auckland: College Communications, 1989, p.40

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*, p.46

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*... sometimes, in troubled days, it took the sharpest controversy to bring out the real issues. Whenever in the crisis something of the truth is glimpsed, as the Hebrew prophets so often demonstrated, the impulse to declare it just will not be denied.*<sup>14</sup>

That a realistic reading of the *Bible* yielded the sense of the reality of the Divine was a *sine qua non* of JJ Lewis' approach. In discussing Hosea, Lewis demonstrates a realistic reading of text wherein taking cognizance of context is no retreat into reductionism but rather a sure pointer to the reality of the Divine with whom, and to which, we relate.

*To assume that the calling of Hosea was wrapped up with his bitter personal experience is not to claim that this was any more a cause of his becoming a prophet than that an unhappy home life was the reason John Wesley took to the roads of England as an evangelist. Reflection upon his own experience was the explosive mixture through which there flashed a spark of insight enabling him to glimpse something of the way of God with the world.*<sup>15</sup>

For Lewis the *Bible* is about God and God's relation with humanity and creation. The very realm of nature, or the natural, is in biblical thought, "the arena of the action of God".<sup>16</sup> Biblical truth is rooted and contextualised in historical reality. "There is in the biblical record," he noted:

*... the realistic view that, without God, deterioration sets in and things get worse. Accompanying the human decision to go it alone is the sound of shattering relationships with its long train of aggression, jealousy and fear leading to violence against the person, the domination of one race by another, the subordination of one sex by the other. In the midst of achievement there is desolation and disappointment.*<sup>17</sup>

The *Bible* is not just the story of a people; it is a story with a message, and the message is not less than God. Above all it was the sense of the presence of the living God that permeated Lewis' reading of the biblical text. "In the beginning was the Word, or, as it could easily be translated" he says, "the Act. God's action speaks and, when God speaks, the words become saving deeds."<sup>18</sup> Biblical words convey the

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<sup>14</sup> **ibid.**

<sup>15</sup> **ibid., p.55**

<sup>16</sup> ***End or Beginning? Biblical Reflection in a Changing World.* Manurewa: College Communications, 1990, p.22**

<sup>17</sup> **ibid., p.68**

<sup>18</sup> ***Between the Vision and the Word, p.4***

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living Word of God. Biblical text yields to theological discourse. In what voice did JJ Lewis speak?

## **Theological Liberalism**

The theological orientation, or voice, that goes most naturally with biblical realism is, I contend, liberalism, by which I mean the perspective and process of careful and critical exegetical scholarship that is brought to bear on the biblical text so as to liberate its meaning, sense and relevance. By contrast it could be said that a so-called biblical literalist, or fundamentalist, position must necessarily read the *Bible* eisegetically, if not also surrealistically, and thereby risk locking meaning and sense into an outdated worldview and/or a quasi fairy-tale-like perception of spiritual reality.

JJ Lewis represented the best of the tradition of liberal biblical scholarship. Not for him would there be a confusion of metaphor with metaphysics, a confusion that all too often mars uniformed readings of scripture. The Bible read realistically means not mistaking it for a record of history in the technical sense, "although it springs out of history and helps to create it."<sup>19</sup> Neither is the Bible a scientific record "although it sets a context for the understanding of the relatedness of all things which makes science possible."<sup>20</sup> Jack Lewis' intimate familiarity with the wide sweep of the biblical story juxtaposed with his close appreciation of literary and linguistic complexities and the rich diversity of the biblical corpus. "The biblical record is situational, with an extraordinary magnetism to draw us in and confront us with ourselves."<sup>21</sup>

In his 1989 *Across the Biblical Way*, Lewis traversed the biblical narrative in apposition with contemporary socio-cultural and theological explorations, many arising out of group studies conducted in both New Zealand and Pacific Theological Colleges as well as Marae settings. In the introduction he wrote:

*What is presented arises from continuing dialogue between the biblical story and its changing contexts and groups of people in theirs. It is the point where the covers of an ancient book fall away, where imposed and artificial compartments are forgotten, where informed listening becomes sensitive to another word being spoken, where issues arise again out of the very soil to confront us, that often we seek to examine, only to be ourselves examined under a light that is both searching and illuminating. In the encounter and meeting, the word strikes home.*<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> "The Future of Religion in New Zealand in Biblical Perspective", *ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Across the Biblical Way*, p.ix

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We see this at work when, in the context of exploring the intertestamental period - his specialised doctoral subject - together with Wisdom literature, Lewis commented that:

*New possibilities opened when Jewish writers began to explore the human dimension. Finally it is not some immortal part of the personality we are dealing with but the whole person, the person who lives and the person who dies, who has an innate hunger for life and who is given the opportunity of choice.*<sup>23</sup>

He elaborates further: "The person is a becoming. ... The person is person in the act of decision; the turning point, acceptance of responsibility.... The person is person in loving. ... Such love is a response to the prior love of God ... divine life and love are constantly being poured into the life of the world."<sup>24</sup> Then, finally:

*Human destiny is caught up with the decision to live in the world for God as against the desire to live for oneself in the world. Such terms as 'redemption' really embody a metaphor for that recovery and renewal by which the intention inherent in the very nature of things is won back for those who have lost their way. The person who learns to live for God is, in the same moment, a person for others.*<sup>25</sup>

The tradition of liberal biblical scholarship is by no means shallow or sentimental. It does not shirk the hard questions. In an exploration of secular humanism, spirituality, and knowledge of God, Lewis once stated:

*Any death of God would be the death of humanity. ...The abstract term 'spirituality' does not sit well in the biblical vocabulary, nor would it belong should it compartmentalise life into a rarified dimension where God is, as distinct from some other where God is not.*<sup>26</sup>

And when exploring the Psalms he averred that "the original meaning recedes into the background but the spirit and affirmation continue into new situations where the living images and rhythms become our own. We join with others across the ages in acknowledgement of the claim of God upon us and of our need of God."<sup>27</sup> So it is the case that:

*Inclusive of the widest range of personality and experience (the Bible) reaches into every human situation. It meets us at depth and the relationship is reversed. No longer are we examining the Bible since*

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<sup>23</sup> **ibid., p. 143**

<sup>24</sup> **ibid.. p. 144**

<sup>25</sup> **ibid., p. 145**

<sup>26</sup> **End or Beginning?, p. 14**

<sup>27</sup> **ibid., p. 18**

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*we are the examined and, in its illumining, it becomes the medium of the Word to us.*<sup>28</sup>

For JJ Lewis the *Bible* is persistent and resilient in its applicability. It is eminently the case that in studying the *Bible* it is a mistake to think that all that is happening is that we are examining an ancient text, for what is also happening is that the Word that the text bears witness to is examining us.

## **Academic Thoroughness**

Jack Lewis' biblical realism and liberalism was, of course, thoroughly grounded in a first rate academic scholarship that knows how to pay careful attention to language and the meanings of words. He would comment, for example, on the significance of differences in respect to the meaning of time in the *Bible*. 'The common Hebrew word of time, *'eth*, has to do with events and experiences ... (for) the New Testament *kairos*, (is) time charged with meaning and opportunity."<sup>29</sup> He would make a point elsewhere that a prophet is one who both speaks (*nabi*) the Word of God and one who sees ahead (*ro'eh* - seer) to the consequences of both relating and misrelating to that Word. And an observation penned some fifty years ago is just as relevant today:

*In so far as (the) great prophets saw the shape of things to come in the immediate future and in so far as the truth they expressed to their own age is applicable to every age, they were foretellers of the future. (However,) we look in vain to see in their utterances detailed predictions of the distant future. ... In our own greatly troubled age, the enduring message of the major prophets is supremely relevant.*<sup>30</sup>

The elements of academic, liberal and biblical scholarship so far identified illustrate JJ Lewis as a biblical realist who held to a deep sense of the reality of a graciously interacting God. Keith Rowe once referred to Jack Lewis as "a gift to the church" one "who can hold together careful and imaginative critical study along with an ability to hear the word afresh in new contexts".<sup>31</sup> This leads me to the fourth element, which rounds off the first set of contour markers, that of an intimation of a dynamic hermeneutic as a leading component of the thought of JJ Lewis.

## **Dynamic Hermeneutic**

Something of Lewis' hermeneutical stance, his approach to the matter of biblical interpretation, can be discerned from the first chapter of *End or Beginning?* Here he acknowledged that his youthful experience of the Napier earthquake yielded a

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<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*, p.37

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*, p.24

<sup>30</sup> 'The Message of the Major Prophets' - 1950/51 Leadership Schools Study. Personal papers. St John's Theological College Library, Auckland

<sup>31</sup> *Between the Vision and the Word*, back cover

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sustained metaphor for interpreting the human experience of change. This metaphor enabled him to juxtapose biblical material with disruptive themes in 20th Century social and religious history so as to explore the emergence of polarising extremes of attitude, value, and interpretive perspectives in modern life. He lamented the loss of the liberal 'via media' in theology as in much else. The *Bible* is rich in evocative imagery and suggestive insight. Read as a source of image and idea illuminating the present, rather than a record of lessons from long-gone illuminaries, the *Bible* comes alive with a relevant power and perspective.

In his earlier *On the Boundaries of Faith* he addressed themes such as covenantal dynamic and the way the *Bible* speaks at the boundaries of life, and again he went beyond the mere recounting of biblical narrative to a lively discernment of deep and contemporarily relevant theological insight. Other examples of such reading of biblical text, and its exposition into a contemporary milieu, can be easily adduced: it is the stuff of much of Lewis' published work. But how might we describe his particular approach?

JJ Lewis' overall stance to the reading and interpretation of the *Bible*, I suggest, illustrates what I would call the principle of 'dynamic hermeneutics'. This means that one reads beyond the raw 'data' of narrative, or whatever, in order to discern the 'dynamic' contained within - wherein, of course, lies the power of the Word to speak afresh today. The genius of JJ Lewis lay not just in his grasp of the full sweep of biblical data, but also in his clear application of a hermeneutic whereby he always made fresh and relevant sense of the *Bible*.

### **Philosophical and Reflective Interests**

The second 'set' of markers begins with the philosophical or reflective motif. This is seen most obviously in the 1994 publication *Beginning From Here*, a winsomely reflective piece exploring life as a retiree.<sup>32</sup> Here we find a tantalizing hint of autobiography and a series of contemplative discourses interweaving biblical insight and philosophic reflection. There are many rich themes that Lewis explores: creation and purpose; cosmos and relatedness; New Zealand geological and human history; Methodist roots and the motif of *turangawaewae*; the juxtaposition of biblical genealogy with *whakapapa*, not in terms of detail, but as a dynamic. It seems, at first glance, to be a work of free-association of ideas with no particular or prearranged pattern; yet first glances can be deceiving, and the logic and deeper inner connectedness of Lewis' thinking ought never be underestimated. In the midst can be found gems of wisdom and crystals of insight.

Such is the case with *End or Beginning?* where Lewis engaged in reflections upon the book of Ecclesiastes. There is a mercy in mortality, he affirmed. "The mere prolonging of life is not in itself necessarily a kindness. An unredeemed immortality,

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<sup>32</sup> *Beginning From Here*. Orewa: Colcom Press, 1994.  
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confronting only oneself, would be intolerable."<sup>33</sup> And, a little later, "Easter brought with it the assurance of life in the purpose of God. Distortion sets in, however, the moment we are tempted to throw the emphasis all upon a life to come beyond death."<sup>34</sup> And elsewhere he asks, "... how can anyone assess the quality of a human life simply by reference to its length in years?"<sup>35</sup>

## Ecumenical Elements

A more obvious interest that JJ Lewis demonstrated, although there is little of his own work actually published on it, was, of course, ecumenism.<sup>36</sup> Apart from various documents, some annotated with comments, and working papers to which he contributed, all included in the personal archival holdings, one can only infer [and recall from personal knowledge] that this is, in fact, a major element that must be included in any sketch of his thought. But clearly further and more detailed research would be required to recover the *ipsissima verba* of Jack Lewis in this regard. However, a little indication may be gleaned from the comment, with reference to ecumenical developments in theological education, that "So much progress has been made that it is difficult to realise how quickly it has happened. ... Yet this is just a beginning. Success cannot be taken for granted. There is a future to be won."<sup>37</sup> Or we may infer something of Jack's own thinking from a remark with which he is clearly associated, such as, for example, in the Epilogue to the 1983 *The Search for Unity*:

*The venture that excited so much hope and offered so many possibilities has ground to a halt. Keen disappointment can easily turn to cynicism, and inverted idealism. The time has come for a reappraisal and for putting down even deeper roots to enable the journey to take up at a new level. The question ... is not whether it was really necessary hut whether the route was somehow mistaken, its basis inadequate.*<sup>38</sup>

From the same work, the comment that "There is an ever present danger of withdrawal into the comforting but illusory security of the smaller group, of a docetic separation of spirit and form, even of elevating the peripheral above the central and the abiding",<sup>39</sup> whilst a reflection on the then state of Church Union and the ecumenical venture in New Zealand, could easily be read in a wider context of applicability.

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<sup>33</sup> *End or Beginning?* p. 95

<sup>34</sup> *ibid.*, p.97

<sup>35</sup> *ibid.*, p.77

<sup>36</sup> As already indicated, there are some works to which Lewis contributed, possibly predominated, but his own thought can only be inferred from them rather than directly referenced.

<sup>37</sup> *The Trinity College Story*, p.57

<sup>38</sup> *The Search for Unity*, p.56

<sup>39</sup> *ibid.*, p.57

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Perhaps a later comment gives better evidence of Jack Lewis' considered opinion where he states that:

*The ecumenical movement arose out of the missionary dispersion. An intolerable burden of choice was imposed upon new converts when they had to ask, "but which Church?"... While diversity is a gift of the Spirit, its elevation into division, so breaking the fellowship, is a denial of the good news.*<sup>40</sup>

But this has really less to do with views on ecumenism *per se* and rather more to do with his thinking about the Church in general, which leads to the seventh and last component or contour of the thought of JJ Lewis I have identified.

### Ecclesial Concerns

In his 1969 Presidential address entitled "On the Frontiers of Faith"<sup>41</sup> JJ Lewis affirmed that the Church "as the People of God, is always a becoming ... It is not an entity in itself so much as the action of God through faithful men and women in the world." He asserted faith as the "healthy option" in an ever-changing world, a faith that is both rooted in history and open to the future. He averred then, and reminds us now, that "there are times when the good news in Jesus Christ concentrates on a single issue..." and he made the rather challenging comment that "Redemption is a metaphor for winning back to the purposes inherent in the very nature of things that which somehow has lost its way."

Lewis' view of the Church was as deeply pastoral as it was theologically sophisticated. His Presidential address touched on the wider ecumenical context of ecclesial concerns. There was a sense of ecumenical excitement in the air. This was the threshold time of Church Union debate, and for Lewis the excitement lay in promoting an ecclesial development in the cause of a "reconciling mission" and not as a mere bureaucratic or institutional novelty.

Some twenty years later and we find, in a reflection on the biblical roots of the Christian Church, the assertion that the "New Testament presents us with an emerging Church, developing and taking shape according to pastoral need and historical circumstance."<sup>42</sup> The believing community is:

*oriented towards God and the world. ... The Church, as it emerges through the total biblical story, is not its own explanation or goal.*

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<sup>40</sup> *End or Beginning?* p.53

<sup>41</sup> Presidential Address, November 1969, held in the Personal Papers archives, St Johns Theological College Library.

<sup>42</sup> *Across the Biblical Way* p. 175

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*This is the world itself being reconciled. It is becoming a part of the answer instead of continuing to be part of the problem.*<sup>43</sup>

Lewis' biblical perspective on what the Church is and means can be further discerned from the following two quotations. First –

*At Pentecost the holy and the common come together, the holy breaking through the common to gather it into itself, the vertical cutting through the horizontal at the point of the Cross. Things kept separate ..(are).. brought together in the common life of the Christian fellowship, a general sharing of the life of God in the world.*<sup>44</sup>

And second -

*It is clear from the New Testament story that there is one basic calling to be a Christian, and all who acknowledge Jesus as Lord share his mission and ministry in, to, and for the world (Eph 4:1-16) ... across the years, for the building up of the Church and for leadership in mission, there have been given within this total ministry special ministries as a cutting, edge and reminder to the whole Church of its service and offering.*<sup>45</sup>

The pastoral priority in Lewis' thinking about the Church is very evident. The Church, in his view, "was not an institution Jesus bequeathed, rather a movement of life and faith within and beyond Israel."<sup>46</sup> Indeed he held that the Church's real character is manifest in and through its total ministry:

*Ministry in all its forms is an expression and medium of what is essentially Christ s ministry in and to and for the world through the believing and serving community, the Church. ...*

*There is a grace of orders. What makes ministry possible is not, finally, the conferring of any particular status hut rather the conviction that Christ chooses to work through fallible people. It is his ministry.*<sup>47</sup>

And Lewis' concern and focus for Church and ministry, whilst catholic and ecumenical in scope, was, naturally, particularly addressed to the people called Methodist. He sets the scene by stating that "Methodism has always lived on a knife edge as a movement within the Church catholic. Pragmatic in character, it shaped into Societies according to local need, went out into the open air to proclaim its message,

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<sup>43</sup> **ibid., p. 180**

<sup>44</sup> **ibid., p.173**

<sup>45</sup> **ibid., p. 178**

<sup>46</sup> ***End or Beginning?* p.50**

<sup>47</sup> **ibid., p.52**

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discovered the power of lay witness and preaching ..."<sup>48</sup> Then, after alluding to the demise of an earlier ecclesial community, the Nestorian Church, he asks:

*What of the people called Methodist? ...they too can settle into conformity with prevailing and passing fashion and sometimes imagine that by changing the structures at intervals, progress can be made. John Wesley was a Church builder hut this grew out of an abiding theological vision. He helped discipline the growing Evangelical Movement into the service of the Church whereas George Whitefield, the greater preacher, regretted that, unlike Wesley, he had built with 'a rope of sand'.<sup>49</sup>*

Elsewhere he made the trenchant comment that:

*Recent years have been marked by a resurgence of denominationalism, finding liberty to travel paths in a pluralistic world. Methodism, by its own history, cannot escape oscillations between the church and sect; the former is still with the Catholic dream of the universal and of good news in its totality for the whole person in the whole world; the latter with its search for new authority and self-determination ... taking responsibility for itself but sometimes covering the wall with pictures of itself.<sup>50</sup>*

He went on to warn, however, that:

*When ... the Church does not draw deeply enough from all its resources, uncertainty is inevitable, leading to retreat into the security of obscurantist fundamentalism - the old structures of sectarianism - or, at the other end of the spectrum to a new liberal dogmatism.<sup>51</sup>*

In recent years his concern for the shape and health of the Methodist Church in New Zealand received his attention in a leaflet written in response to what he saw as a crisis in Methodism. He addressed such issues as the emerging tendency to sectarianism, the procedure of consensus decision making; the use of the contentious term '*Tauuwi*'; and the need to attend carefully to language and meaning especially in respect of divisive issues such as homosexuality.<sup>52</sup> His plea was for biblical and theological integrity. His call was for catholicity of outlook and fidelity to critical principles.

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<sup>48</sup> **ibid.**, p.54

<sup>49</sup> **ibid.**, p.56

<sup>50</sup> *Beginning From Here*, p.46

<sup>51</sup> **ibid.**, p.54

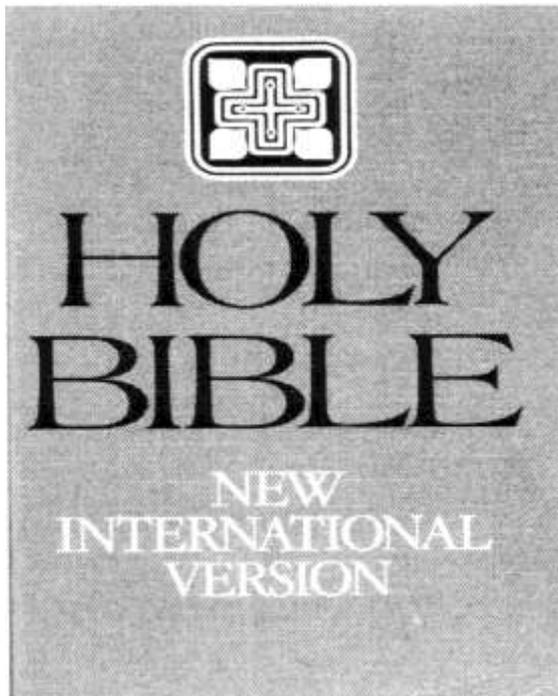
<sup>52</sup> "Some Personal Reflections", January, 1998. Personal Archives, St Johns Theological College Library.

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But Jack Lewis' concern was not simply addressed to social and structural issues of the ecclesial body. He was also concerned about matters of worship in regard to which he once remarked that:

*The sense of the Presence cannot be conjured up at will or manipulated by a certain quality of voice, attitude of piety, careful selection of hymn, or even stereotyped expressions of fellowship seeking instant ready-made relationships. Any pretence, simply going through the motions, destroys the very nature of worship.*<sup>53</sup>

And yet, of liturgical diversity, he also commented that "one emphasis need not exclude the rest. People can feel impoverished in the presence of constant novelty as much as they can feel oppressed by an unimaginative and unchanging form."<sup>54</sup> In a printed address from 1972 he spoke of worship as premonition of God, as participation in God, as proclamation of God, and as praise of God.<sup>55</sup>



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<sup>53</sup> *End or Beginning?* p.64

<sup>54</sup> *ibid.*, p.65

<sup>55</sup> "A Theology of Worship", 1972. Personal Archives, St Johns Theological College Library.

## Conclusion

I have endeavoured to sketch the contours of the thought of JJ Lewis - in reality an impossible task in the compass of a relatively short paper. It will be up to others to determine the extent to which I have succeeded or failed to do him justice, and it would certainly require a work of further research to do him full justice. But, for myself, I am grateful for the chance to make even a humble beginning.

The thought of JJ Lewis began and ended in the *Bible*, which, he said:

*belongs to the whole Church. There are so many who contribute to its interpretation. In the way its materials can be handled there is infinite variety, in keeping, with its inherent purpose and message. No theme is completely self-contained, while changing situations may recall different aspects of several.*<sup>56</sup>

For Lewis it was the case that the biblical record "stands at the very heart of human experience and is subject to all the scrutiny that can be brought to it. Truth is not destroyed by sound criticism or assessment, but rather set free and confirmed." Yet at the same time he could say that there comes "a point at which, when all the critical tools have been used and set aside ... intuition takes over."<sup>57</sup> In the epilogue to *Beginning From Here*, Lewis noted that his -

*... experiences of retirement add to life on the boundaries a very healthy realism. As memory occupies a larger place constant reassessment becomes an inevitable accompaniment. While nothing seems to remain hidden amongst the cobwebs and the oddest recollections are stirred some over-riding convictions also emerge.*<sup>58</sup>

In many ways it has been in retirement that the mature and rich thought of JJ Lewis has been able to find expression. I only came across one rare error of fact: it was the group Boney M, not ABBA, who in the 1970s made famous the song "By the waters of Babylon".<sup>59</sup> But such is easily forgiven!

In the publication of a 1984 lecture series, Lewis addressed issues of scepticism and renewal. Out of the rubble of life comes re-creation; out of the past there arises a new future. The *Bible* does not shirk the ambiguities and the despondent moments of life. Thus the ray of hope shines forth the brighter and more trustworthy. The *Bible*, read with critical realism, offers neither panacea nor quick-fix. In the pages of the *Bible* real problems are addressed; real searching and questing is engaged; and a divine

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<sup>56</sup> *Between the Vision and the Word*, p. 184

<sup>57</sup> *Across the Biblical Way*, p. 190

<sup>58</sup> *Beginning From Here*, p.60

<sup>59</sup> see *ibid.*, p.48

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reality beckons within and through all. Let me illustrate, in Jack Lewis' own words, concerning Job:

*In one sense Job... received no answer and... knows no more ... than he did at the beginning. But he has maintained his integrity, the right to stand upon his feet even before God, and it is only before God that he can do this. Only in this relationship can he know the wholeness of true selfhood. Humanity which, in the Garden story, stepped aside into a neutral position in judgement upon God, now returns humbly and gratefully to the relationship of faith and willing obedience and, in this awareness of acceptance, finds itself. Here is our true place in the universe, where faith discovers that dependence and independence are the same thing. ... Here is the dimension of true freedom.<sup>60</sup>*

In the Postscript to *On the Boundaries of Faith*, JJ Lewis referred to predecessor Dr Harry Ranston's work as highlighting the fact of contemporary life ever "breaking through the biblical record... the need is always there for fresh appraisal, for continuing research and reinterpretation." Lewis was himself a master in letting the *Bible* speak into contemporary life and, conversely, helping us to see into the constant contemporaneity of the biblical witness.

Without doubt, to read JJ Lewis is to hear him speak again: his word of address, gentle, insightful, humble yet profound, reaches out to us today with a never dimming freshness. In particular, for those who knew him personally, his voice lives on as the words he penned are read. And it is his voice, his words and the Word he sought to express, that I want to leave you with. In a collection of meditations on selections of Scripture passages that follow the Christian Calendar,<sup>61</sup> each commences with a single short sentence encapsulating a key idea or two. These pithy statements also speak volumes of JJ Lewis' style and outlook. For example:

"An excitement moves in the season of Advent" [Advent 1]

"Lent is a time of sifting, of discriminating between the passing and the permanent, the false and the creative." [Lent 1]

"In the resurrection period, it was evidently one thing to see Jesus, another to recognise him." [Easter 2]

"By its very nature, Christianity is a global faith with a wide-angled view on the world." [Pentecost 18]

Some illustrate his academic attention to terms and details:

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<sup>60</sup> *On the Boundaries of Faith*. Auckland: College Communications, 1985, p.65

<sup>61</sup> *Between the Vision and the Word*

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"The term 'Lent' derives from an old English word indicating, in the northern hemisphere, the lengthening days of Spring." [Ash Wednesday]

Some read like proverbial aphorisms:

"There is a mercy in not always getting what we want." [Easter 6]

"Religion is not often friendly to change." [Pentecost 3]

And some illustrate his view of the Bible itself:

"The biblical record is frank in its presentation of human nature." [Pentecost 16]

While yet others have a hint a wry humour:

"We are told that a subtle change takes place in one who has ventured into outer space." [Good Friday]

"The last Sunday before Advent has sometimes been known as 'Stir-up Sunday!'" [Pentecost 26]

In the Epilogue to *Between the Vision and the Word*, Lewis cited an anonymous scribe's complaint from around 2000BC -

*Where are the words that are not the words that the poets have used up already? How can I find afresh thing, afresh way, to say what I want to say, when all the ways have been made stale by my predecessors?*<sup>62</sup>

We might say JJ Lewis found the words-or at least some of them. Yet it seems to me that, for Jack Lewis, the point of preaching and of biblical interpretation is not so much to say a new thing but to utter the Word anew, to contribute to the stimulation of thought, knowledge and conviction "already there at work".

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<sup>62</sup> *ibid.*, p.184

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**TRINITY COLLEGE 1955** Photo: *Kinder Library*

**Back Row:**

W S Gilbert, K H Russell, J C F Mabon, G B W Bell, R J Hamlin, F G Glen, M H Downner

**Second Row:**

H W Kitchingman, J F Cropp, T L Nicholls, G E Scarr, O A Kitchingman, G D Brough BA

**Third Row:**

B A Walker MA, F R Lewis MSc, E P Boyd, I D Grant, W J Cable, B M Watson MSc, P F Taylor

**Front Row:**

G L Bennett, P M Guthardt, R H Wood (Senior Student), Rev. E W Hames MA (Principal), Rev. JJ Lewis MA, BD, B Scammell (Vice Student), R S Andrews



**School for Christian Workers, 1960's** Photo: *Kinder Library*  
*'JJ' second from left, front row*

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**TRINITY COLLEGE PRINCIPALS WITH FIELD WORKER, late 1970s**

**L to R: Rev. Dr David Williams (1963-70), Rev. Eric Hames (1941-63), Rev. Keith Rowe (Field Worker 1975 - ), Rev. Dr John Lewis (1971-80)    *Photo: Kinder Library***

## ISSUES FACING THE METHODIST CHURCH

### The Rev. Dr John J Lewis and his Thought

*Rev. Dr Lynne J Wall*

*Lynne Wall was ordained a Methodist minister in 1978 and is currently serving as the Ranston Lecturer in Biblical Studies at Trinity Methodist Theological College in Auckland. She is married to the Rev. Terry Wall and they have three daughters. Lynne's interests lie in biblical interpretation, education/or ministry and spiritual growth.*

### Introduction

It is clear that the influence of the Rev. Dr John J Lewis has been deeply and widely felt throughout the life of our church during the last half century. As Principal of Trinity Methodist Theological College, ecumenical statesman and biblical scholar, his life and thought have touched the lives of many through lectures and written publications, in sermons and letters, and not least by the privilege of relationship and conversation.

It is therefore an honour to be invited to share in this lecture some reflections upon the way in which his thought continues to have an impact on issues facing the church today. What I have to say is the product of my own pondering on the man I knew as mentor and colleague in ministry, and on his published writings and unpublished papers now collected in the Methodist archives. There is, then, a tentativeness to my offering this evening, as I am very aware of the way in which one's own views may impinge on the task of bringing to bear the thought of another upon the life of the church today. Complete objectivity is an impossibility in the scholarly critical task, yet it is essential that one strive to enter the mind of another with honesty about one's own prejudices and openness to the gift of otherness and all that such a gift might have to offer.

The issues facing us as the Methodist Church, Te Hahi Weteriana o Aotearoa, are of critical importance for our continuing identity, life and mission as a church in this land. We are at a crisis point and as we struggle to find a way forward on several fronts, we may find 'bread for our journey' in the wisdom of one who was steeped in the biblical tradition and in the life of our church. For to be in such a position of crisis and struggle is nothing new. As Dr Lewis reminds us:

*Life has the texture of struggle that endures to the moment of death,  
that calls for everything we have and are, feel and think, that is*

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*diminished or enlarged in the decisions we make, the causes we espouse. It is the anvil of understanding and belief.<sup>1</sup>*

In seeking to respond to our current situation I want to begin by outlining the way I perceive the broad development of Dr Lewis's thinking in regard to the nature of the church. Then I will identify three key issues which I see as crucial for the health and well-being of the church and explore them in the light of Dr Lewis's thought. Those issues are derived from an unpublished paper written in response to the booklet *Methodism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. In seeking to address the concerns raised by this booklet, he asks, "What are the real trouble spots?"

*a) Is it a feeling of loss of direction?*

*b) Is it an extreme emphasis upon biculturalism leading Pacific Islanders and others to a sense of being overlooked and marginalised?*

*c) Is it some form of elitism which breaks fellowship?<sup>2</sup>*

In identifying these concerns he recognises that the question of homosexuality has brought other issues to the surface in the life of the church. From his analysis I will explore the three issues of direction, diversity and decision-making. These are intertwining issues which by their very nature impact on one another. However, I shall seek to address them independently before drawing them together in a conclusion.

## **The Nature of the Church**

As with all Dr Lewis's theological thinking, the initiative lies with God whose disclosure is always of a self-revelatory nature which cannot be manipulated by human impatience or the desire to control. In speaking of God's call to relationship through covenant he writes:

*The Covenant made with humanity was not imposed by force, entered into by mutual agreement, but offered as a gift... It is a way of saying that we cannot make any claim upon God as if we could remind God to be God. God is always taking the initiative, thinking of it first... No claim can be made on this kind of love, because it is always giving and, at cost, forgiving.<sup>3</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> *End or Beginning? Biblical Reflection in a Changing World*. Manurewa : College Communications. 1990. p. 103

<sup>2</sup> Unpublished response to *Methodism in the 21st Century*

<sup>3</sup> *On the Boundaries of Faith*. Auckland: College Communications. 1985, p.13f.

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A recurrent phrase throughout his work is, "Let God be God"<sup>4</sup> - something which in its seemingly naive simplicity we seem reluctant to do. For Dr Lewis this phrase is the essence of the first commandment and is at the centre of the biblical message.<sup>5</sup> Again he summarises his understanding of God as he sees God revealed and responded to in the biblical record:

*The record is not speaking of a God, nor of some penny dropping experience, a blik, and calling that God, nor of some point of convergence towards which all things move, nor even of some cypher or device to enable us to talk about ourselves. There, at the end of our curiosity and endeavour, the Other is already reaching out towards us in invitation to partnership.*<sup>6</sup>

So then it is God who calls the church into being, just as the people of Israel were called by God from once being "no people" to becoming "the people of God." I well remember the powerful impact of an Old Testament Introduction class when the question was raised as to why the people of Israel were called, even chosen by God. As so often Dr Lewis quietly drew us back to the words of scripture:

*The Lord did not set his love upon you nor choose you because you were more in number than any other people. You were the fewest. But just because the Lord loves you. (Deut. 7:7)*<sup>7</sup>

There is then no defining character as to what kind of people make up the church. There is but *one* calling made to each person, to follow Christ, which may be expressed in an infinite variety of ways through discipleship and ministry. Dr Lewis writes:

*Certain distinguishing marks speak of the presence of the Church. There is a difference in expression from community to community, culture to culture but, inherent in the life of the believing people everywhere is that which belongs to the Church of the ages. Exposition of the biblical story, sacramental celebration, praise and prayer, ministering, teaching, healing, caring, all the offering of worship and service in the name of Christ - these in a diversity of form are all there in the life of each congregation, and beyond it in the wider community.*<sup>8</sup>

He is also at pains to stress the *local* character of the church:

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* p.32. *Koru and Covenant: Reflections on Hebrew and Maori Spirituality on Aotearoa* (JJ Lewis with LV Willing and DS Mullan). Orewa : Colcan Press. 1995. p. 118

<sup>5</sup> *Across the Biblical Way*. Auckland: College Communications. 1989, p.73

<sup>6</sup> *On the Boundaries of Faith*, p.29

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* p. 13

<sup>8</sup> *End or Beginning?* p. 53

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*That means for us the Church around the corner, that congregation whose influence cannot be contained within four walls, the people of Christ wherever we live. We may have grown up within a rather small company, yet, with all its limitations, it has opened for us a window on life.*<sup>9</sup>

In an unpublished response to a document more recently circulated within the church entitled *The Regional Church*, Dr Lewis critiques the perceived assumption that:

*Conference is the Church in totality. It is however a legally constituted instrument to enable the wider Church to meet, share, worship, learn and act together, seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit, as servants of the Word.*<sup>10</sup>

He wonders whether "the motivation behind it is less theological than ideological, sectarian rather than ecumenical. A mission statement formulated as if for all times sets the framework."<sup>11</sup> Again he emphasises the importance of the local congregation: "Christ is present and central" wherever Christians meet. "The really decisive and distinguishing mark of the Church is the presence of Christ within: "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst" (Matt. 18:20)."<sup>12</sup>

Lest the impression be given that Dr Lewis is an idealist when it comes to the nature of the church, he reminds us of one of Paul's images of the church in the following way:

*Conscious of its weakness, perversity and inability to make any real claims for itself, Paul once spoke of it as an earthen vessel which nevertheless was bearer of a treasure (2 Cor.4:7).*<sup>13</sup>

Further in his credal statement he writes:

*I believe in the Church, human in weakness, disappointing in failure, called to be the community of the Spirit, the people of hope, through whom Christ continues service in, to and for the world, for release from brokenness to wholeness and total renewal.*<sup>14</sup>

Finally, Dr Lewis summarises the nature of the church in this way:

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<sup>9</sup> **Ibid. p.54**

<sup>10</sup> **Unpublished response to *The Regional Church*. Kinder Library. St John's College.**

**Auckland**

<sup>11</sup> **Ibid.**

<sup>12</sup> ***End or Beginning?* p.54**

<sup>13</sup> **Ibid. p.48**

<sup>14</sup> **Ibid. p.104**

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*The Church is described in three metaphors: the People of God, a family of young and old with varied experience and understanding; the Body of Christ growing in unity; the Community of the Spirit, coming alive in each generation. It is a given agent of the Reign of grace through which Christ continues his mission in the world.*<sup>15</sup>

On the basis of this understanding of the nature of the church, let us move now to the issue of direction within the Methodist Church.

## **Direction**

On the occasion of Dr Lewis's retirement as Principal, the Rev. Dr Raymond Pelly, then Warden of St John's College, described him as someone:

*whose vision somehow constantly renews itself and is strange and disconcerting through always being slightly ahead of the times, of the situation... this constant and necessary renewal of vision which is at the heart of leadership.*<sup>16</sup>

Dr Lewis himself was keenly aware of the significance of vision especially as he perceived it at work amongst the people of Israel. A man of vision himself, what is the nature of the vision he has for the church?

Taking seriously the imperfections of the church and the struggles of human existence, Dr Lewis identifies the tension between vision and its realisation in human terms:

*In the ambiguities of human existence, tension must exist between what is and what can be. The invitation is to share in the new being of the new creation by letting God be God. In the biblical view God does not make new things; but the things that are, are made new.*<sup>17</sup>

Like a red thread running through all Dr Lewis's teaching and writing is the goal of God's activity in our world expressed in creation and liberation. He sees this as a central motif in the biblical record where creation and liberation are seen as two sides of the same coin, redemption as recovering the original intention of creation. In commenting on the high point of prophecy in Deutero-Isaiah, Dr Lewis writes:

*When God creates, there is liberation and in setting people free God is doing a new thing (43:19). Out of captivity will come resurrection into new nationhood and the wilderness itself shall blossom as the rose.*<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> **Ibid. p.55**

<sup>16</sup> **Pelly. R., Unpublished paper. Methodist Archives**

<sup>17</sup> **Koru and Covenant, p. 102**

<sup>18</sup> **Across the Biblical Way. p.74**

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Similarly, in writing of the prophecy of Isaiah of Jerusalem, he says:

*Order would return to the earth, the intention of creation would be fulfilled as harmony gathered all existence into unity, the lion and the lamb lying down together, a little child being able to walk amongst the creatures of the earth unharmed and unafraid. Creation and liberation belong together.<sup>19</sup>*

Both creation and liberation are seen to be the work of the Spirit:

*The Spirit of God was also associated with creation when ruach blew or brooded over formless chaos (Gen. 1:2) and with liberation in national renewal and regeneration (Ezek. 11:19-20; 37:1-14), with the release of the powers and purposes in creation, setting the world free to become its true self.<sup>20</sup>*

In expressing this concept within a Maori context he writes:

*Creation and liberation belong together in the grace of God. In creating there is a setting free which is the essence of the Rangī and Papa story. It is out of their enforced separation that creation begins and their children are freed to live their own lives. In this liberation there is a new creation.<sup>21</sup>*

In commenting upon this work of the Spirit within our own context, Dr Lewis speaks of "the humanisation of the world in a community of relationships in which each race is enabled to become truly itself, making its own contribution to the common welfare."<sup>22</sup> (We shall follow this thought further in the section on diversity.)

For Dr Lewis, vision and direction are always grounded in theology which in turn has its source in the *Bible*. Flexibility to read 'the signs of the times' is needed as well as a keen eye for the needs of the church and the world. There can be no 'one size fits all' blueprint for the church's life. In the following summary Dr Lewis shows how the prophetic message is tailored to the needs of the situation:

*If the preachers in the eighth century BC condemned preoccupation with the externals of religion to the neglect of justice in the community, those returning from Exile were to affirm the reverse that, without the re-establishment of worship, the nation could never fully recover.<sup>23</sup>*

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<sup>19</sup> **Ibid. p.61**

<sup>20</sup> **Koru and Covenant, p.96**

<sup>21</sup> **Ibid. p.101f.**

<sup>22</sup> **Ibid. p. 102**

<sup>23</sup> **Across the Biblical Way, p.48**

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Whenever Israel's vision narrowed or became self-seeking, God broadened and universalised the message through the prophets so that the whole earth became the focus of God's reconciling love and Israel was called to be "a light to the Gentiles". Preoccupation with the internal life of our church may well have stultified our wider vision and mission.

Styles of leadership and direction are often shaped by personality but they can also be shaped by the theology which undergirds them. The powerful words of Lzekiel 34 rebuke the leadership of Israel: "Ho, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep?" (Ezek. 34:2). Dr Lewis's commentary is illuminating:

*True leadership is pastoral and not authoritarian but here the exercise of power has proved so corrupting that God must now meet the need of scattered and suffering Israel.*<sup>24</sup>

Such pastoral leadership must keep close to the people and their needs, listening carefully to a variety of voices and taking courage to speak a word of vision and direction. Being on the boundaries is another theme which is reiterated throughout Dr Lewis's work. It is not an easy place to be but for the leader it is a necessity in order that all may be heard and responded to.

Finally the role of responsibility is implicit in accepting the call to be God's people:

*In their best moments, the Hebrews came to see [the Exodus] as the choice of the one for the many, the creation of a people for the deliverance of the world. Liberation carried with it responsibility and accountability to life.*<sup>25</sup>

And again he writes:

*Election for any people is never for privilege hut for responsibility and those who fail to discharge it are under the greater judgement.*<sup>26</sup>

To be responsible, then, means just that - 'able to respond' - to the needs of others, to be "my brother's keeper" (Gen. 4:9), to care for those who are vulnerable, difficult, or who think differently from myself. This is not a patronising act, for leadership involves consultation and partnership. A last comment from Dr Lewis:

*As need arises, leadership is raised up as a service to be undertaken. The antidote to the temptations of power is commitment to the welfare of others. To camouflage leadership by a contrived remoteness or by pretending it does not exist is to repudiate responsibility and to*

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<sup>24</sup> **Ibid. p.72**

<sup>25</sup> **Ibid. p. 17**

<sup>26</sup> **Ibid. p.51**

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*deprive those who are dependent on it of benefit that they might receive.*<sup>27</sup>

## **Diversity**

Over the last ten years, perhaps the most pressing issue within our church has been how to live with diversity. We are not alone in this concern. The Japanese theologian, Kosuke Koyama, visited New Zealand earlier in the year and he was raising a similar question, "How can we live together?" When we are open and secure in our own identity, diversity may be welcomed as an enriching and illuminating aspect of human life in the world. Dr Lewis writes:

*In any meeting of different forms of spirituality across cultures, imperialism or exclusiveness are out of place. It is a matter of light meeting light.*<sup>28</sup>

But when we perceive otherness as threat, our response to diversity becomes destructive of relationship and mutual understanding.<sup>29</sup>

*While diversity is a gift of the Spirit, its elevation into division, so breaking the fellowship, is a denial of the good news.*<sup>30</sup>

Again let us approach this issue from a theological standpoint, for the "loss of true community is a sign of spiritual decay,"<sup>31</sup> "a breakdown in social relations, evidence of alienation from God."<sup>32</sup>

The danger is in allowing ourselves to be so convinced that we are right in our thinking about an issue that we do not care about the breakdown of relationships, or that the severing of "the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:3) is a cost to be borne for the cause of right. Dr Lewis identifies this as a continuing problem. He writes concerning Elijah in this way:

*There is a problem, though, in equating any event with the divine intention. This same Elijah had no compunction in returning to slaughter the prophets and even to make a disastrous political alliance with Syria, thinking it was the will of God. It is so easy to imprison God in the ethical standards of the lime, except that the biblical experience is that God cannot be so contained.*<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> *Between the Vision and the Word.* Auckland : College Communications. 1986. p.79

<sup>28</sup> *Koru and Covenant*, p.95

<sup>29</sup> See Wall, T.W. *Is There Another Way?* Kinder Library, St John's College, Auckland

<sup>30</sup> *End or Beginning?* p.53

<sup>31</sup> *Across the Biblical Way*, p.52 and cf. *Koru and Covenant*, pp. 47, 67

<sup>32</sup> *Across the Biblical Way*, p.52

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* p.28

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In prophetic words from a report on his presidential year (1970) Dr Lewis said:

*A fresh danger appears whenever the liberal becomes dogmatic and a new style gathers to itself a stereotype of language and method. The new dogmas must themselves be under the judgement of insight coming to us from out of the past into the present and reaching to us from the future. Diversity can signify life.*<sup>34</sup>

Dr Lewis's analysis of justice as proclaimed by the prophets is as follows:

*Biblical justice, in distinction from a legal tit-for-tat retribution for wrongdoing is a saving activity of loving kindness, exposing evil for what it is and doing all that can be done to restore relationship.*<sup>35</sup>

And just what can be done to restore relationship? Listening seems to me to be the first step, a difficult one when we do not like what we hear, or find it uncomfortable, or offensive. Yet in the midst of such listening another word may also be heard. Dr Lewis in commenting on the unpopular words of the eighth century prophets wrote:

*They agonised with their own thoughts and listened instead/or another word breaking through the clamour of voices around them.*<sup>36</sup>

Such wisdom was not just written about by Dr Lewis, it was an integral part of his own way of living with diversity. I remember when we were students at the newly formed ecumenical theological college, combined on the St John's site, that it was a time of ferment and change, subversion and challenge. A small group of students had a vision of living in community and developing a radical alternative to the theological education currently on offer at the college. They were variously dismissed by faculty and other students as either 'crackpots' or 'shirkers'.

However, it has subsequently emerged through a lengthy correspondence, discovered by Susan Thompson in her research, that there was one person who took them seriously, who listened to their concerns, who patiently replied to their challenges, who earned their respect if not their support. Dr Lewis was open to dialogue and mutual understanding though there might be no agreement.

So many hurts and wounds have been sustained both within and outside the church and yet the call for dialogue, rather than attacks on the floor of Conference, has not been heeded. It is only as personal relationship begins to be established that enough trust can be built to share one's fears and convictions in an atmosphere of respect. It was a sign of hope when two meetings finally took place in the middle of this year, one in Christchurch and one in Auckland, across the gulfs of diversity represented in

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<sup>34</sup> *New Zealand Methodist, October 22, 1970 p. 7*

<sup>35</sup> *Across the Biblical Way, p.53*

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid. p.47*

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the current debate. But will these fragile beginnings be seen as a priority in our church's life - will they be nurtured and encouraged?

## **Decision-making**

Much confidence has been lost in our church with regard to the way in which decisions are being made. Some feel excluded, while others are bewildered by the rate of change in restructuring and renaming the different areas of the church's life and work. Some feel empowered by consensus decision-making while others sense even further marginalisation. Many are weary and filled with apprehension and gloom as another Conference approaches.

Dr Lewis reminds us that "Depressed thinking is never trustworthy."<sup>37</sup> Yet again he points us toward the priority of theological insight in facing these issues. He senses that "bureaucratic interests" have taken over which dictate the life of the church rather than its life being driven by the faith and worship of local congregations:

*The assumption behind much that is said is that Mission represents the whole life of Methodism in Aotearoa/New Zealand. The Statement of that Mission has become an entrenched document/dogma that is set in concrete. It sets up a new legalism which reverses what lies at the heart of the experience of the living Church. We have always held that faith precedes and determines order, giving it its true character in terms of relationships.*<sup>38</sup>

Again in a response to a document entitled *The Regional Church*, he suspects that "the motivation behind it is less theological than ideological, sectarian rather than ecumenical."<sup>39</sup> His counsel when trying to make decisions on the sensitive issue of gay leadership within the church is as follows:

*Had I been asked, I would have made reference to the double-sidedness of the pastoral problem facing us, injustice to the homosexual on the one hand and the great difficulty within congregations, conditioned over centuries to think in another way, of coping with quite new situations and interpretations. It takes time for this to happen.*<sup>40</sup>

Further he comments:

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<sup>37</sup> *Koru and Covenant*, p.83 and cf. *Across the Biblical Way*, p.78

<sup>38</sup> Unpublished letter, 29 December 1995. Kinder Library, St John's College, Auckland

<sup>39</sup> Unpublished response to *The Regional Church*. Kinder Library, St John's College, Auckland

<sup>40</sup> Unpublished response to *Homosexuality, A Christian Viewpoint*. Kinder Library. St John's College Auckland

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*A test of decision is whether it helps towards the building up. not of the institution, hut of the Body of Christ, the believing community.*<sup>41</sup>

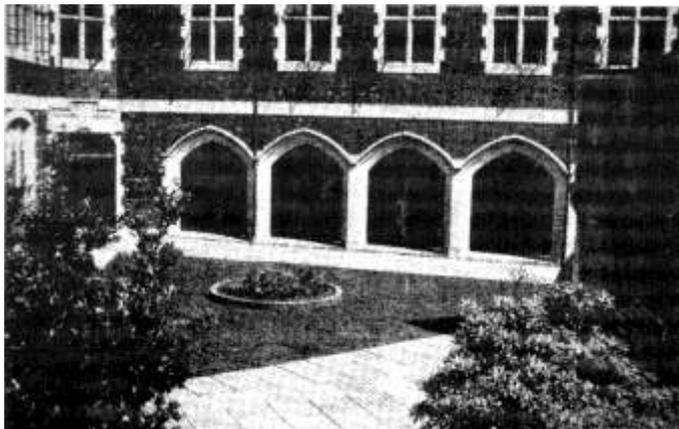
It seems crucial that we recover the theological base for the ordering of our life, that we find more participatory ways of making decisions which are fully owned by congregations and members of Conference alike, and that we allow time for all this to happen respectfully and gracefully.

**Conclusion**

In January 1998 Dr Lewis was of the opinion that "the Church faces a crisis of confidence. There is a hunger for assurance and direction."<sup>42</sup> As his reflections on the Exile demonstrate, times of crisis can be opportunities for discernment and change:

*In the biblical view no area of human existence stands outside the concern and claim of God, hut sometimes, in troubled days, it took the sharpest controversy to bring out the real issues. Whenever in the crisis something of the truth is glimpsed, as the Hebrew prophets so often demonstrated, the impulse to declare it just will not he denied.*<sup>43</sup>

A critical need at this time, then, is to rediscover the theological roots of our faith in God and to move directly from theology to find our direction and vision, our way forward in the midst of diversity, and an accepted way of making decisions. Pragmatism and the changing fashions of ideology simply will not do. We have a rich heritage which has been clearly and perceptively expressed in our own context by such as Dr Lewis. Let s reclaim it'.



Quadrangle, Trinity College      Photo: *The Trinity College Story*

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<sup>41</sup> **Ibid.**

<sup>42</sup> **Unpublished paper *Some Personal Reflections*. Kinder Library, St John's College Auckland**

<sup>43</sup> ***Across the Biblical Way*, p.46**

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**ADDITIONAL PUBLICATIONS**

Titles further to those listed in Notes to the Lectures are held in the Kinder Library. St John's College. Auckland as follows:

*Faith and Toil: The Story of Tokomairiro* (D.I Sumpter and JJ Lewis): Otago Centennial Historical Publications 1949.

*The Bible as the Revelation of God's Nature and Purpose* (JJ Lewis): New Zealand Student Christian Movement 1953. Pamphlet.

*Methodists and the Church of England: Lecture on Proverbs* (KN Booth and JJ Lewis) 1970s. Cassette.

*What is Pastoral theology? Training/or Christian Ministry* (M Wilson, D Cole. JJ Lewis. D Stewart and R Thompson) : St John's College, Auckland 1977. Cassette.

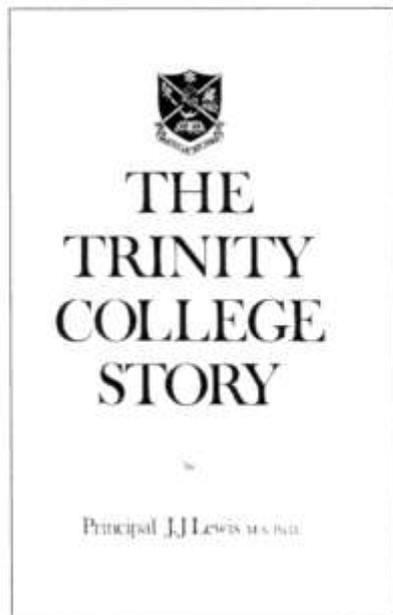
*Religious Studies in the Pacific* (J Hinchcliff and JJ Lewis, ed. and K Tiwari): Auckland. Colloquium Publishers. 1978

*Journal 84: Wesley Historical Society (NZ) Proceeding No. 44.* 1984. Response to criticism of Faith and Order.

*Old Testament* (JJ Lewis): College Communications. Auckland 1980s. Cassette.

*Homosexuality - A Christian Perspective: Lectures given in St Luke's Presbyterian Church.* Auckland. March 1991 (J Lewis). Colcom Press, Red Beach. NZ 1991. Pamphlet.

*Windows on Unity* (C Morrison, ed.): Wellington Negotiating Churches Unity Council 1992.



# ON THE FRONTIERS OF FAITH

**Address delivered to the annual Conference, Wesley Church,  
Wellington, Saturday evening, 8th. November, 1969, by the  
President, Rev. Dr J J Lewis**

## **Editor's Note:**

*Let the last word come from John Lewis himself. He delivered this address, as President, to the 1969 Methodist Conference, before inclusive language became the norm. Its flowing sentences defy any attempt to convert the all-embracing male terms to inclusive without destroying their impact. So here it stands unchanged, to be I trust at once his statement of faith and his memorial.*

In explosive times, more rapidly than suits our comfort, we are thrust out into the unknown. The familiar recedes and in our orbiting there is no choice but to deal with the new as it finds us. But there is an exhilaration in living in frontier conditions: a catch of the breath, a touch of fear, always of sense struggling for words of ongoing and creative purpose. In such a period, the full circle of truth is not given to us to see. The closed system is by its very nature false. Even the contours become difficult to detect. But, with all that has gone before, with all that our fathers have kept in trust for us, with all the resources the living God makes available to the human spirit, we are equipped at least to recognise certain in-built conditions and limits and to glimpse some of the possibilities of advance. For Tillich, the theologian, life itself is poised always on the boundaries that exist between different dimensions of truth. For Eliot, the poet, across these boundaries, "between the idea and the reality, Between the motion and the act. Falls the Shadow" - the shadow caused by the brightness of transcendence. It has always belonged to the People of God to be nomads, the pilgrim people, striving to emerge from brokenness into wholeness, from captivity into the freedom of maturity. We do well to believe that this is just such a moment in history when once again the People of God is being called to break camp and to move out:

## **1. On the Boundary of Faith:**

In a rapidly changing world the only positive and healthy attitude to adopt is that of faith. Faith, indeed, is the very life of the People of God but let us remember that it is the kind of faith that "gives substance to our hopes, and makes us certain of realities we do not see." Not wishful thinking, nor a device for speaking about ourselves, it is essentially a response in which men of every generation have shared. Not from some cosmic platform upstairs but within the texture of everyday experience, man is confronted by this sense of Otherness, exciting curiosity and awakening faith. It happens in the midst of a concern which cries: "Let my people go!" - and a Luther King, calling his people to destiny, just before his death says: "I have seen the vision!" Sometimes, in the extremity of a man's thinking, there is suddenly a beckoning promise, surprising him into insight and action-and a novelist puts into the mouth of a

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twentieth century Communist, who has discovered meaning in the way of love and who through it has come to sense something of the larger hinterland of the spirit and finds he cannot avoid using the language of the personal: "Thou is his name to which 'God' may be added. For T and 'me' are no more than a pause between the immensity of the universe which is Him and the very depth of ourself which is also Him ... I could have said nothing of what I knew or felt or did except the word 'Yes'." It happens when we see a Man for others pouring out his life into the life of the world and we find ourselves looking into the face of God. It all begins in worship and in the faith which says "Yes" to the mystery of the grace, not of a God but of God. We begin today with man, but man confronted in the very depths of being by the living God. Without this there can be no exodus from present captivities, nor any People of God to bring substance to our dreams.

Only with such a faith as this, rooted in history and open to the future, only in the energies of the realm of grace which reach us at every level of our existence can we handle the changing situation on that thin boundary line between the known and the as yet unclaimed. "May you live in interesting times" was a Chinese curse. Ours is a new and exciting world. No longer do men need to cry for the moon. Science, following its own laws and daring in its faith, has taken a giant leap into the future. Theology must take into its purview this vast expansion of knowledge and experience, even with the possibility of the existence somewhere of other forms of sentient life, in the conviction that God gave us that explosion of new life because He so loved the cosmos. We cannot wonder if older formulations of cherished convictions should come under challenge, if sometimes the old wineskins should prove too inflexible to hold the vitality of new insight, if a Jeremiah should feel called to pull down before he can build up, to make accessible a greater reality. We should welcome rather than fear theological ferment when it arises from integrity of mind responding to the probing of truth. Franz Overbeck has said that "the only possible new basis for theology is audacity", daring to speak of God in human terms, a task that can never be complete, that will always have the character of tentative experiment. But let it also be said that, with all they have done to affirm the world and the sheer goodness of life, and to point to the true humanity and the truly natural as a satisfying meaning for life, the new secular theologies have not replaced the living symbols of Advent and Easter whose inner historical realities for many speak more powerfully to faith than ever before. Only such a faith as this, grounded in experience, able however haltingly to offer its reasons, not at the mercy of the latest book or fashion, only such a faith which "holds to Christ" can be resilient and adaptable enough to meet the needs of a new day and "for the rest be totally uncommitted."

We do not enjoy the process. It is more comfortable to stay where we are. But, if the pattern prayer Jesus taught us is a prayer for the pilgrim people, hallowing the Name, seeking the Kingdom, recognising the need for forgiveness to be as real as the need for daily manna, then that enigmatic petition, "Bring us not to the test" could also come out of the Wilderness experience where, in asking for a visible sign, it was not

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the people but God who was put to the test. Let us not come to that point where we grind to a halt, ask for signs, look for some kind of instant religion by which to manipulate God, but let us go on in the obedience of faith. This means that we must step out on to:

## **II. The Boundary between what is and what we are called to be, the Boundary of Renewal:**

The Church, as the People of God, is always a becoming. It cannot contract out of a necessity for giving shape to its life. To allow freedom for some to explore new ways, others must continue to provide the essential context by establishing the base, the launching pad, yes the institution. While there must always be this incarnational aspect, it is not possible, however, to draw a line around the Church. It is not an entity in itself so much as the action of God through faithful men and women in the world. When the Joint Commission's statement, "The Faith We Affirm Together" was being prepared, it was so easy to repeat the traditional description of the Church as One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic, until it became all too clear that at no point has the Church really arrived at the fullness of God's intention. Indeed the questions disturbing every section of the Church today, hesitations regarding the nature of ministry and of evangelism, all this surely is a sign that God is saying something of life and death importance if only we can have the ears to hear. In such a time of moral and spiritual earthquake, the writer to the Hebrews found in this the surest sign that God is alive, the very author of change, shaking heaven and earth, "that what cannot be shaken may remain." It is God who makes all things new, bringing out of the old such a release of light and insight that they come to us as fresh as the new day. It was always salutary for the Hebrew to remember his origins in slavery as it is for the modern Methodist reading Smollett's *Humphrey Clinker* to see his spiritual forbears on the lunatic fringe. Those who were once "no people", who might with the black American take the symbol X for an unknown family name, nobodies, are by grace gathered into a family that is called to be catholic, with room enough for all temperaments, for all shades of opinion conservative and liberal, for the many who with integrity cannot accept the full statement of the Christian Faith but who wish to share its enterprise, and for all the races of men black, brown, yellow, white, with freedom for all to be and to become themselves. Called also to be apostolic, it is launched on a world mission to fill its life with the fullness of the good news. For such a purpose, as wide and as long as history, the People of God must constantly be renewed. Part of the meaning of renewal for today is the call to be one family to mediate in the recovery of unity the very life of God to men.

In our day we are being given an opportunity so rare in history to move decisively forward into the larger fellowship of true community. Not out of expediency, not to save money, although there is a stewardship involved and in the face of world need we must justify all that we spend in the name of the Church, not as a device for professional survival, not huddling together for warmth to keep out the chill winds of

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an alien world, but rather as an act of willing obedience to the vision of the One in whom all things cohere, we are being invited to bring our life into the larger fellowship of the Church of Christ in New Zealand. This is not for the sake of the Church but of the world, since, as Karl Rahner puts it, the Church is called to be "the visible sign of the salvation of the whole world." As the Uppsala Report reminds us, the context of reunion is the unity of mankind, and the ground of both is the love of God. The Plan for the organic union of five Churches, the product of the most thorough research and patient listening, offering a fullness of life not possible in our divisions, this Plan is one more indication that God does not despair of men. Obligation is laid on every one of us to study the Plan, suggest ways of improvement, and at the same time to maintain the unity we already enjoy.

But redemptive time is always short and the world itself is waiting for our answer. Even this act of reconciliation would be just one step along the road of total renewal. Those who met with Roman Catholic representatives to discuss together the Christian faith, earlier this year, were not too surprised at the claim of one Catholic participant that this was "the most important event in the history of Christianity in New Zealand." This reconciling mission must go on until all the People of God and all the world are gathered into the fullness of the City of God. This means that the Church is always under reformation and that the People of God must always live:

### **III. On the Boundary of Redemption:**

Redemption is a metaphor for winning back to the purposes inherent in the very nature of things that which somehow has lost its way. This boundary exists as long as there are areas in our life in captivity. This is not simply a dividing line between the Church and the world, the saved community and the great massa damnata, the sacred and the secular. Part of the tragedy of our broken world is that we have set up false boundaries and pride allied to self interest has fragmented world community into black and white, age and youth, rich and desperately poor. In so far as there are attitudes of self assertion with a cynical disregard of the welfare of others, this line of redemption must run through our own life and through the Church, as it must do through the structures of society. For all the excitement of scientific achievement, Biafra, the Gulf of Aqaba, Northern Ireland remind us of a deep sickness in human affairs. Every creation is marred by a subsequent fall. As M M Thomas has it, with the amazing development of communications, it has never been so easy to spread the lies, the distortions and the enmities that issue in the breakdown of communication. The empires of human pride, which are just one step away from the sea of chaos, are depicted in the Book of Daniel as monsters. It is on this boundary that we hear the real cry of man for meaning, for a ground of faith, for an answer to death, for the right to live, for the dignity of the person, and for hope. It is here that we face the appalling mystery of evil. There is, however, an "optimism of grace." "The task of Christian optimism", writes Leslie Paul, "is to place the tragic reading of history within that all-pervading love which says that nothing human is beyond redemption."

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There are times when the good news in Jesus Christ concentrates on a single issue, race, hunger, the misuse of technology. We grow tired of the statistics of hunger until we see it destroy our children. We are bored by this talk of war until we see our possessions vanish and a fellow villager bum to death with napalm. We grow weary of interminable protests until for a moment imagination helps us to enter the situation of just one student, sensitive to the point of agony, appalled at the thought of tanks rolling through Wenceslas Square, and at the structures of his own competitive society into which somehow he must try to fit himself. Since love is commitment to all lives within reach, we cannot withdraw from responsibility towards this vast neighbourhood of anxiety and need. We begin with the evangelical approach to the individual and then come to see that there can be no growth into maturity without the community of the Church. But we have failed to understand the nature of the Church, unless we come to see that the purpose of the Church is to die for the world to find life. Lest we think that, in such responsibility as we do accept, we are somehow better than others, let us remember the present movement to crush growing violence in the community with repression and the birch, and the claim made earlier in the year that we are spending too much on the sick and the maimed who contribute nothing to the economy - the disabled who remind us of courage, the blind who help us to see! If in New Zealand we have not been hit by Black Power or Student Power, if Neville Shute could not write a novel here because he could find no sense of conflict or of commitment to a great cause, across the world young people have given their lives in their protest. When asked why they stir up such trouble, they answer in amazement, "The trouble is already there, in the corrosion of human values, in a world in flames about us!" The word of a Cabinet Minister to the Church to stay out of politics is really a call to vote for the status quo. Amos said it long ago that the breakdown of community is a sign of inner decay. The letter of James has a strange relevance when paraphrased, "Show me your works and I shall know your faith. Show me your attitude to race, to hunger, to wealth and I shall know whether you are Christian." We have the means today to meet the needs of expanding populations. If we were willing, atomic energy turned to peaceful uses could banish hunger. The world would not fail to look and listen if New Zealand, with her love of sport, chose on grounds of principle not to compete in situations of racial discrimination, nor to permit the presence of her sporting teams to be used for political purposes. The underprivileged black majority of Rhodesia and the Nelson Mandelas in their island prison would know the lift of spirit that sees signs of hope amongst men. The call for renewal, the quest for authentic unity, and the cry for justice heard so strongly at Uppsala belong together since, as Tillich has stated it, creative justice is the form of reuniting love. This can only mean that in a new day:

### **IV. Life on the Boundary Situation calls for new Ways of Serving:**

The direction of the People of God today is outward, relating to people as they are and identifying with them where they are. A New Zealand poet, in Christian conviction, gives up his life to Auckland drop-outs and drug addicts to help them find themselves

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again. Community centred, this approach is positive rather than negative, of dialogue rather than monologue. It does not escape from the world but, as for de Chardin, meets God as it plunges into the world. It does not seek to carry Christ to others but discovers him already at work in those we seek to serve. It does not claim to have the answers. Job long ago discovered that for many issues there are no ready-made solutions, press button A and there they are! The People of God is called to be the salt of life, not only a preservative but also at times an irritant, raising the questions the world itself must face for health and peace, whether technological advance allows room for human values, where the priorities are, in space exploration for political purposes, or in the fight against the poverty at our door, whether we contest the election on the issue of a rising standard of living or of the responsible stewardship of the good things of this world we have in abundance. Not only to raise the issues the Church is called to share the world's agony of decision making. How can we know the burden of the scientist handling the deadly culture of bacteria or the anxiety of the surgeon who must decide, in the limitations of his equipment, who will live and who must die, except by seeking to share the vulnerability of decision. All this complex interplay of faith, belief and action adds up to a way of serving and a style of life that speak to men of God in Christ living for the World.

But what kind of service is this? Not serfdom nor a subtle means of establishing obligation, not a mere pragmatism but rather a total response to the love of God of worship and action, the royal way of One who, finding his life in God, took up the towel and basin to wash the tired feet of men. This is a major meaning of ministry in which, in Christ, every Christian shares. Through the years, as a focus of our calling, he has given us special ministries, that basic ministry of service preserved for us in the order of the Diaconate and its extension, the Ministry of Word and Sacraments and Pastoral Care. No purpose is served in reducing this ministry from its high calling to communicate the biblical insights, to proclaim the living Word, to offer the means of grace, to care for men, but the Faith and Order Committee this year is asking us to consider more adventurous and flexible concepts of ministry, breaking through older patterns. This is a question for the whole Church to study, lay and ordained together. In the universal need of men for forgiveness, assurance, meaning and direction, the urgency is not for fewer resource people with the mark of Christ's Church upon them but more, and then still more: especially those with probing minds, a concern for people, and a loyalty to Jesus Christ.

Life on the boundary situations has its dangers. "Father, save me from this hour!" we sometimes pray but the word keeps returning, "This is why you are here!" Sometimes we would prefer to be deep-frozen to be thawed out when others have found the answers. We substitute emotion or the aesthetic for action, seeking an instant mysticism, or we rush out into unthinking activity. We offer what the world wants to hear until we see that its agenda is to be the context for the questions God is asking. For the pilgrimage of the People of God there must be a moving altar. At the heart of any true national development there must be concern for the greatest possession of all,

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the development of the personal in the purpose of God. But whatever course beckons us, let us claim no more than we are prepared to match in action. If we had less to say in place of action, men might more clearly hear the word of God and receive it as good news.

We are all of us involved but it is to young people, who mature so much more quickly today, who are capable of voting at eighteen, it is to them especially that the call comes to throw into the pool for the welfare of the Church in its mission in the World their resources of talent, time, energy, and money, that extension of personality and consolidation of life, and to take up that journey into the new world of promise. If it takes one generation to break the ties with an old captivity, it is for the next to discover the meaning and responsibility of freedom. James Cook, 200 years ago, confessed to an ambition "not only to go farther than any man had ever been before, but as far as it was possible for man to go." He reached this land, the spot where the sun first rises on the inhabited world. New Zealand, under God, could be, as Stuart Jackman once put it, the Country of the Dawn, the land of Easter Day.

For the unpredictable, dangerous yet fascinating possibilities of the secular Seventies who is sufficient? We come back to where we began, for the People of God is called to live:

### **V. On the Boundary between the Ages:**

It is called to share in something that has already happened to this planet. As T W Manson has it, it is not a matter of transferring all attainment to some nebulous goal of the far future but rather of participating in an event, the coming into the very processes of history of One who holds in his hands the past and the future and who meets us here and now - eternally Now. "How can you be so calm?" asked Arthur Koestler of a priest sharing the same cell in a Spanish gaol. The Communist believes in the present moment because he is creating it. History is breathing down his neck. "In Christ," replied the priest, "we can afford to wait". For the Now is already here in One who by his self giving love and obedience to the point of death has become Lord. He has won the right to command. It is at this point where we discover our true humanity in response to him, where we learn to stand upon our feet that he may speak to us, that we find also that dependence and independence are exactly the same. It is here that we taste the good word of God and begin to live "by the powers of the age to come."

The evangelical invitation is still the same: Take a look at Jesus Christ - but then go on out with him into life. In more confident days we used to say, "The best of all is God is with us", but in these challenging days we might prefer to say, "The best of all is God is alive and, through His people and through His creation, offering Himself for the life of the world."

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or conceive, by the power which is at work among us, to him be glory in the Church and in Christ Jesus from generation to generation evermore. *Amen.*



John and Grace 1990s

*Photo: Family Album*