

Megan McKenna – A Call to Faith in Action
Ellen Teague

“If your religion doesn’t make you more compassionate, truthful and just, and stop you thinking only about yourself, then it is no religion at all.” These blunt words from American Catholic theologian Megan McKenna were spoken in November 2010 at the launch of a new UK-based Catholic Social Teaching website at Heythrop College in London.

Her dramatic presentation and engaging story-telling about the importance of Catholic Social Teaching, along with her passion for justice and peace action, captivated the audience. Immediately afterwards, one of them - Anne Peacey, Chair of the National Justice and Peace Network (NJPN) – approached her about speaking at one of NJPN’s annual conferences. It has taken three years, but this July she is indeed returning to Britain to be keynote speaker at the 2013 conference in Derbyshire, titled ‘Breaking Open the Word – a call to faith in action’. I, for one, won’t be missing the opportunity to hear this inspirational woman again.

Megan wears a lot of hats - author, lecturer, story teller, retreat leader being among them. Originally from New York City, she now lives in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Outside the United States, she has visited and taught in Europe, South America, Asia, and clearly has a special interest in islands - Celtic, Japanese, Philippines, Singapore, Haiti, Hawaiian Islands, Malaysia, and Marshall Islands. This has given her an international outlook and knowledge of indigenous peoples. She relishes working with Church groups and has engaged with hundreds of base Christian communities and justice and peace groups, as well a good number of parishes, dioceses and religious communities in many countries. She has been on the United States National Board of Pax Christi and in 2002 was appointed an Ambassador of Peace for Pax Christi.

Her focus on the Justice and Peace mission of the Church and faithfulness to Vatican II’s opening up of the Church to the world, is clear in her latest and fiftieth – yes fiftieth! - book, ‘Like a Hammer Shattering Rock’. It goes back to basics with the four Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. She examines what they meant at the time they were written and what they mean for the Church and society today. She feels modern audiences have become so familiar with the Gospels that we’ve stopped listening and integrating their wisdom into our everyday lives. In her view, they are a call to action on behalf of the poor and marginalised, and she suggests the Church has too often looked past their radical purpose and inserted lukewarm theology in its place.

The radical teaching of Jesus on peacemaking receives attention in her book ‘On Your Mark: Reading Mark in the Shadow of the Cross’. She highlights that Mark’s gospel was written in the midst of persecution and Roman occupation, and the fledging community had the imperative from Jesus of going against mainstream values and practice. “The religion of Jesus means loving one another as God has loved us in Jesus”, she says, “expressing that love in universal justice for all, and replacing violence and evil with the truth and goodness”. She points out that in the early Church no soldier could be baptised until they had left their profession, but this practice broke down after Constantine made Christianity the religion of the Empire. Megan argues that no baptised believer should see taking up arms and killing as compatible with their faith. She feels ignorance of the Gospels is the root cause of contemporary tolerance by Christians of war and militarism. Involvement with Pax Christi, the international Catholic peace organisation, has long been part of her life.

For her, worshipping God includes, “what we do with our lives, our time, our money, our priorities, our excess and our resources every day of our lives”. Megan points to the connection between the Eucharist and the contemporary issues of hunger and poverty. “It is a mockery of the Eucharist to eat at the table in church and to exclude or ignore and not be shamed by those who go hungry, without water and the basic necessities of life” she says.

Megan feels that children globally are probably the most endangered species on the planet today because of what human society has done to water sources, air, food chains, the atmosphere, and the sheer waste of the resources of the planet, along with the build-up of nuclear materials, waste products, and nuclear weapons. “We live in a bizarre time when we seem to be obsessed with anyone who hurts a child sexually, physically, violently, individually, but don't care much for the billions of children who slowly starve to death; who never know childhood because of slave labour; who never know freedom from fear, bombings, child trafficking; and who die of diseases that could be easily obliterated for a tiny fraction of what we spend on killing one another and strangers around the globe”.

Megan would like her own United States government to redirect its military budget to conserve water, air, land, and other natural resources. “We should make sure that everyone has the basic necessities of life” she says “and we must undo the harm that we have done through global warming, destruction of the earth, seas and watercourses, and make sure there is an Earth that can support all life”. She describes being inspired by “art, literature, music, dance, culture, language, religious traditions, geographies, expressions of life, everything that grows and moves, and how it survives along with people, and sometimes often in spite of them”.

When asked about who she sees as models of Christian discipleship today, she suggests, “the first and largest group are just folks, ordinary people, many of them poor, struggling to make ends meet, struggling alone or with handfuls of other folks to live decently, to live truthfully, to live humanly in spite of what others with power, money, resources, might, and self-righteousness do to make life so hard”. She feels honoured that they listen to her and she shares their stories with others. Such communities “give me hope and teach me what it means to be holy and to incarnate the Word as Christians in today's world”. She greatly respects missionaries who have been in cross-cultural mission for decades, “teaching me of other cultures, languages, heritages, knowledge of food, and ways of doing restorative and reconciling justice”. Nonagenarian Canadian bishop Remi J. De Roo, one of the few surviving bishops who took part on the Second Vatican Council, says, “Megan McKenna has used her gifts of insight to help us take a fresh look at the role of the Gospels in contemporary church life”. In his view, “ours are times of great upheaval and we are called to revisit the very foundations of our faith as we scrutinise the signs of the times”.

Megan has a profound sensitivity to the world's problems, but a heightened awareness that “God so loved the world, and, more and more, I can see why”. She struck me three years ago as a breath of fresh air in the Church. She is just the tonic for our battered and under-valued Justice and Peace movement in England and Wales that will be gathering in their hundreds in Derbyshire during July! But let me give the final word to Megan: “The people of God, the world that God so loves, and the Word of God shared together make up the trinity that gives me hope and for that I am so grateful”.

Megan McKenna is keynote speaker at the 2013 National Justice & Peace Network (NJPN) conference 19-21 July, titled 'Breaking Open the Word – a call to faith in action'. It is organised in conjunction with Hallam Justice & Peace Commission. Ellen Teague, of Columban Justice and Peace, is running one of 14 workshops.
www.justice-and-peace.org.uk or call 020 7901 4864