The drawing, Christ of the Breadlines, by Fritz Eichenberg (1953) probably says all that this book wants to say about being church. The church is a space in this world where heaven and earth reach out to each other. It is a space in the world, but not of the world, as it is touched by heaven. Christ is in the breadline, yet one can recognise Him as He stands out in the breadline. One can recognise him, because of the hallow that surrounds him. He is the incarnation within reality and through the incarnation the place within reality becomes holy, not sacred as in separated, but sanctified as differentiated offering an alternative within reality. He brings a space that is marked, not by the darkness and the vicious cycles of the world which dominate and enslave creation, such as poverty, but a space that breaks into this darkness with light as it is hallowed in hope. What more can the church hope for than to be allowed to be a space of hallowed hope in the vicious systems of death in a postmodern and post-Christian world?

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In the journey of trying to be a church in the world but not of the world it has become clear that there are very few foundations to rely on. All that one has are the four soli: by faith, grace, Christ and Scripture alone. These four translate into what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13, “all that remains are faith, love and hope and the greatest of these is love.”

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Johann-Albrecht Meylahn worked for numerous years in the inner city of Tshwane in a multi-cultural congregation. Currently he is associate professor in the Department of Practical Theology at the University of Pretoria and his teaching and research focus is congregational studies and pastoral care. Johann is married to Ronél and they have a son.
Church Emerging
from the cracks

A church IN, but not OF the world

Johann-Albrecht Meylahn
Church emerging from the cracks:
a church in, but not of the world

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WHAT ON EARTH IS GOING ON?

Chapter 1

Why start with the earth (world)? Should theology not start with God or at least the Bible? In the past it was obvious that the only possible point of departure can be Scripture and the theological tradition, starting with the theory of the church – an ecclesiology that is based on Scripture and a theological tradition – and then seek ways to apply this theory to praxis in the world. Yet, there are other voices who immediately say: we HAVE to start with the context, because that is where we are called to be. We must start with the context and then move to theology which means that one should interpret tradition and Scripture from the point of view of the context.

These two differing views have been a bone of contention for years between practical theologians from various schools arguing about the best point of departure for doing practical theology. Should one start with theory (Scripture and tradition) or should one start with the context and praxis?

This book would like to propose that it does not really matter where you start because theology is circular or spiral, and therefore there is no starting point as the two continually influences each other, or one could even say the one interprets the other. So for this book the best place to start is with where we are now – the now of experience as this now of experience includes both theory and praxis. Don Browning (1991:6) calls this ‘now of experience’ theory-laden praxis. He argues that you cannot separate theory from praxis, because our praxis (the way we interpret our experience and the way we give words to our experience) is determined by the tradition, the knowledge, the language and thus the theory that we have and that has shaped us so as to ‘give words’ [meaning or interpretation] to our experience. There is no such thing as experience pure and simple, as experience is always interpreted-experience and the interpretation is done through the theory that has shaped and formed us. Thus, in this book we work with ‘theory-laden practice’.
What does all this mean? Maybe it will become clearer if we put this ‘theory’ to practice. Let us start by asking the first question: How would you describe the world?

Well, that depends on who is being asked and when in this person’s life he/she is being asked this question. If this question is posed to somebody who has just got a promotion and a pay rise, the answer will probably be a positive appraisal of the world that we live in. If the question is asked to somebody who has just been retrenched and who is struggling to find a new job, the world will be an absolutely dismal place.

How an individual or a group sees the world depends on so many different things. It depends on their current life situation (what is happening in their life at the moment). It depends on their context, for example somebody living in a luxury apartment in New York will experience and see the world differently to somebody living in an informal settlement in Nairobi. Our current experience, our emotional state, our socio-economic status, our political orientation and our religious views, amongst others, all have an influence on how we experience and interpret and thus describe the world.

As you are holding these pages in your hand, I can presuppose that you are interested in the church and the reason why you are interested in the church is because you are Christian, and thus this will influence the way you look at the world. Our faith influences how we experience things in the world, our faith influences how we interpret events in our personal lives, but also in the greater context in which we live and thus our faith will influence how we experience the world. Yet, all Christians will not see the world in the same way. Let us try and imagine how some Christians might view the world (without being judgemental or generalising about their views):

✦ Some will say that the world is completely corrupted by the devil and in need of salvation and thus the world needs to be saved.

✦ Others will say that the world is totally evil and bad, and therefore Christians should focus all their energy on heaven thereby freeing themselves from the evil of the world.

✦ Others will say that the world is full of God’s presence and thus it is filled with beauty and good things.

And so every Christian will probably have his/her own opinion about the state of the world.

It becomes clear from the above that there is no single truth about the state of the world, because it depends on who you ask and not only who, but also when you ask that person. A person might have a completely different view of the world on Monday than say on a Friday of a long weekend.
What does this mean? It means that our knowledge of the world (the way we see the world) is not just a matter of adding up everything that is neutrally and objectively present in the world and once you have added everything up you have the complete view of the world which is known as ontology (the study of what is/being), but everything depends on the person or group of persons looking and interpreting what they experience. What they experience is not neutral and objective, but is dependent on who they are, where they come from and where they are in their lives at the moment, and this is known as hermeneutics (the study of the theory and practice of interpretation).

How we understand or describe the world has everything to do with hermeneutics and no longer with objective ontology because what is, is dependent on who is looking. In other words, it is not about the way things are, but it is about the way we see and interpret the things that ‘are’ (hermeneutics).

Hermeneutics is the way we interpret things such as the world. It is the theory of interpretation, or a better description would be: it is the art of interpretation. This means that things have radically changed in the way we know things. In the past (classical modern view) there was a neutral objective subject (scientist) studying the world and gathering objective facts about this world which are universally true (cf Figure 1.1). These facts would then lead to 'true' belief about the world which would in turn influence 'correct' human behaviour and practices (cf Figure 1.1).

Figure 1.1: The hermeneutical turn.
Then came the hermeneutical turn where it was no longer about neutral impartial subjects studying objective objects to gain universal truths which would lead to true knowledge of the world so as to make correct action and practice possible, but about very subjective subjects interpreting objects from their point of view. Thus the so-called facts (knowledge) were already determined by the belief and behaviour (theory-laden practice) of the subject doing the interpretations (cf Figure 1.1).

It is clear from the above that who we are and where we are (both place and time) will influence the way we see the world and things in the world.

Have you ever tried reading a book and it just did not speak to you and then months or years later you pick up the same book once more and now it profoundly speaks to you? Who you are and where you are (both the place and the time in your life) play a vitally important role in how you see and read things. Hermeneutics, in the tradition of Hans-Georg Gadamer, tries to make sense of exactly this phenomena – who and where (both place and time) influences and in a sense determines how we read and see the world. Gadamer (1989:276-277) speaks of the prejudice of the subject who looks at the world and that this prejudice, far more than his/her judgements, constitute who he/she is. The reason that you are reading these pages, already determines to an extent how you will look at the world, because you are looking at the world from a specific horizon (tradition), namely the Christian tradition and from the perspective of the church. This perspective is further influenced by the belief that the church has got some kind of role to play in the world and that will certainly influence the way we look at the world in which this role is to be played.

I believe that the world has something to do with the Trinitarian story of God that can be summarised as follows:

- God created the earth.
- The created earth fell, because of sin.
- The world could not save itself from this fall (vicious cycles of sin) and thus God lovingly sent His only Son to redeem the world through love and grace revealed through the cross.
- After the ascension God and the Son sent the Holy Spirit to inspire the church for the task ahead.

This story tells me the following:

- God loves the world; and
- God cares about the world as He hears the cry of the oppressed and suffering (Exodus) and he responds to that cry.
Church Emerging from the cracks

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