

The Christian Challenge in the Postmodern World

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We have this thing in the Anglican Church where no service is complete without one of these wretched little microphones, and we have the line at the beginning of the service where the bishop is struggling with the equipment and the congregation has a service sheet that they are expecting to follow through, and the bishop says, "There's something wrong with this microphone," and the congregation obediently responds, "And also with you." It could almost be a definition of postmodernity, actually, that, where something comes back at you revealing your own inadequacies.

It's very good to be with you and to have a chance to talk about this hugely important and relevant subject of the Christian challenge in the Postmodern World, which is my title this morning, or I'm not sure whether it's morning or afternoon, actually, because for me it's already evening in my body clock.

But anyway, I want to add another element to this title which has developed in my own hacking around of ideas since we initially put down some markers as to what I was going to be talking about — because I want to correlate *three* things today, and one of them is the Christian challenge, and the second is indeed the postmodern world, but the third one more particularly is the *world of new empire*, which we in the Western world are involved with.

And I say we in the Western world, because there is a strong sense in which we're all in this together. We may think of it as the *American* empire, but I don't actually want to look at it as an "us and them." We are all involved in what the Western world is doing. And these things track very very closely together. And actually they grow out of — my reflections on them grow out of — one particular passage which was drawn to me just a few weeks ago in an email from somebody I don't know (I get a lot of emails from people I don't know — if you want, there is a Web site, and it has a how-to-contact-us address, and it lands on my secretary's desk, and if she doesn't know what to do with it she passes it on to me), and this one said, it was actually talking about Tony Blair and the Iraq war and the then-forthcoming election a few weeks ago, and it said, "Why, when Pontius Pilate asked Jesus, 'What is truth,' why did Jesus make no response? Why did he remain silent? Is it because actually there is no such thing as absolute truth? Is it because truth is simply relative and is always subjective?"

And I was fascinated at this correspondent, who as I said I had no idea where he was coming from — this question came out of the blue. I was fascinated that he'd correlated Pilate's question about truth and the question about the war in Iraq, and whether Tony Blair had told the country the truth about whether there were weapons of mass destruction, whether there was a threat, etc., etc. Because actually in John Chapters 18 and 19, when Jesus is standing before Pontius Pilate, in that very detailed description of Jesus' hearing before the Roman governor, we have question after question and issue after issue which resonate exactly with these two themes — of postmodernity on the one hand, the question of what is truth, and with empire on the other, when Pilate is the representative of the greatest empire the world had at that stage ever known, the Roman

Empire, which proclaimed that it believed in freedom and justice and peace, and had a moral obligation to share this freedom and justice and peace with the rest of the world.

Now, without getting too obvious, we British believed in the 19th century that we had an empire based on freedom and justice and peace, and we had an *obligation* to share it with the rest of the world. And it's remarkable how few words there are in the imperial vocabulary, because that is of course how today's pan-Western empire still sees itself. So I want to look at these current issues, of postmodernity and empire, and then this big picture of God and the world, with Jesus in the middle of it, which we see in quintessential form in John, chapters 18 and 19, and various other biblical passages. And I want to reflect on where this takes us today, how we can take forward the Christian challenge in the world in which we live. I'm going to give so many hostages to fortune that it hurts just thinking about them, because I've only got 45 minutes or so, and there's no way I can dot all the i's and cross all the t's. There will be some time for question-and-answer at the end, but apologies if I seem to skate too quickly over issues which you know and I know are in fact much more complicated and need a lot more teasing out and footnoting.

So, first, some remarks about the postmodern world where we are, and particular in relation to the current state of global empire. And the basic claim that I'm going to make is that the postmodern climate in which we live not only cannot *critique* empire but actually *colludes* with it. You'll see the point of this in a minute — that's rather abstract; we'll get there. Just let me sort out one or two technical terms, as it were. By "empire," I'm talking broadly about the global economic and political reach of the Western superpowers, especially but not only America, because as we saw a year or two ago, America does want to have allies, and Britain at least has said, yes, we are in a very strong bond with you, which we saw particularly on 9-11, of course, when we had your national anthem played outside Buckingham Palace as a sign of solidarity.

And that goes very deep with many of us in Britain, that we really feel a bond. It's one of the reasons that Maggie and I love coming back to America. We feel at home here; we really want to be together with you, and that gives us a position, a rather uncomfortable position, where we can see things in your culture and ours and those which we share. But that's what I'm talking about — the global empire, particularly in its economic outreach, and what that does to the rest of the world. As for postmodernity itself, postmodernity is essentially a negative force, parasitic on modernity; and modernity was itself, is itself, because it's still going on, parasitic on an older Christian tradition, and indeed an older *Christendom*, a Christian and imperial combination.

Briefly, the modernist package, just to bring you up to speed, if it's rhetoric you're not terribly familiar with, the modernist package was a view of God, a view of the world, and a view of the *project* that we in the West were launched on, a view of God which was that God was a rather distant, detached deity. Modernism embraced that deism which saw God a long way off up in the sky somewhere, to be approached with reverent private prayer but to be largely irrelevant when it came to public policy. And I know you have an official separation of church and state; we in Britain have an official *joining* of church and state, but neither of those is anything like as simple as that summary makes out. And you actually have a lot more very high-octane civil religion than we do, despite the fact that we are in some kind of symbiosis, church and state.

So we have somehow to get used to modernism with this business of a distant and sometimes even an absentee God, and particularly, therefore, heaven and earth a long way apart, and not really correlated. God's in his heaven, and we have to look after the earth — that is how modernism conceived it. And as a result, the view of the world is

that everything comes into rather sharper focus. If you put God outside the picture, it's easier to get clear what you're going to say about the world. And what we say about *myself* is that I am the master of my fate — this is within modernism, remember — I am the captain of my soul. What we say about the world is that we get to know objective truthful facts about the world (somebody said facts, like telescopes, and wigs for gentlemen, were an invention of the 18th century). And the idea that we could simply know things objectively without being involved with that knowledge ourselves, and hence modernity told famously the story of progress, of things getting better and better, and of our learning by science and technology to *master* the world — quite an important word, that. The world has reached its new climax in the 18th century in Western Europe and North America, and we have a responsibility to implement this achievement of all our modern science and study and new knowledge, and the way we implement it is through empire. Empire, not only as a possibility, but as an *obligation*, and so you see the imperial expansion of the European countries in the late 18th, and then gloriously and vastly around the world in the 19th, century, with Britain leading the way and painting half the world pink or red or whatever color you were going to make British on your map. This was how it was that we had arrived at a new version of civilization and had not just the chance but the *obligation* to share that with the rest of the world.

One of the driving forces here was the philosophy of Malthus, a pre-Darwinian Darwinian, actually, believing in something pretty much like the survival of the fittest. Western Europe had shown itself to be fittest; therefore, it had to go out and do business in the rest of the world. Colonial expansion — a new theory of the state — in which we now had new ways of choosing leaders: universal suffrage (well, it took a while to come but we got there). And in America, in Britain, in France, in many countries, there was this passionate belief that once we got everybody involved in the democratic process we would achieve utopia. One of the problems in the world at the moment, if I can radically oversimplify, is that the French really believed that if they got universal suffrage they would create utopia. Now they've had it for a long time and the utopia hasn't arrived, and they're very puzzled and cross; whereas in America you believed that if you had universal suffrage it would create utopia, and now it has and you're very pleased. And actually part of the problem is that both France and America believed that they in the late 18th century could draw up a constitution based on the enlightenment which would produce the ideal society, and it's why you guys — France and America — really can't get it together, because you're both trying to play Father Christmas at the same party, and there can only be one of those.

The Achilles' heal of modernity is the actuality of evil. And the real problem to which modernity was supposed to be the answer was the perceived problem of evil after particularly the Lisbon earthquake, interestingly, in 1755. But the project of modernity was a way of saying, well, nasty things may happen but we're basically going to organize the world within an inch of its little life, and as a result we will actually banish evil from the face of the earth. Isn't it amazing our politicians still talk about that, as though that is the agenda: We're going to make these moves and change this tax law and that housing condition and do this in Africa and this in Asia, and then we'll basically have got this evil thing sussed.

And then along comes 9-11 and we're right back to the beginning. And this is what I'm going to be talking about, God willing, tomorrow night. Because then having lived the modernist dream, when radical evil happens, you don't know what to do about it. So we have the bizarre picture of Tony Blair and people jetting around the world frantically reading the Koran to find out where they went wrong, what they missed out. Part of the problem is that none of our politicians ever read religious studies at a university so they were not ready for this when it happened. That's a whole other story and I'll get back to

that. But it's within the arrogance of modernity, thinking that it could solve the problems of the world, that postmodernity has come along and basically blown a raspberry at modernity and said, you know, all your righteousness is as filthy rags. And I've said it before and I'll say it again: Under God, the role of postmodernity has been to announce the doctrine of the fall to arrogant modernity, and to say, it's not that easy, guys, you've just been building the tower of Babel, and God is coming down to have a little giggle at it and to confuse your languages.

And so postmodernity is in all sorts of ways like a Babel come again. Here was this grand project and now it's all come crumbling down. Images of 9-11 I'm afraid yet once more. But now the confusion of tongues which is postmodernity, but which now is generating a new kind of worldview, its own story. Within postmodernity God is sometimes assumed to be a very old silly dream that's long gone but equally within some of the New Age movement there are gods of all sorts, gods aplenty, coming bubbling up at us from all corners, not necessarily the Christian God by any manner of means. Everyone now wants spirituality, but ironically they don't all think, in fact most of them *don't* think, that you can find it in church. Isn't that interesting!

And the view of the world that we now have is much more mysterious than in modernism, but much more chaotic. When we look in the mirror, we discover that this grand I, the master of my faith, the captain of my soul, deconstructs. Don't know who I am anymore. Charlie Mingus, the jazz musician, says, "When I'm trying to play my music, I'm trying to play the truth of who I really am. The problem is that I'm changing all the time." Welcome to postmodernity — that's what it's like. And as for facts, all truth is *somebody's* truth: Nietzsche. All truth claims are really claims to power. And when I tell you that I'm telling you the facts, what I really mean is, you sit down, shut up, and let me impose my agenda on you. And that there is in postmodernity famously again no big story, no story of progress. It's all a deceit. It's all a con. It's all in service of somebody's empire. And when it comes to empire itself, postmodernity critiques it, famously. We don't like empires. We don't like this big totalizing vision where an emperor imposes his will. It's *usually* a his — it wasn't in Queen Victoria's time, of course, but lots of men putting it into operation. It's critiqued because it squashes other people's little stories.

The problem is that that critique doesn't work. As somebody said recently — and forgive me because this is a cheap shot from whoever it was who said it — "All those years of Jacques Derrida and we still got George Bush." The empire actually cannot take account of postmodernity, because it's got power. And people in university departments can scream, can deconstruct, can write counter-critical theses till they're blue in the face. And the empire just goes and destroys another bit of the rainforest, because it needs it for whatever particular economic/political project it's got. Even more, the empire actually *co-opts* postmodernity to prevent critique, because it uses the tools of postmodernity — spin and smear and the challenging of all truth claims — to dismiss its opponents as airy fairy fanatics.

Rowan Williams, the archbishop of Canterbury, recently made a very powerful, very cogent, very clear and well-thought-out statement about fair trade as over against free trade. And the center right newspapers in Britain rubbished him, using all the postmodernity techniques, to say, "Oh, well, that was just his silly point of view, and he's a bit of an idealist and he's a this and he's a that," and leaving him in little bits on the floor. Actually, his arguments I think still stand up. The empire turns to the church and says, what is truth, and like Jesus we end up silent, because we know that they can't hear what the answer might really be.

And where does that lead? In John 18 and 19 the question what is truth, without an

answer, leads directly to the people of God saying, "We have no king but Caesar." That is the message of John 18 and 19. And then Jesus standing in between cynical Pilate and colluding religion, Jesus goes to the cross. That is the extraordinary power of those chapters in John, so that the current global empire of Western Europe in the United States — incidentally, it's not going to last; you know, we kid ourselves that our empires last forever, we British know they don't. It may take a little longer this time, because you've got all the technology going for you. What's going to happen when it's China's turn or India's turn or somebody else's turn? It's going to be very interesting. And those countries, including yours and mine, who are at present rather cynical about the United Nations and the International Court of Justice and so on are suddenly going to be running screaming to them, when somebody else is doing to us what we've done to the rest of the world. Think about it. But at the moment we've got an economic stranglehold on much of the rest of the world. We use war and violence as endemic means of our hegemony. They're good for business. We treat ecology as OK when we've got a moment for it but as irrelevant when we don't. Not just because it's inconvenient, because we've got to make money and if there's a forest in the way, too bad, but because we are by definition its masters in the empire. And anyway, according to some right-wing Christians, God's going to destroy this world and rapture us up to someplace else fairly soon, so who cares about polluting the planet? I suspect that I'm preaching to the choir here, and I doubt that too many of you embrace that ideology; you probably wouldn't have come to hear me speak if you had. I wrote an article in *Bible Review* four or five years ago deconstructing the rapture theology of the *Left Behind* series, and among the many letters that the editor received, canceling subscriptions and so on in the usual way, was one which said, "How does Mr. Wright think he's going to get to heaven if he doesn't get raptured?" I found that a *fascinating* question.

And we see now the current huge irony — and forgive me again if I'm preaching to the choir — but I think it has to be put down as a marker, of the current Christian right in your country and a bit in mine being bitterly opposed to Charles Darwin when it comes to teaching about creation and so on in schools but completely colluding with Social Darwinism in hailing the empire of the West as obviously God's advanced guard to bring that survived fittest civilization into the rest of the world. Think about it. That's where we are. Little global map. Some windows on the biblical worldview in order to mount the Christian challenge to this particular world.

Back to John, chapters 18 and 19. John's Gospel is reaching its climax at this point. Jesus having loved his own who were in the world has loved them, or is loving them, to the very end, the bitter end, *eis telos*, John 13:1 — "unto the uttermost." And now we see what that means. Chapter 18, verses 33-40. Kingdom and truth. Jesus' kingdom is not from this world but it is for this world. We Christians have often read John 18 to be saying, my kingdom is not of this world meaning my kingdom simply belongs to somewhere else called heaven. It's not what the Greek says, actually. It's, my kingdom is not *from*, or *out of*, this world. It is not characterized by the mechanisms and the power plays of this world. But, my goodness, my kingdom is for this world. Jesus taught us to pray, "Thy kingdom come . . . on earth as it is in heaven." And we Christians have all too often said, "on heaven as it is in heaven, and if we can sort out a little bit of earth, that's OK, but it's not terribly important." Jesus' kingship is all about a different way of power, a different way of life, within this present world.

And the evidence he gives, that it's a different sort of kingdom, is that his servants are not fighting. Isn't that interesting! If it were *from* this world, my servants would fight to prevent me being handed over. And Jesus' kingdom is all about bearing witness to truth. And Pilate says, "What is truth?" *Pilate's categories are too small and flat*. The only truth Pilate knows is *Caesar's* truth, the *empire's* truth, the truth of scourging and nails and

crosses. Had he been born a millennium and a half later, he would have said, "The only truth I know comes out of the barrel of a gun." Same kind of thing. And the person who gets let off at the end of the chapter is Barabbas, the violent revolutionary. So then in John 19, here is the king, hail to the king, dressed in a purple robe, and then verse 5 of chapter 19, "Behold the man." And John is saying, "This is genuine humanness. This is what humanity really looks like." It doesn't look like what Pilate's doing with his empire; it doesn't look like what the chief priests are doing with their religion. The highest empire the world had ever known, the greatest religion the world had ever known, and they fall away. They're condemned in front of the man in the crown of thorns.

And then, very, very interestingly, Pilate says, "Don't you know I have the power to crucify you or to release you?" And Jesus says, "You couldn't have that power over me unless it were given you from above." Isn't this complicated! We don't *want* Jesus to say that, do we? We want Jesus to say, "Yes, that authority is *completely* swept away, and now we have a totally, totally different thing in which there will be no human authorities at all." No, Jesus acknowledges that God wants his world to be ordered. But he will hold that ordering to account, a theme to which I shall come back.

And then Pilate, thinking, "I can't cope with this; I've got to get out of it," says to the chief priests, "I'm going to let him go; he's actually not terribly significant; he's obviously not a real threat," etc., etc.

And then they turn the screw: If you let this man go you are not Caesar's friend. Have you ever felt that argument in 21st-century America or Europe? I have: If you do this, the empire's not going to like you. And that's the point at which this great Jewish leadership says, "We have no king but Caesar." Devastating denial of two-thirds of the Old Testament. You find the same scene — just leave John 18 and 19 for a moment and come to Mark 10. Mark 10, with James and John meeting Jesus, or coming up to Jesus as they're going up to Jerusalem, Mark 10, verse 35 and following. And they know that Jesus is coming to Jerusalem to become king. And so naturally they want to be sitting at his right hand and at his left. And Jesus says, listen, you don't know what you're talking about, actually. And they didn't, of course, because those who end up at Jesus' right and his left when he comes in his kingdom in Mark and Matthew and Luke are the two who are crucified alongside him.

But he then says, "Listen, the kings and rulers of the earth lord it over their subjects and exercise a tyrannous authority over them. But it must not be so among you, because anyone who wants to be great among you must be your servant, and anyone who wants to be king must be the slave of all, because the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." And you know we New Testament scholars and teachers, and you preachers, we have all often taken Mark 10, verse 45 and said, "There is our atonement theology — Daniel 7 plus Isaiah 53 equals Mark 10:45; "The Son of Man, who is the servant, who gives his life as a ransom for many." And we wave it around: "Here is a nice bit of atonement theology." And we fail to see that that atonement theology is the sharp edge of Mark's *political* theology. It is the *redefinition of power*. It's the reason why, though the rulers of this world do it one way, you're going to do it a different way. And Jesus is leading the way in that redefinition of power, all the way to the cross, exactly the same point as the "What is truth?" question in John 18 and 19. You get the atonement theology — *boy do you ever* — but you get it *inside* that political theology. And I've sometimes said that, and people have said, "Surely this is all about Christ dying for *me*." Absolutely, right on, but you get that *inside*; again, it's like a Russian doll. You get this Kingdom of God theology, which is a redefinition of what power is all about; inside that you get the meaning of the cross, the full atonement theology; and inside that there is room for every man, woman, and child in the world to

find that Christ died for their sins according to the Scriptures. Let's have the holistic biblical theology.

Were there another three lectures, I could run this whole theme through Paul as well, and I'm going to be saying something to one particular group tomorrow afternoon, I think it is, about this. Maybe it's even this afternoon. Sometime, anyway. About Paul. Because the usually unnoticed theme in Pauline theology is that when Paul says, "Jesus is Lord," he means that Caesar *isn't*. You can see this set out to glorious effect in Philippians Chapter 2, where that whole wonderful poem, "Christ being in the form of God did not regard his equality with God something to take advantage of, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant" (echoes of Mark 10, got it?). A king being born in the likeness of man, "and he humbled himself and became obedient to death, even death on a cross. Therefore, God has highly exalted him and given him the name above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow and every tongue confess that *Kyrios, Iesus Christos* — *Lord Jesus Christ* — to the glory of God the father."

And you know I wrote a long article, one of the largest articles I've ever written, on the interpretation of Philippians 2, back in 1984 or '85 — 20 years ago — and I analyzed all the different things that were going on there, and it *never occurred to me*, because the *question* had never occurred to me, that one of the key things that Paul is doing there is telling the story of Jesus in such a way as to *subvert* the imperial ideology that runs from Alexander the Great through to Augustus Caesar through to Nero, through to the empires of the 18th, 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries. Because it is the rulers of this earth who make themselves like gods. It is they who give themselves airs, who treat their quasi-equality with God as something to take advantage of — *boy do they ever* — and who demand that the whole world hail them as lord, as savior. These were *imperial* titles, explicit there in the imperial rhetoric of Paul's day.

You need to know, if you don't, that the Caesar cult was the fastest growing religion in Paul's world. And don't make the mistake of thinking that there are not equivalents in our world, because there are. And Paul does it in all sorts of places. In Romans, he begins Romans with this amazing statement about Jesus as the son of God, as the Lord of the world, as the one who has all power, as the one who claims the allegiance of all people, as the one through whom we have justice and salvation. Every single word there is a direct echo of what people in Rome must have known was part of the stock rhetoric of the empire. It's a redefinition of power around the gospel of Jesus Christ. And in 1 Thessalonians 5, he says, "When they say peace and security, then sudden destruction will come upon them unawares and there will be no escape." Who was it who was going around saying peace and security? It's another Roman imperial slogan. We've got plenty of examples of it, of people in the Roman world saying — it's basically a global protection racket, you know — it's "Come with us, do what we say, pay the taxes, we'll look after you, we'll give you peace and security, at *our price*."

And what is the price if you say no? Here is the center: The price if you say no is the cross. Romans *crucified* people who resisted empire. Isn't that interesting! It took genius to see that this symbol, which already had theological and political meaning, because it meant, "We Romans rule the world and if you get in our way Caesar, who is a god, will get you," and this is what you do. It took genius to see that that symbol could work the *other* way and be a symbol of the outpoured love of God, and the very redefinition and reconstitution of what power itself was all about. We need to embrace that as the deep meaning and message of the cross if we are to have the genuine Christian challenge in the postmodern world.

Now, standing behind all of this of course is the Old Testament critique of pagan empire

which runs all the way back to the tower of Babel. Humans overreach themselves, become arrogant, they build their great towers, and God comes down and confuses them and says, "I've got a different way of putting the world to rights. Behold my servant Abraham." And Abraham's a bit of a shaky character too in various ways, because the people who are called to be the bearers of the solution are also part of the problem. That's the story of Israel in a nutshell, and it's very tricky. So they go down to Egypt, where they build the pyramids — isn't that interesting! — for the pharaohs. Why is it that empires always like building towers? It says something about something.

And then the ambiguous kingdom of Israel in the books of Samuel and Kings. And then in Isaiah, the critique again of Babylon. Second Isaiah, Isaiah 40–55, that astonishing bit about Yahweh as the only God. "I am, and there is no other. To me and me alone every knee shall bow and every tongue shall swear." The very bit that Paul quotes, Isaiah 45:23, in Philippians 2:10, and he quotes it about Jesus. It's the very high Christology of the New Testament, which is directly in your face to the claims of Caesar. And then of course the book of Daniel, Chapter 2, Chapter 7, Chapter 9, but all the way through — the kingdoms of this world do their worst, they rage and shout against God and his people, and then God takes his throne and the Son of Man is exalted. Vindicated. Surprisingly. And God puts the world to rights at last. That is the image which haunts Isaiah, Daniel, the Psalms: The trees of the field will shout for joy because God is coming to sort the mess out. He's coming to put the world to rights, *and we all know in our bones that that's what we want*. And the folly of empire is the attempt to do here and now in our own strength and without reference to God that which God has promised that he will do through his Son and by his Spirit. We have to learn to live with that paradox. I've already quoted the Psalms. We could then jump forward again to the book of Revelation, very similar. You get the image of all creation worshiping God in Revelation 4 and 5. And then the image of the holy city coming down from heaven to earth at the end of the book, chapters 21 and 22, heaven and earth coming together as the idolatrous city, great Babylon, is overthrown by the victory of the Lamb. All the stories of Scripture are rolled into one in this almost psychedelically, kaleidoscopically, image-laden retelling once for all of the book of Revelation. And it's all in the context of that Roman Empire which claimed that it had peace and justice and freedom, because its ruler was the Son of God before whom every knee would bow.

Where does all this get us? Well, the death and resurrection of Jesus in the New Testament are the climax and center of world history in the sovereign purposes of the Creator God. The New Testament says in different ways on every other page that this is the ultimate exodus, this is *real* return from exile, this is the moment when God defeats the powers of evil, not least the *imperial* powers of evil. This is the moment when God launches his project of new creation. There's so much in Paul which is about the way in which God is bringing the world into one in Jesus, and that is directly in your face to the claims of the Roman Empire, to bring world unity under allegiance to Caesar. And Paul saw that Rome couldn't achieve that, and he believed that Jesus could, and indeed already had. Neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male and female. No, barbarian, Scythian, bond, free — you are all one in Christ. And Paul's job was to plant little cells of people loyal to Jesus as Lord, right there within the heart of Caesar's empire, as a sign that there was a different king. In Acts, chapter 17, Paul is assailed on a charge of saying that there is another king, namely, Jesus. Wouldn't it be great to have Christians in the Western world hauled up on that same charge today?

The large story, then, which is the basis of the Christian message to the world, engagement with the world, challenge to the postmodern world, is that the world is basically God's world, and it's a good world, but it's gone wrong, and evil has infected it in all sorts of ways which modernism really didn't want to take account of and which

postmodernity has partly seen but then has wallowed in because it's got no answer. Because the answer is that God the Creator has rescued the world from evil and *is* rescuing it from evil. That's why we need the death and resurrection of Jesus at the center of every Christian retelling, and every Christian challenge. God's condemnation of evil — God takes evil exceedingly seriously — but then God's launch of new creation at Easter, when Jesus comes out of the tomb, not only to announce new creation but to embody it in himself.

And within that, the place of Israel in the Old Testament, and the place of social powers and authorities to this day, remains ambiguous. The people who as I said to you are supposed to be the bearers of the solution turn out to be part of the problem. And that is echoed by the ambiguity of human authority. God wants order in his world. If you don't have appropriate authorities in the world, the bullies and the bad guys always win. Oh, it's a thorough nuisance when the police stop us for speeding when we're driving down the highway, but if somebody steals your car or even something *out* of it, you want the police to be on the case and to sort it out. We do not actually *want* to live in a world of anarchy and chaos. We know that the bullies and the bad guys will always win. And I believe that we ought to be saying that globally right now as well. But those to whom authority is entrusted are always tempted to abuse it. Which is why in early Christianity and in the long Jewish tradition of critique of civic authorities, people aren't nearly so much worried about how people get to be in authority — how did they *get* there, by democratic means, by overthrowing a previous government, whatever — they don't seem to worry about that; they care very much indeed about what people *do* once they're in power.

It's interesting, we've done it exactly the other way, certainly in my country. We care passionately about our democratic process, which once every four or five years we go through this rather odd business with our constituencies and our voting, and we finally choose a government, and then the government claims that it has a mandate even though our present, our new government, only got, what, 39 percent of the vote, something like that, but they claim they've got a mandate to do whatever they choose to do for the next four or five years.

It is the *church's* job, I believe, to hold such authorities as we've got — nationally and internationally and locally — to account before the God who will put the world to rights and who has announced in Jesus the way of doing it. The point of this all comes together, of course, in John 18 and 19 again, and Mark 10. The point of it all is that God will heal the world and that Jesus has achieved the victory in his cross and resurrection by which God will do that. And he is now calling the church, his loyal followers, to be the people through whom that critique can come about.

So my third and final and much shorter section as I come towards close: glimpsing and grasping new creation and thereby embodying the Christian challenge to the postmodern world. What does it look like when we come back from that modernist view and that postmodernist view and say, "What would a Christian worldview look like in here?" For a start, we've got to tell the truth about God — that God is not the same as the world, as in Pantheism, nor is God a million miles away from the world, as in many dualistic schemes, but that heaven and earth have *overlapped and interlocked* once and for all and forever in Jesus, and that ultimately they will overlap and interlock entirely. Romans 8, Revelation 21.

I was talking with a small group this morning about Isaiah 11, the time when the earth shall be filled with the glory of God as the waters cover the sea. Never go *near* any theology which cannot play out into Isaiah 11, because if you do you'll be colluding with

dualism, sure as anything. “The earth shall be filled with the glory of God as the waters cover the sea.” Wait a minute, how do the waters cover the sea? The waters *are* the sea. God wants to flood creation with himself. God made a world that is other than himself in order to embrace it with love and flood it with his own being so that it will in the end be both something other than himself and full completely full to overflowing with his own glory. And in the light of that, our knowledge of truth, the real answer to Pilate, and our understanding and appreciation of beauty, are grounded in the goodness of the original creation and the promise of the new creation.

And the renewed, re-image-bearing human beings which we are called to be will attain *not* the identity of the lonely enlightenment “I” as in 18th-century modernism, nor the scattered chaotic confused nonidentity of the postmodern deconstructed “I” that’s just a mass of floating signifiers. No. Rather, we are offered — and are to embody — the identity of being new people in Christ within the community of his followers and for the sake of the world. We will discover what it means to be genuinely human as we go in the service of the Kingdom of God, should I say the *Empire* of God — dangerous language, dangerous both politically and philosophically, because a lot of postmodernity doesn’t like that any more than a lot of the modernist empire does.

And our attitude to the world — and here in a university we can really celebrate this — is that we are not studying facts in the abstract as though we’ve got these facts in a test tube or whatever and we can just do things to them and learn them as though they’re over against us. No, the Christian calling is to know the world with a knowledge that approximates to *love*, and the point about love and the epistemology which love generates is that love both affirms the otherness of the object while remaining in deep, close, and rich subjective relationship to it. Love transcends the objective-subjective divide. It can be quite confusing when you think about how you do chemistry, economics, that way, but it’s a challenge for the whole university community to think about that, because that is the Christian task. Knowledge is a *subbranch* of love, rather than the other way around. Our vocation, then, is to be agents of new creation, knowing the world and one another with delight and in love and in respect, celebrating it as *God’s good creation*, grieving over the places where it has gone wrong, glimpsing new creation, not least through the arts and through beauty, and working to make it happen.

In other words, here is a high road through the sterile culture wars that have defaced the last 20 years in your culture and mine, modernism versus postmodernity, which gives us a Christian critique, both of post modernity and of the empire. And the critique of the empire is not the anarchist’s dream, “Oh, let’s just get rid of all these rulers and let’s just everyone do our own thing.” No, I was in a taxi yesterday, and it just happened that on the radio that we got John Lennon, “Imagine there’s no heaven,” and it goes on, “Imagine no possessions,” and there’s all these people hanging out being late washed-up ‘60s hippies just living for today. Fine, but actually it’s not going to work; it’s not like that.

I want to suggest instead that you imagine that there is a heaven and that it actually overlaps with earth and that that’s very confusing but it’s what was embodied in Jesus and what Jesus wants us to embody in our own lives by the Spirit. It’s not the anarchist’s dream, it’s not the romantic dream — the critique of empire is not, “Oh, no, let’s not try and organize the world; let’s go back and each sit under our vines and our fig trees.” Well that would be nice but again that’s not where it’s at; and it’s not the Marxist dream either, which is actually part of postmodernity, a parasitic on modernity. It is rather saying, yes, God does want there to be authorities, nationally and internationally, I believe, but he wants them to be held to account and it’s the task of the church to avoid the sterile left-right polarization of issue after issue after issue. You know how it goes, that somebody votes one way on one issue and so it’s assumed that there’s a package of all sorts of

other issues that go together, and if you tick one box on the left you're going to tick them all and if you tick one box on the right you'll tick them all. I need to tell you your left-right spectrum in America does not correspond to our left-right spectrum in Britain — it does a bit but it's quite confusing, actually, it's quite different. And we need to uncouple those issues and name them one by one, and sometimes as a Christian you'll find yourself voting with the left and other times you'll find yourself voting with the right. And if that means that ultimately we need to vote for better systems with better ways of discovering what we really deeply believe, maybe we ought to be doing that too. And we are not to be scared, *we are not to be scared*, by the rhetoric of the new right, nor are we to be conned by the rhetoric of the new left — if you have ears then hear — rather we are to work and pray for exodus, for liberty, not for free trade but for fair trade, in economic and military and ecological matters.

How are we going to do this? By re-envisioning and re-appropriating worship and mission in the light of all that's been said, in the light of the full biblical story. Worship is not simply Christian entertainment or making a miscellaneous nice party with lots of nice music. Christian worship is humbly adoring the Creator God and thereby being renewed in his image. And image-bearing includes that love of the world which shares the love which was Christ's, which sent him to die on the cross, renewed in his image and strengthened by his body and blood, into a transformative spirituality which expresses itself naturally and obviously in the work for new creation in the world. I had a message the other day from a friend the other side of the world who lives in a really, frankly, rather dualistic church, where he was struggling to hold together evangelism and social justice, and saying, "My church finds it very difficult. Social justice seems to be the sort of thing those liberals do, and I want to be able to talk about social justice — how do I do that?"

The answer must be, talk about new creation. Talk about what happened when Jesus came out of the tomb on Easter morning. Talk about John 20 and 21. Talk about God putting the world to rights, and wanting us to anticipate that in every way we can in the present. Many of you are pastors. If somebody came to you and said, "Look, I have a real difficulty with battling with sin; I find that I'm tripped up by temptation and I sin a whole lot and I don't seem to be able to help it, but the good news is that, after all, God is going to redeem me one day and I'm going to be with him in heaven or in the new earth, or whatever, and so I really don't need to bother about it now, do I?" Now, if somebody said that to you, I hope you would hit them with a fairly strong dose of inaugurated eschatology. You mightn't call it that. You would want to say, "Precisely *because* God's going to do that for you in the future, you need to get to work on that now in the power of the Spirit."

Now supposing we were to run the same about the way the world is right now. There are many people who say, "Oh, maybe God will do something one day, that's fine, there's nothing we can do to put the world to rights, and so we'll just go on polluting the planet and exploiting it and treating the world as a cross between a gold mine and an ashtray, and who cares?" And the answer is no, read Romans 8 and how much God loves the world that he's going to redeem the whole cosmos. The whole creation will be set free from its bondage to decay, to share the liberty of the glory of the children of God. And are you and I not going to work for that in the present? We won't build the Kingdom of God by our own efforts in the present; it remains God's gift by his grace and by his power. But we can produce signs of the Kingdom in love and justice and beauty and healing and fresh community work of all sorts, internationally, locally, all over the place. And thereby celebrate the whole biblical story, the *whole biblical story*. We must not collude with deconstruction in how we use the Bible as though a little bit of it here, a little bit of it there will do the business. No, we need the *whole story*. And re-creation, which is

the heart of Christian mission, starts with the imagination of a world set free from sin and decay, a world we glimpse at Easter and are mandated to implement by the Spirit in art and music and literature, in politics, in theology, in chemistry, in mathematics, whatever — and to embody that in communities which live it out and make it happen in our public discourse in so many ways.

Isaiah 55 is a passage which has been hugely important for me in my first two years of my life as a bishop, and I end by quoting you the end of it, the end of that great section which climaxes in the work of the Servant. It almost mirrors John 18 and 19, actually, the way it works there. Isaiah 55 ends with the vision of new creation, new creation accomplished by the word of God. The biblical renewal of God's world, standing over against all the Babylons which Isaiah has dealt with, standing over against all the deconstructive depressions which Israel has had in exile. No, as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth. It shall not return to me empty. It will accomplish my purpose and prosper in the thing for which I sent it.

And then listen to the last two verses, the echoes of the reversal of Genesis 3, the reversal of the thorns and the briars that choked the vineyard in Isaiah 5. "You shall go out with joy and be led forth in peace, and before you the mountains and the hills will break forth into singing" — there's an agenda for ecology — "and all the trees of the fields will clap their hands." Instead of the thorns shall come up the myrtle. Instead of the briar shall come up the cedar. You see? It shall be to Yahweh for a sign, a memorial, an everlasting one, which will not be cut off. Amen. Thank you.