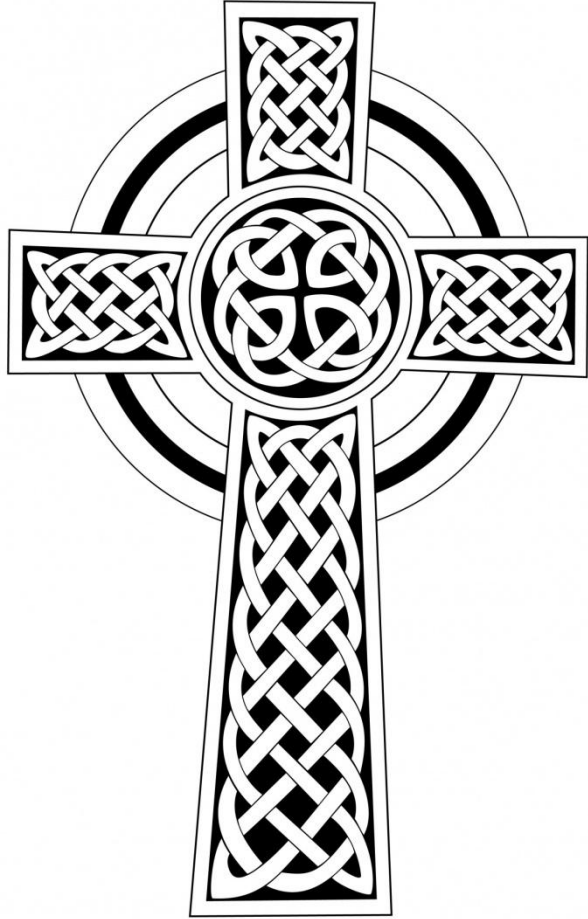


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Free to Believe



An occasional magazine for *Free to Believe*

Winter 2021

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John Shelby Spong, 1931-2021

I was introduced to the work of Jack Spong by a colleague minister in the Scottish Congregational Church in the late 1990s. It was one of those 'cards on the table' conversations where we talked about faith and the church, and in particular our *own* faith.

I was lamenting my lack of belief in orthodox Christianity and wondering whether I should perhaps be giving up ministry and seeking another career path altogether, when my colleague produced from his desk drawer a dog-eared copy of Spong's *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism*. It spoke to me, and from that point I read every one of Spong's books as they were published.



Spong had his critics in both the liberal and conservative wings of the Church, and even his most avid supporters would concede that not everything he wrote was as fresh, new and radical as he perhaps claimed.

Yet his influence on the Church was massive. A champion of equality, he tackled head-on the issues of sexuality and race. A student of scripture, he encouraged his readers to approach the Bible with an open mind and an open heart.

Above all, though, he brought these issues of faith and doubt into the public forum, and offered the permission of a senior Church figure to ask questions of scripture and doctrine. His debate was conducted not only among scholars, clerics and academics. Through the media of paperbacks, lecture tours, television and latterly the Internet he was able to invite ordinary churchgoing Christians to the debate.

Jack Spong made Christianity interesting and exciting again. That could have been his greatest achievement and his lasting legacy.

Ken Forbes (Editor)

TOM HOLLAND: DOMINION – Martin Camroux



I first came across Tom Holland as a popular historian of the classical period with books like *Rubicon*, on the end of the Roman Republic, and *Dynasty* on the Júlio-Claudian dynasty. Like a lot of us, he says, he felt an empathy with classical history. Then it began to change. “The more years I spent immersed in the study of classical antiquity, so the more alien I increasingly found it”. Rome was a brutal imperial power, Caesar slaughtered a million Gauls, and enslaved a million more. The economy was based on slavery. Holland quotes Tacitus. “We have slaves from every corner of the world in our households, ... and it in only by means of terror that we can hope to coerce such scum”. Its principal entertainment was the gladiator arena. They threw unwanted babies on the town rubbish dump, especially slave or girl babies. “It was not just the extremes of callousness that unsettled me, but the complete lack of any sense that the poor and the weak might have the slightest intrinsic value”.

Asking himself why this so unsettled him he realized it was because, although he had long given up Christian faith, his values were not bred of classical antiquity, but came out of Europe’s Christian past. Nor he realized was he alone in this. The great champion of the new atheism, Richard Dawkins tells of sitting in Winchester Cathedral, listening to the bells peal. “So much nicer than the aggressive-sounding ‘Allahu Akbar,’” he tweeted. “Or is that just my cultural upbringing?” A preference for church bells over the sound of Muslims praising God does not just emerge by magic. Dawkins — agnostic, secularist, and humanist that he is — absolutely has the instincts of someone brought up in a Christian civilisation. Perhaps then Holland reflected, the debt of the contemporary West to Christianity is more deeply rooted than

many — believers and non-believers alike — might imagine. “This book explores what it was that made Christianity so subversive and disruptive ... and why, in a West that is often doubtful of religions claims, so many of its instincts remain for good and ill- thoroughly Christian”. John Gray puts it rather wonderfully. “If they read *Dominion*, as they certainly should, secular liberals might pause to reflect that they acquired their deepest values by chance from a religion they despise”.

In what I think is the strongest part of the book Holland starts by showing how extraordinary it is that the primary Christian model for God should be a crucified nobody.

The Easter story lies at the heart of this narrative. Crucifixion, in the opinion of Roman intellectuals, was not a punishment just like any other. It was one peculiarly suited to slaves. To be hung naked, helpless to beat away the clamorous birds, ‘long in agony’, as the philosopher Seneca put it, ‘swelling with ugly weals on shoulder and chest’, was the very worst of fates. Yet in the exposure of the crucified to the public gaze there lurked a paradox. So foul was the carrion-reek of their disgrace that many felt tainted even by viewing a crucifixion. Certainly, few cared to think about it in any detail. Order, the order loved by the gods and upheld by magistrates vested with the full authority of the greatest power on earth, was what counted — not the elimination of such vermin as presumed to challenge it. Some deaths were so vile, so squalid, that it was best to draw a veil across them entirely.

But it such a death, not imperial power, which gives us our clearest clue to God. Unbelievable surely, had it not happened? It was this which gave Christianity its essential moral impetus.

That the Son of God born of a woman, and sentenced to the death of a slave, had perished unrecognised by his judges, was a reflection fit to give pause to even the haughtiest monarch. The awareness enshrined as it was in the very heart of medieval Christianity, could not help but

lodge in the consciousness a visceral and momentous suspicion: that God was closer to the weak than to the mighty, to the poor than to the rich. Any beggar, any criminal, might be Christ. “So the last will be first. And the first last”.

Then Tom Holland sets out to do the impossible, something which no real serious academic historian would even think of doing, to survey 2000 years of Christian history and show how this idea formed our moral consciousness and still does.

Holland does not for a moment deny that Christian history has been full of terrible crimes. One of the harrowing things in the book is the horrors of Christian history such as slavery, the crusades, or the Inquisition. But he sees the Christian gospel as having a radical impulse at the heart of it, which keeps breaking out, in Paul’s breaking down of the racial divides of the ancient world, in the early Church’s care for the poor, in the church’s creation of medieval civilization, in the radical Diggers or the wonderful story, which I didn’t know, of Paul Lay and how the Quakers became abolitionist. Along the way there are vivid portraits of some key figures in Christian history- Origen, Augustine, Abelard, Elizabeth of Hungary, Catherine of Siena, a former playboy known as Francis of Assisi and a host of more modern luminaries. And even when Christianity failed, Holland argues, it was its own moral insights which condemned this failure most clearly. “To claim, as I most certainly do, that I have sought to evaluate fairly both the achievements and crimes of Christian civilization, is not to stand outside its moral framework but rather, as Nietzsche would have been quick to point out – to stand within them”. It is, he says, the greatest story ever told.

All this is in direct contradiction to the foundation myth of modern secularism, set out, for example, in Edward Gibbon’s *Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire*, which sees religion as the enemy of humanism. “In the second century of the Christian era, the Empire of

Rome comprehended the fairest part of the earth, and the most civilised portion of mankind.” Then the triumph of Christianity ushered in an “age of superstition and credulity.” Christianity led to the Dark Ages, medieval barbarism, religious wars, and Puritanism, as in H L Mencken’s definition: “The haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy”. Or listen to Martin Luther speaking of the Jews, Set fire to their synagogues or schools so that no man will ever again see a stone or cinder of them. This is to be done in honor of our Lord and of Christendom, so that God might see that we are Christians. Anti-Semitism has which a major theme in the Christian story along with homophobia and misogyny. All through our western story, this view argues, humanist values and science have had to fight their way against religious prejudice. As Emile Zola put it, “Civilization will not attain to its perfection until the last stone from the last church falls on the last priest.”

Our task as a reading party was to evaluate these two views of the Christian story. I think we probably agreed that Holland was wrong to think that a concern for the weak was exclusively Christian. What for example of the prophetic tradition which so inspired Jesus? “He judged the cause of the poor and needy, is not this to know me says the lord”. I think we were not all certain that our culture is as Christian as he thinks, the culture of consumer capitalism is not obviously Christian. But otherwise I doubt if we came to agreed conclusions on the main thesis. For myself my lasting recognition was that when we condemn the moral obscenities committed in the name of Christ, it is his cross which most powerfully does so. I am grateful to Tom Holland for reminding me of it.



The Enlightenment and the emergence of the modern world

David Cornick

Tom Holland covers 400 years of history in five clever chapters. He proceeds from story to story. So, the Enlightenment begins with the familiar yet powerful story of Voltaire's anger over the case of Jean Calas, and then moves through the Huguenot experience to the age of revolutions, then de-touring past de Sade and Napoleon and the Congress of Vienna to the abolition of slavery.

The approach is schematic – religion, science, world wars and the rise of fascism, and on through the summer of love and Live Aid to 9/11. What I want to do this morning is to paint in some of the background, and try and trace some of the threads that make up the cloth of the modern world and the ways in which that has shaped the church, and indeed as Holland would argue, the ways in which the modern world has been partially shaped by the church. I want to do two things. First, we'll look at some of the unintended consequences of the reformations. Then we'll consider the Enlightenment.

1. The unintended consequences of the reformations

So, let's begin with the legacy of the reformations and their unintended consequences. I want first to look at war and governance. The two are intimately connected. One of the unintended consequences of the reformations was religious war and violence, that in turn was determined partly by geography, and once Europe was exhausted by wars a search began for new ways of governance which were not determined by religion and religious alliances.

Let's unpack that. As we saw in the last session Europe was a patchwork of tiny states and principalities, so when Luther's protests took root and changes in religious behaviour happened, that was reflected in the fragmented geo-politics of the Holy Roman Empire. Papal authority was replaced by a gaggle of godly and not-so-godly princes and the principle established that the secular power determined the religious affiliation of the state.

In Diarmaid MacCulloch's judgement, '...the Reformation took only six years from its outbreak in 1517 to become a major trigger of violence in the Peasants' Wars of the German lands. Very soon it was the single greatest motive of the killing, as the Lutheran-inspired Schmalkaldic Wars unfolding from 1547 were succeeded by the Reformed-inspired wars of religion between the 1560s and 1590s, and then by the horrors of the Thirty Years' War...' ¹.

Terrifying violence swept across Europe in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries – the French Wars of Religion (1562-1598 intermittently) encompassed such appalling acts of atrocity as the St Bartholemew's Day massacre – a three day assault on Protestants which by a conservative estimate left at least 5,000 dead.

It was followed, some twenty years later by the Thirty Years' War (1618-48). This was the kickback of the Catholic Hapsburg monarchs to regain the lands they had lost to Protestant princes, and it quickly metamorphosed into the rivalry between the Hapsburgs and France for supremacy in Europe. Neil MacGregor reminds us in his fine study of Germany of the effects on Germany as the armies criss-crossed its territory, spreading terror and plague and brutalising the population. A third of the population of what is now Germany were killed. Jacques

¹ Diarmaid MacCulloch *Reformation: Europe's house divided 1490-1700* (London Allen Lane 2003) p.671

Callot's *The miseries of war* (1633) literally etched it into European consciousness.

It was never forgotten. Its economic consequences could still be felt three centuries later, and when hostilities between Germany and the allies ceased in 1945, Albert Speer explained the capitulation – 'The destruction that has been inflicted on Germany can only be compared to the Thirty Years' War. The decimation of our people through hunger and deprivation must not be allowed to reach the scale of that epoch.'²

England's wars of religion, otherwise known as the Civil War, also encompassed atrocity and violence, albeit on a smaller scale. Wherever you look in the post reformation world, religion is pitched against religion – Catholic Spain against the newly Protestant Netherlands, Protestant England against Catholic Ireland, Catholic against Huguenot, Catholic against Protestant in the sprawling expanse of the Holy Roman Empire.³ By the time the exhausted powers signed the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 which ended the Thirty Years' War the boundaries agreed between Protestant and Catholic were actually much the same as twenty years before, and they are still cultural boundaries that we recognise – Germany, Scandinavia and the Netherlands mainly Protestant, Spain, France, Austria, Poland, what is now Italy mainly Catholic. It was clear that religious alliances and crusades had achieved very little, and that new ways of ruling were necessary.

One answer to the question of governance was monarchy. During the brief life of the English Republic, the exiled royalist philosopher Thomas Hobbes, produced *Leviathan* (1651), arguing that absolutism alone could prevent society collapsing into the chaos of a constant war of person against person and a life that was 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short'. In order to secure peace and security, individuals would enter a kind of contract with their ruler, surrendering rights in return

² Neil MacGregor *Germany: memories of a nation* (London, Allen Lane 2014) p.xxxiv

³ Ritchie Robertson *The Enlightenment: the pursuit of happiness 1680-1790* (London, Allen Lane 2020) pp 85-6

for protection. Continental theorists like Jean Bodin (1530-96) and Jacques Bossuet (1627-1704), the French bishop who was tutor to Louis XIV, preferred the locus of authority to be not a contract with the people, but God, from whom the power of the ruler derived.

However understood, between 1650-1750 the rulers of France, Prussia, Austria and Sweden all became absolute rulers. The power of the state was focused in the person of the monarch who controlling taxation, foreign policy and religious affiliation.⁴ It reached its apogee in the magnificence of Louis XIV's court at Versailles.(r.1643-1715). Louis regarded himself as God's representative on earth, and as the father of his people, and his court as the epitome of civilisation. His successor, Louis XV (r.1715-74) put it like this – '...sovereign power resides in my person alone....It is from me that my courts of justice derive their existence and their authority. The plenitude of this authority which they exercise only in my name, remains always with me. I alone possess the legislative power without sharing it with, or depending for it on, anyone...The whole system of public order emanates from me.'⁵

As absolutism developed, one strand of the modern world came into being – the nation state. Centralised bureaucracies were developed to reap taxes. Standing armies expanded – the Hapsburg Empire from 50,000 in 1690 to 300,000 in 1789, Prussia from 30,000 in 1690 to 190,000 in 1789. Nobilities were strengthened and controlled, and the thirst for territorial expansion replaced religion as the reason for war.

European politics became a story of the balance of power. Louis XIV's territorial ambitions were clear. He considered France's natural boundaries to be Pyrenees to the south and the Rhine to the east. The Holy Roman Empire, which Voltaire not inaccurately described as neither holy, nor Roman, nor an empire had in effect divided into two when Charles V abdicated in 1558. His son became King of Spain, with

⁴ John Merriman *A history of modern Europe: vol 1 From the Renaissance to the age of Napoleon* (W.W. Norton, New York and London 1996) p 276

⁵ Merriman *op cit* p 298

an empire which included the Netherlands, parts of Italy and the American colonies. His brother succeeded him as Emperor, inheriting Austria, Hungary and Bohemia. It was the Hapsburgs versus the Bourbons, a conflict mapped out in shifting alliances and a series of wars, which became increasingly international in scope, engaging colonies in both America and Asia.

Britain was inevitably involved as it sought to promote the interests of commerce and develop the productivity and wealth of its empire (which included, of course, slavery) and protect its trade routes both to the west in America and the West Indies, and to the east in India. Striking success in the war of the Spanish Succession (1701-14), which saw the French defeated by Marlborough at Blenheim and Ramillies established Britain as a major power. But what I want us to notice is the internationalism of the conflict. It ended with the Treaty of Utrecht (1714) under which France ceded to Britain Newfoundland, Nova Scotia and the Hudson Bay.

The Seven Years' War (1756-1763) was in some ways the first modern war. It saw tens of thousands of European troops shipped across the Atlantic, and the results altered boundaries from Upper Canada to Florida. It affected different parts of the Caribbean, coastal South America, Senegal and Manila in the Philippines, and it was fought as much at sea as on land – three of the most important engagements were in the Indian Ocean.⁶ Commerce and the quest for Empire in all its dazzling brilliance and remorseless horror, had made the world international, and that was reflected in warfare.

It is a commonplace of historical study that the number of conflicts increased markedly after 1700 as the technology available became gradually more and more lethal. So-called 'umbrella wars' – the Seven Years' War, the Napoleonic Wars (c.1792-1815), and eventually the

⁶ Linda Colley *The gun, the ship and the pen: warfare, constitutions and the making of the modern world* (London, Profile 2021) p 26

First World War involved more and more of the world, exacerbated local struggles, and bred revolutions. The levels of taxation necessary to support armies and navies could result in constitutional strain and revolution. The American War of Independence and the French Revolution are but two examples.⁷

So, to recap. The reformations caused religious conflict which sparked horrific violence and war. The exhaustion of war led to the development of absolutism, a power struggle between the major European powers (initially Hapsburg-Bourbon, or Spain and France) which in turn led to the internationalisation of war, because the European powers wished to protect and exploit their colonies. The pressures of raising taxation to pay for that led in some places to revolution.

That is a long way from the reformations of the sixteenth century, but I hope you can see a little of the complex pattern of causation.

The second unintended consequence of the reformations was toleration, which became in turn a central facet of Enlightenment thinking. Let me begin with Tom Holland and Voltaire, and his time in England. He was sent into exile in England in 1726 following a duel, and he stayed for two and a half years before he was allowed back into France. He loved English literature, moved easily in high society, was fascinated by our constitutional monarchy which was so different to the absolutism of Louis XV, and by the degree of freedom and religious toleration which he saw here. 'If there were only one religion in England, there would be danger of tyranny; if there were two, they would cut each other's throats; but there are thirty and they live in peace.'⁸ As Holland neatly points out, Voltaire's wish for a single religion of tolerance and brotherly love was but a reflection of catholicity and Paul's insight that there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave

⁷ Colley *op cit* pp. 1-14

⁸ Tom Holland *Dominion: the making of the Western mind* (London, Little Brown 2019) p. 375

nor free in Jesus Christ. Christian roots are deeply entangled in the mind and soul of the West.

Tolerance, and therefore freedom of thought, was another unintended consequence of the reformations. That is not to belittle all those thinkers of antiquity who championed tolerance and freedom of thought, but it is to suggest that once the unity of Catholicism had been breached by Luther and Zwingli and later by Calvin, to say nothing of the radicals, that theological pluralism provided a rich soil for the growth of toleration. It was first of all a practical response by rulers to the simple fact of pluralism. England is an interesting case study. Catholicism never went away. Had Mary not died of cancer in 1558 England would be Catholic. However hard Elizabeth tried, she could not wipe out recusancy. The old faith stubbornly survived. Post 1662 when a comprehensive Protestant church proved an impossibility thanks to the Cavalier parliament, the religious fragmentation of the country increased. Those Quakers, Baptists and Independents who wanted no truck with any established church found themselves joined by nearly 2,000 ejected ministers who couldn't agree to the terms of the Act of Uniformity. As we all know the journey to toleration was a tough one, but by 1689 political terms were agreed for a limited degree of religious toleration. It did not encompass Catholics of course - the process of dismantling the penal laws surrounding Catholicism began in the 1770s and was not complete until 1829, the year after the Test and Corporation Acts were repealed and Protestant dissenters were granted civil rights. However, *de facto* toleration was part of eighteenth century English life, as Voltaire realised in 1726. Across Europe states were having to come to terms with dissenting minorities and pluralism. The maintenance of peace began to outweigh the necessity of religious uniformity.

2. The Enlightenment

The Enlightenment is often told as the story of the progress of the world from Christian superstition and short-sightedness to secular

clarity and wisdom. That is far from the truth. If toleration is one root of the Enlightenment, humanist scholarship is another, and in the hands of Erasmus, Zwingli, Luther and Calvin it flourished. The reformations were in part a return to original sources, to the actual text of the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures. That was an academic exercise of considerable learning and skill. Erasmus was the first holder of the Lady Margaret's chair of divinity at Cambridge, Zwingli was deeply respected as a learned pastor, Luther was a university teacher, and Calvin's first book was on Seneca's *De Clementia*. There was nothing intellectually half-hearted about the Protestant reformations. They were expressions of cutting edge intellectual life.

A third root is science, or natural philosophy as it was known in the late seventeenth century. The early 'natural philosophers' were Christians. Newton, for example, wrote more about the prophecies of Daniel and Revelation as he did about gravity. He was also fascinated by alchemy. Those interests in the mysterious, almost mystical, past were allied to acute observation and a marked capacity for abstraction. Diarmaid MacCulloch has suggested that Newton thought that all of his work was part of a common task of reformation. His theological investigations led him discreetly and privately doubt the doctrine of the trinity, yet his pursuit of natural philosophy was religious – '...the first religion was the most rational of all others till the nations corrupted it. For there is no way without revelation to come to the knowledge of a Deity but by the frame of nature.'⁹

This was also the beginning of the age of experiment and observation, yet broadly that exploration remained within a Christian intellectual framework. In 1761 John Newbery published a children's book *Newtonian System of Philosophy*. The main character is a philosopher called Tom Telescope. He lectures the children on matter and motion (illustrated by a spinning top), the solar system, the air, geography, animals, vegetables and minerals and the senses. The children are

⁹ Diarmaid MacCulloch *A history of Christianity* (London, Penguin 2009) p 9
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encouraged to look at the night sky through a wooden telescope and learn that each star is probably a sun circled by planets which are full of living beings ‘...all intended to magnify the Almighty Architect.’

This is a world that is familiar to us – it’s the world of the meeting house and the dissenting academy. Charles Morton’s academy at Newington Green (c.1675-85) was equipped with a laboratory, and the syllabus included ‘natural philosophy, logic, geography and history’, but he excelled at mathematics. Doddridge’s students at Northampton studied not just theology but ‘...trigonometry, conic sections, and celestial mechanics, consisting of a collection of important propositions taken chiefly from Sir Isaac Newton.’ John Horsley of Newcastle kept a school in Morpeth, lectured on natural philosophy and was a Fellow of the Royal Society. On his death his extensive scientific apparatus passed to Caleb Rotherham who kept an academy at Kendal from 1735-1752. He taught ‘...the nature of matter, the laws of motion, mechanics...heat...optics, light and colours and astronomy, and when he died, his equipment went to Warrington Academy, founded in 1757, where Joseph Priestley taught briefly.¹⁰

The conflict between science and religion belongs not to the Enlightenment, but to a later age. But, there was a shift of mentality and culture between, say, 1660 and 1700. It too was one of the unintended consequences of the reformations. Almost in reaction to the extremes of violence which had scarred the previous century, the churches sought a more peaceful, tolerant version of Christianity. The interventionist, providentialist God who moves through the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament gave way to a God who created the world, endowed humans with reason to understand its laws, and granted the world order. Latitudinarian, deist maybe, but after such violence who could blame them for stepping away from a

¹⁰ Michael Watts *The Dissenters: from the reformation to the French revolution* (Oxford, OUP 1978) pp368-71

confessionalism that had reaped the whirlwind. It is the world of that gentle, good Anglican the poet and playwright Joseph Addison:

What though in solemn silence all
Move round the dark terrestrial ball?
What though no real voice nor sound
Amid the radiant orbs be found?
In reason's ear they all rejoice
And utter forth in glorious voice,
Forever singing as they shine,
'The hand that made us is divine.'¹¹

In that sense, the change of mood which we call the Enlightenment also touched and transformed the church. Revelation and the supernatural were downplayed, morality, goodness and God given laws of nature and the universe were stressed. Indeed, some scholars talk about a religious or a Christian Enlightenment. That represents a dramatic shift in understanding. Long ago when I was an undergraduate, the textbook assumption was that the Enlightenment was a 'war' on Christianity (Peter Gay) or that Christianity was on trial. It was far from that. Most eighteenth century Christians were more afraid of religious 'enthusiasm' which might lead to revolution than reason. Some looked to reason as the key to re-defining and re-invigorating the faith. Men like William Robertson, Principal of Edinburgh University for thirty years, historian and leader of the Moderate party in the Church of Scotland espoused a 'broad, world-affirming theology' Those who thought like him, and there were many in England and across Europe, wanted a simpler, clearer, moral religion, and were convinced that reason and revelation could be reconciled through concentrating on the moral essentials of Christianity which would be confirmed by the study of nature and its laws.¹²

¹¹ MacCulloch *op cit* p787, 'The spacious firmament on high'

¹² Helena Rosenblatt 'The Christian Enlightenment' in Timothy Tackett and Stewart J. Brown *Cambridge History of Christianity vol 7 Enlightenment, reawakening and revolution 1660-1815* (Cambridge, CUP 2008) pp 283-301

The Enlightenment is diffuse and therefore difficult to grasp. We've seen how it embraced the very different strands of toleration, scholarship, science, philosophy and indeed theology, but as it developed during the eighteenth century it concentrated on what could be observed, measured and known. Its scope increased. For Diderot and the French encyclopedists it was about the dispassionate collection and distribution of all knowledge. All areas of life fell under its aegis. One recent study has the following chapter or section headings – science, toleration, anthropology, sex, politeness, agriculture, medicine, aesthetics, commerce, and political economy.¹³ The common thread was a concentration on this world, on human betterment and improvement, on tomorrow being better than today. Few thinkers of the Enlightenment had a naïve view of inevitable progress, but they were convinced that advances in science, medicine and the understanding of political economy would improve the human lot, and they were right.

It was that sharp concentration on the things of this world that eventually helped de-throne theology, the supernatural and God. Voltaire's coruscating wit, Diderot's atheism, Rousseau's natural religion, and Descartes' dualism of material and immaterial all contributed, but it was above all Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) who drew the parameters for a new world. Kant described the Enlightenment as '... the freedom to make public one's use of reason with the goal of liberating mankind from its self-imposed immaturity.'¹⁴

Prior to Kant philosophers assumed that each individual mind gave a picture of the real structures of the real world. Kant argued that this was not so. The mind orders the world by the ways in which it interprets experience. There are 'Ideas' which are beyond experience,

¹³ Ritchie Robertson *The Enlightenment: the pursuit of happiness 1680-1790* (London, Allen Lane 2020)

¹⁴ John Robertson *The Enlightenment, a very short introduction* (Oxford, OUP 2015) p7

and therefore incapable of proof by reason. Kant called these 'God', 'Freedom' and 'Immortality'. They can be reached rather by conscience. So Kant's system postulates a God, and a life beyond the life of this world, but this is a God whose existence cannot be proved, and who has no need of revelation. No manger, no cross, no Jesus, just the movings of our consciences. It is the ultimate philosophy of this world and no more, and as such it set the scene for the development of philosophy and theology into the nineteenth century.

There are, of course, theological responses to Kant which take revelation seriously – Thomist Catholicism and Barthian Protestantism are two examples. It is easy, and all too fashionable, to criticise the Enlightenment, to blame it for the environmental catastrophe, for the all-commanding power of the market, for racial stereotyping and the holocaust – and critics have. But we should be wary of throwing out the baby with the bath-water. Human life *is* incomparably better thanks to the growth of science, incomparably easier thanks to technology, and profoundly better resourced thanks to political economy. Any Christian critique should be deeply grateful for those God-given skills. But a Christian critique might also wish to point out that although the reformations increased pluralism, post-Enlightenment philosophy has multiplied it exponentially.

One church historian who also has a doctorate in philosophy concluded a rapid survey of Western philosophy by noting that '...it can be simply observed that in no domain of philosophy since the seventeenth century has there ever been general agreement about what reason dictates, discloses or prescribes, whether in terms of metaphysics, epistemology, philosophical anthropology or morality.'¹⁵

A Christian critique might also point to the fact that classical Christianity carefully distinguished between God and the world. God's

¹⁵ Brad Gregory *The unintended reformation: how a religious revolution secularised society* (London, Harvard UP 2012) p 123

freedom is absolute precisely because God is not a being as we are beings, and is therefore not subject to temporal and spatial constraints. It is that which makes revelation possible.

It is important to remember too that the Enlightenment co-incident with both the religious awakenings of the Evangelical Revival in America and Europe, and with Romanticism, indeed was intertwined with them. Historically at least, reason and feeling, calculation and emotion, joined hands. Wesley's heart may have been strangely warmed, but he was also a great champion of 'natural philosophy'. His best-selling book was his handbook of practical medicine, *Primitive Physick*. He was in the words of one of his biographers 'a reasonable enthusiast'. Think too of Wordsworth above Tintern Abbey:

And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
A motion, a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of thought
And rolls through all things.¹⁶

Kant did not have it all his own way. There were different ways of looking at the world. In their fervent youth Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge had been ardent supporters of the French revolution which had seemed to embody so many of the ideals of the Enlightenment – liberty, self-determination, equality, and the enthronement of reason and the toppling of the church. But as revolution turned to terror and then to Napoleonic dictatorship, they

¹⁶ Lines composed a few miles above Tintern Abbey, on revisiting the banks of the Wye during a tour. July 13 1798

grew disillusioned, and they found consolation and meaning in nature. Meaning was to be found not in political agendas and constitutions, but in nature under the tutelage of God. Sitting by his baby son's cradle Coleridge pictures him growing up not in a great city but in the countryside, by lakes and sandy shores and mountain,

...so shalt thou see and hear
The lovely shapes and sounds intelligible
Of that eternal language, which thy God
Utters, who from eternity doth teach
Himself in all, and all things in himself.
Great universal Teacher! He shall mould
Thy spirit, and by giving make it ask.¹⁷

William Blake was more specific:

Mock on, Mock on Voltaire, Rousseau:
Mock on, mock on: 'tis all in vain!
You throw sand against the wind,
And the wind blows in back again....

The Atoms of Democritus
And Newton's Particles of light
Are sands upon the Red sea shore
Where Israel's tents do shine so bright.¹⁸

Romanticism was a reaction against the growth of science, the industrialising of the countryside. It preferred intuition to observation, feeling to reason, the soaring spires of medievalism to classical columns. The German artist Caspar David Friedrich noted that became increasingly popular. We see it in Pugin and Barry's design of the palace of Westminster, in the rash of Victorian Gothic churches and chapels

¹⁷ 'Frost at Midnight', partially quoted in Simon Schama *A history of Britain vol 3 The fate of Empire 1776-2000* (London BBC 2002) p 100

¹⁸ Geoffrey Keynes *Blake, Complete Writings* (Oxford 1966) p 418

which shape our urban landscapes, and in the liturgical quest for the beauty of holiness which spilled over from the Oxford Movement into Anglicanism and then the Free Churches.

The Enlightenment stimulated exploration scholarship in every area of life. Two were to be determinative for the future of Christianity and the rise of secularism. The first was the study of geology and its exploration of the age of earth. The second was the study of history, and particularly of texts. The first began in the late 17th century with works like John Woodward's *Essay toward a natural history of the earth* (1695) which suggested that fossils were living beings from the period before the flood.¹⁹ It flourished, and as it did so undermined any literal reading of Genesis, and dumbfounded traditional assumptions about the age of the earth. However, we need to remember that in the early nineteenth century the two ablest geologists were Adam Sedgwick and William Buckland, professors of the subject at Oxford and Cambridge respectively, both devout Anglican priests who found in their professional studies a profound new demonstration of God's purpose and providence. Within our own tradition, John Pye-Smith, Principal of Homerton Academy wrote *On the relation between Holy Scripture and some parts of Geological Science* in 1839 in which he jettisoned the recent creation of the earth, original chaos, the creation of the heavens after the earth, the derivation of all animals and vegetables from one centre of creation, the belief that animals were not subject to death until the fall of man, and the universal flood. Enlightened, serious Christianity coped with the rise of science, but there was a gap developing between educated and popular theology.²⁰

History is, amongst other things, the study of texts and their contexts. Part of the Enlightenment was the examination of those two critical texts for Christianity, the Old and New Testaments. In a sense this was yet another unintended consequence of the Protestant reformations,

¹⁹ Robertson *op cit* p75

²⁰ Owen Chadwick *The Victorian Church* vol 1 (London, A & C Black 1966) p 563
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the return to the original Hebrew and Greek sources. Just before his death in 1707, John Mill, the principal of St Edmund Hall in Oxford, produced an edition of the Greek NT which had 30,000 variant readings. That in itself showed that no stable text of the NT existed. Scholars like the German professor Hermann Reimarus began to apply historical method to the texts. For example, Exodus 12:37-8 says that 600,000 men of war, beside their families and flocks and herds passed through the Red Sea. Reimarus worked out that if there were so many fighting men, the nation would have numbered 4.2 million, making a column 49 miles long, slowed by children, the infirm, animals and baggage wagons. It was, in other words, impossible.²¹



Reimarus then became the first scholar to investigate the historical Jesus. He wrote that the authentic teaching of Jesus had been obscured by the apostles and gospel writers who were intent on building a supernatural theological narrative over Jesus' simple and straightforward moral teaching. Jesus' mission was political – he wanted to set up the Messianic kingdom, and that was why he rode into Jerusalem and turned the money changers

out of the Temple. Small wonder the priesthood contrived his arrest and crucifixion. The resurrection was concocted. The disciples had stolen the body and made up the story that Jesus had risen from the death because they had no desire to return to the obscurity from which they had come. And gradually the huge theological edifice which became Christianity derived from this deception.

Reimarus's work was only published in fragments, but it was the beginnings of a movement which reached its apogee and stability in the mid C19th as New Testament studies began to take the shape by which

²¹ Robertson *op cit* p 189

we know it today – the serious study of texts as texts. Reimarus's theories were wild, and they were reined back by others. However, by the mid nineteenth century the Bible was a very different book to the one studied by Isaac Newton. It had become a text just like any other.

Those are just some of the ways in which the modern world began to be shaped. I've confined myself to just some of the unintended consequences of the reformations, and I hope shown some of the complexity of the Enlightenment. The two belong together. They overlap and are intertwined. Both were to do with the mind, indeed with reason and understanding. Both were deeply concerned about texts. Both, initially at least in the case of the Enlightenment, were concerned about morality and God. Both took revelation seriously and believed that human reason and revelation were gifts of God. Together they opened the gate for secularism. Pluralism leads to toleration and toleration to acceptance and acceptance to the right to believe nothing. That, coupled to the Enlightenment's championing of the knowable and measurable, began to push God and faith to the margins.

By the time of the 1851 religious census, half the population were not in church, if they had ever been. They are still not there, indeed most of the population are not there now. The religious history of the twentieth century is of the quiet growth of a humanism which has achieved an epochal shift in human behaviour. The Christian creed has been quietly laid aside for a linked set of principles – the 'golden rule', human equality, bodily and sexual autonomy.

Historians debate the roots of this shift. It has happened since 1945, which leads some to suggest that it is a reaction against Nazi genocide – the modelling of an ethic which is the precise opposition of the

twentieth century's greatest evil.²² Or does it have deeper roots, in the explorations of the Enlightenment? Whatever the answer may be, in Western Europe at least, the church remains a minority culture, a voice on the margins, albeit having shaped the Western world as Holland argues. Elsewhere, Africa, South America, Asia, there is prodigious growth, largely Pentecostal, charismatic, Spirit focused, built around individual prosperity. What shape might the Christian future have, and will we, heirs of the reformations and the Enlightenment, recognise it?

Reading Party thoughts from a Unitarian – Julian Smith



Still central to Free to Believe (FTB), the URC's liberal wing, is Rev Martin Camroux: Minister; religious writer; and former *Times*' Preacher of The Year. It was my great pleasure to finally meet Martin recently. As a young preacher I was inspired by numerous sermons of his published in *The Expository Times* and I owe him a great deal for his unconscious contribution to my Biblical knowledge and Unitarian Lay Minister formation. This opportunity arose due to a FTB post on Facebook which came my way. I am somehow a Facebook Friend of FTB, which adds up when I think about it. I am a Unitarian of the traditional Christocentric variety and more of a Liberal Christian than a

²² Alec Ryrie *Unbelievers: an emotional history of doubt* (London, William Collins 2019) pp 202-3

Unitarian these days. The FTB post from Martin advertised that there were still places left on the FTB Reading Party looking at Tom Holland's favourably reviewed *Dominion* at Westminster College, Cambridge. Needing a break and some theological stimulus, I checked my diary, found I could do it with moving this and that around, and booked it. It more than met my expectations and I came away very pleased indeed with the insights I had gained and the people I had met.

The Reading Party was held from 31st August to 3rd September 2021, commencing with dinner and a welcome from Martin on day one, and concluding with Communion (celebrated by Rev Liz Byrne; with the sermon delivered by Rev Helen Mee) and lunch on day four. On days one, two and three, prayers were led by Rev Ann Lewitt. These had a feminist flavour, which I failed to see the relevance of, but did the job well enough. The Reading Party was very ably and gently led by velvet voiced Rev Nigel Uden of Downing Place URC, Cambridge, the immediately former URC Moderator, who had immersed himself in *Dominion* not just by repeated reading, but also by repeated listening to an audiobook version of *Dominion* which included a contribution by Tom Holland himself. It showed. Each day he unpacked chapter after chapter faithfully and clearly. A particular bonus for me, as I had not found *Dominion* an easy read logically and stylistically. This was followed by quite lively discussions facilitated by Nigel. Woke assumptions found expression somewhat surprisingly amongst our group which was getting on in years, but these were of some relevance to what was under discussion.

The first highlight for me was naturally meeting Martin. The second highlight for me was Rev Dr David Cornick's contribution. David is a URC Minister, Fellow and Director of Studies in Theology and Religious Studies at Robinson College, Cambridge, former Principal of Westminster College, Cambridge, and former General Secretary of both Churches Together in Britain and Ireland and the URC. None of which surprises me. He has valuable things to say, is

fascinating to listen to, and is a thoroughly nice chap not beyond enjoying an ice cream cornet with a grandchild. It was his job to fill in a few gaps in Holland's account of particular significance to Protestant Liberal Christians, that is in relation to the Reformation and the Enlightenment. These areas are very familiar to me from my formal and informal Biblical and theological studies as a Unitarian, yet David's handling of them brought me new food for thought.

I was delighted that David included the Radical Reformation within the Reformation itself (still an option in some circles, sadly), and while I understood why he could not say more about the Radical Reformers (who were less influential than Luther et al and less relevant to his audience historically), a bit more would have been useful given the eminence of Baptists amongst the historic Free Churches today and the disproportionate contribution of the also Nonconformist Unitarians (usually descended from Presbyterians, and which had taken its best buildings according to Liz Byrne in the pub) and Quakers to progressive Christianity today. Indeed, as David was rather unsympathetic to Calvinism (not altogether fairly in my view), he might have illustrated a few points by reference to the Unitarian martyr Servetus, in whose execution Calvin was deeply implicated for all Servetus was a pain who had it coming to him, bless him.

David's treatment of the Enlightenment and the emergence of the modern world was another detailed, fascinating, and entirely persuasive tour de force. Throughout it, however, I heard the waves crashing on Matthew Arnold's *Dover Beach* as I thought I had heard in David's treatment of the Reformation. 'The sea of faith / Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore / Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled' during the Pre-Reformation Catholic Church, as Holland suggested. And like Holland also suggested, Christendom was then rent apart by ever-splitting Protestantism and invincible modern thought so that '...now I only hear / Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar / Retreating, to the breath / Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear / And naked shingles of the world.' Westminster College, Cambridge out of term on a grey day can feel rather like a once fine and now abandoned fortress overlooking

the English Channel, its relevance in the modern world diminishing with each withdrawing wave.

Church closures and the loss of true glory by a large, powerful, influential denomination was felt keenly by me throughout my stay. It was outside my experience as a member of a much smaller, if not undistinguished, Protestant group; and was within my experience as someone concerned with the numerical decline of that much smaller cause and what passes for its faith these days theologically and professionally in many places. Holland's book, however, brought me hope for the Church in Britain and the West more generally. For all the historic abuse cases that have undermined the Church so gravely and, again, continuing church closures, the legacy of its faith is increasingly understood as the bulwark it is against rampant materialism and individualism, identity politics and fundamentalist Islam, to mention only four of the current threats to our essentially Christian civilisation. Discovering who one is, is now increasingly more rooted in the community, its history and traditional spirituality than in the self. While we might not be big on Hell and damnation these days, as inheritors of Western Civilisation we all know from personal experience what misery life is outside the Church and what joy can be found therein, which we would not, could not be without. It is time to share the good news that there is a much better life waiting for most people in their local churches which are cradles of our civilisation and its locally flavoured touching points. Our reach should not be limited to the recognisably marginalised. The most lost and needy, spiritually, are surely the comparatively comfortable in worldly terms, and we need some of their money and expertise.

Communion on the last day was lovely. Liz's order and delivery were superb and Helen's sermon most stimulating. Helen emphasised God's changeability rather than immutability. I enjoyed that. But surely it is more our understanding of God that changes than God himself changing. As I departed and took in the friendly faces of the Reading Party and the magnificent Arts

and Crafts architecture of Westminster College, I thought that the God who has given us these will do for me and for anybody if they want to taste a bit of Heaven on earth. Amen. *Julian Smith*

Sermon preached by Helen Mee at the Reading Party

James 2:14-17 (The Voice)

Brothers and sisters, it doesn't make any sense to say you have faith and act in a way that denies that faith. *Mere talk never gets you very far, and a commitment to Jesus only in words will not save you.* It would be like seeing a brother or sister without any clothes *out in the cold* and begging for food, and saying, "Shalom, *friend*, you should get inside where it's warm and eat something," but doing nothing about his needs—*leaving him cold and alone on the street*. What good would your words alone do? The same is true with faith.

Mark 7:24-30 (NRSV)

The Syrophenician Woman's Faith

From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter." So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

Sermon

Grant us open hands, open hearts and open minds.²³

I am going to have a shot at weaving some kind of Free to Believe Reading Party 2021 word cloud. Feel free to imagine it behind me,

I am a woman who has grown up in the church, someone who in general has been relatively comfortable there – or at least who can be.

I have memories in church that go right back – my mother preparing me for proper church behaviour telling me I could read a story during the sermon and then refusing to let me take along whichever story book I had fished out. My mother's plan was that I was to read a bible story to be found in one of the dusty King James Versions in the pews (no illustrations!).

Later when I was big enough to go to Sunday School there was the weekly ritual of warming the cold, damp balls of plasticine on the base of the gas fire until they were malleable
And yet whether out of habit or not I stayed.

I can be and regularly am traumatised by the bloody history of the church, the active ushering in a time of sadism and superstition; I recognise the church as an agent of terror, I abhor the patriarchy and paternalism, the white Christendom-centric hetero supremacy, the lack of welcome of the other and most disconcerting is that on occasion these things are not only the story of the church's past but of now too.

But I am compelled to own and to confess that this is the story - or part of the story - of the church in that part of the world North of the Brandt line and therefore part of my story.

²³ Rev Jo Clare-Young, St Andrew's URC, Scarborough

Put slightly differently, the poet Mary Oliver wrote a poem 'to the empire' but I propose that for empire we could read church

*"We will be known as a culture that feared death and adored power, that tried to vanquish insecurity for the few and cared little for the penury of the many. We will be known as a culture that taught and rewarded the amassing of things, that spoke little if at all about the quality of life for people (other people), for dogs, for rivers. All the world, in our eyes, they will say, was a commodity. And they will say that this structure was held together politically, which it was, and they will say also that our politics was no more than an apparatus to accommodate the feelings of the heart, and that the heart, in those days, was small, and hard, and full of meanness."*²⁴

I acknowledge that, I see it as part of his and her story but assert that going forward it is not good enough.

Back in my naïve Sunday School days we sang CSSM Choruses and Songs from a Hymn Book called Golden Bells – and people wonder when my theology started to go askew!

You need to be so grateful that I can't sing anymore so I wont break into this one – but any of you feel free

*"He lives, He lives Christ Jesus lives today
He walks with me and talks with me along life's narrow way
He lives, he lives Christ Jesus lives today
All may change but Jesus never, glory to his name."*

And I can remember a time, just, when that seemed fine

²⁴ Mary Oliver, Red Bird, Published by Beacon Press 2008

But really – all may change but Jesus never?
Seriously?

Me, born in God's image exposed it seems to constant transition and change – from birth to death and yet all may change but Jesus never
For me this did not and does not sit comfortably and I started to question and now, for me I realise that if I feel, emotionally, too comfortable for too long in Church then something is wrong and I am not attending to allotted tasks of being exposed to new perspectives, of transitioning, of contributing to more insights/ yet more light and truth to break forth from God's word to precis John Robinson.

It is this notion of change that I hope we can explore this morning.

Lets take ourselves back 2000ish years into the gospel story we listened to

Who is this Jesus? A wise rabbi? or supreme manipulator leading the conversation to make his own point?

Who is this marginalised, foreign (as foreign in Tyre as Jesus and his friends), needy woman? A humble woman written in to a story to be a role model for people of faith especially women?

Or a role model for the disenfranchised and powerless spurred on by love and a sense of justice?

A role model for all post colonial peoples as a displaced woman reclaims her place at the table?²⁵

In this encounter we are offered a glimpse of God Incarnate. Truly human and like all of us the product of our socialisation, our culture and the traditions

²⁵ This is based on a memory of something I heard the theologian Aruna Gnanadason say many years ago. I suspect it is expanded in her paper but I did not check that out [“Jesus and the Asian Woman: A Post-colonial Look at the Syro-Phoenician Woman/Canaanite Woman from an Indian Perspective”](#)

which inform it. Jesus was a Jewish man, the Jewish people steeped in centuries of xenophobia.

And he also was informed by a traditional understanding that salvation was for the Jews either the Jews alone or the Jews first

But here in Tyre we are spectators to a crossing of a border that is not only geographic, not only cultural.

It is a watershed, an epiphany moment for Jesus of Nazareth

But a kairos moment for the gospel and followers of the gospel

Jesus changed his mind, Jesus' mind is changed

Surely this can be described as a paradigm shift from peculiar (in the older understanding of the word) to open and inclusive

And there we have it. The good news

The good news on which my faith is built; not only "I have come that you should have life and have it more abundantly" (John 10:10) but, for me, I have come that you ALL should have life and have it more abundantly.

And of course we were reminded last night that Nelson Mandela said something very similar in 1994 when addressing the Zionist Christian Church Easter Conference. Essentially Jesus who is the Christ did not draw boundaries by race or country or language or cultural identity but, says Mandela, "chose all of humankind"²⁶

No exceptions, all are welcome, for all the dilemmas that that creates.

Where do you see the Syrophenician woman embodied today?

I wish I could claim that you might catch a little of her reflected in me but I am a privileged white woman with first world problems I can't appropriate her context. Equally I am sad that although I might have been able to discourse

²⁶ Nelson Mandela; 1994; Zionist Christian Church, Easter Conference; Quoted by Tom Holland; Dominion: The Making of the Western Mind; Abacus; 2019

with Jesus on that cultural, philosophical, religious level I have never been adept at the quick retort. I would have thought of a good response 30 mins after Jesus and his pals had wandered off down the street.

But I have some candidates for you. People who by their words, actions or presence make us pause, take stock and move us radically, move us to the core. Create Kairos space for us.

Firstly a young woman whose name I don't know and whom I have never met but in her being has had a great impact on me. I attended a WCC event with a focus on disability. I had a long career working with adults who have learning disabilities. There the mother of a young woman who had profound and complex disabilities shared her art work expressing her experience as the mother of her daughter but the heart stopping moment for me was when she said My daughter is made in the image of God – she has all the time in the world. (don't ever forget that people born with disabilities don't experience that 1st unconditional love as a newborn but rather love which includes I wish you were different)

Anyone who has stood up and said 'me too' whether that context has been the entertainment industry, the church, places where young people were being offered care and support or any other place.

Anyone who is forced to repeat the words of Eric Garner & George Floyd – 'I can't breathe' because Black Lives do Matter and excessive force, intolerance and institutional racism are unacceptable.

Every theologian (not necessarily professional) who brings any thinking to the table not formed initially by the Western mind.

And finally I offer Greta Thunberg the young climate change activist who challenged world leaders; “You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words.”²⁷

These people risk or are subject to ridicule and contempt for something that you know deep in your heart is right?

They are people who back up talk with action. Remember James’ tells us that “Mere talk never gets you very far, and a commitment to Jesus only in words will not save you.” (James 2:14b; The Voice) Any preferential option for the other, the marginalised, is meaningless unless it is accompanied by radical action.

One last story which comes from a different wisdom tradition it belongs to the Inuit peoples and I first heard it when I was at a chaplaincy conference in Nova Scotia. It is worthy of a proper telling and hearing but for today just the headlines.

A young woman displeased her father and he had her thrown from the headland into the sea. Eventually only her skeleton remained swept back and forward by the waves.

That skeleton became entangled in a fisherman’s line and when he realised what he had snagged he tried to free his line but he had been shocked and scared by the discovery and raced for the shore and the comfort of home. Not actually working out that the skeleton was snared he felt that it was literally chasing him rather than the fact that he was dragging it.

At home his fear subsided and as if he saw the guddle of bones in a new light, he set about disentangling them straightening the joints and placing the limbs where they should be.

²⁷ Speech to *U.N. 's Climate Action Summit 23/9/19*

He then went to bed and he dreamt of that young woman and the horror she had experienced. He cried in his sleep and the skeleton woman saw those tears, approached and drank them. Whilst she was close to him she felt his heart beating as if it were a drum and she placed her hand over his chest and removed it.

She held the heart gently becoming attuned to the beating rhythm. As she did so, flesh began to grow on her bones, until she was skeleton no longer, but a healthy vibrant young woman.

She replaced the fisherman's heart and when he awoke and saw the young woman, they fell in love.²⁸

You won't be surprised to know that a whole body of material has been produced to explore this tale but for me the take away is that
You can't lend your heart to another without being profoundly, radically
changed yourself

Let me say that again

You can't lend your heart to another without being profoundly, radically
changed yourself

Whether you are Jesus of Nazareth

Whether you are Thomas Aquinas

Whether you are Martin Luther

Whether you are Isaac Newton

Whether you are Helen Mee

It is in our Christian DNA to tell and share stories and I think we understand the impact of stories and in turn those who share their stories with us. Our scriptures are full of testimonies from the ancient faithful, speaking to us across time and beyond time.

²⁸ Precis of Skeleton Woman a story belonging to the Inuit peoples of Northern Canada and environs

Or church fathers or mothers standing in the tradition of the church or any other who has with a word influenced us

But I suggest they all stand in the tradition of a Syrophenician woman in Tyre And we need to be **woke** to that discourse because this is the core of the discipleship to which we are all called. It is a discourse which eases and cajoles us, encourages us and if necessary pulls us screaming towards an understanding of our call to discipleship

We are called, in fact I would argue that it is an imperative, that the lava of the radical discipleship to which Jesus called us is not seen as set (with apologies to Tom Holland²⁹) but rather is life changing that it gets to the root of the issue or the heart of the matter

I call you to replace your potentially small hard full of meanness hearts with ones that are large in the sense of having the space to love and keep on expanding, that are welcoming and generous.

²⁹ Tom Holland; Dominion: The Making of the Western Mind; Abacus; 2019; Page 277
“The lava of its radicalism, though, had long since set.”

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I call you to bring your insights, your stories, your commitment and join me in our calling to discipleship, to walking the way of Jesus today to, as my friend Lawrence Moore would say, to making a Jesus shaped difference in the world today

Glory to God, Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer – let the people say - **AMEN**



Our next conference will be 14-16th July next year at High Leigh on the theme of *Keeping Hope Alive*.

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Karen Campbell, URC Secretary for Global and Intercultural Ministries

Alex Clare-Young, is a pioneer minister in the URC and author of *Being Human, Trans and Christian*

Helen Garton. Minister of St Columba's Oxford.

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