

## Food for Thought: “The Upside-down Christ and His Upside-down Kingdom.”



A few months ago, my wife and I went to the Science Museum in London with three of our grandsons. In the interactive ‘Wonder Lab’, we looked into a mirror and appeared to be standing on our heads; we were inverted, turned upside-down! It was quite an unsettling experience. However this, it seems to me, is exactly what Christ does whenever he comes to us and establishes his Kingdom. If we are expecting him to leave us the ‘right way up’, as the world views things, we may be disappointed.

Jesus was indeed a revolutionary, overturning the tables of the money-changers in the temple and challenging nearly all of the ‘givens’ of his day and therefore of ours also.

In his ‘Sermon on the mount’, for example, he re-defines what constitutes murder and adultery; tightens the conditions under which divorce may be allowed; undercuts the desire to retaliate against those who hurt, harm and sue us, and says that everything and everyone is to be covered with the all-welcoming, all-embracing, universal love of God (Mt. 5:21-48). Wow, imagine a society, a political party, or even a church, that operated along these lines!

In this article, I will look at Jesus’ upside-down teaching and practice as it relates to 3 areas: -

- Marriage and Sexual Morality
- Money and Financial Responsibility
- Power and Authority and How They Are Exercised

Finally, in the light of how the Bible says things will be before Jesus returns – i.e. times of pressure, people loving themselves, money and pleasure rather than loving God - I will look at what I consider to be the myth of human progress – i.e. continuous improvement, utopianism, the ascent of man - before contrasting the fragile, transient kingdoms of the world with the unshakeable, indestructible, upside-down and eternal Kingdom of God.

### **Marriage and Sexual Morality**

Today we live in a highly sexualised culture which promotes, as freedom, multiple sexualities and having multiple partners. Marriage, as Jesus defines it, is between ‘a man and a woman’, ‘male and female’ (Mt. 19:4&5). But today our sexual identities are apparently multiple: trans, lesbian, gay, bisexual, asexual, heterosexual, intersex etc. And we are encouraged to experiment because, we are told, the goal of sexual activity is self-fulfilment.

Shahidha Bari on Radio 4’s ‘Analysis’ programme in 2019 said that the TV programme ‘Love Island’ dramatized love as a market place. Multiple sexual encounters are seen as a necessary process in finding that ‘self-fulfilment’ with the right person. Marriage is not now seen as the beginning of a long exploration of commitment, but as the possible end of a long period of trial and error, research and experimentation. So it was that in 2017 the average age of men at first marriage in England and Wales was 38, and for women, 35.

But fewer and fewer people are choosing Jesus’ definition of marriage. Here in the U.K., marriage rates for heterosexual people have fallen to the lowest level since 1862 for both men (down by 75%), and women (down by 69%).

Even as Christians we may be impacted by this worldview and somehow come to believe that we **can** live by the Spirit **and** gratify the desires of our old sinful nature; that the two are somehow complementary, whereas the Bible says they are contrary and mutually exclusive (Gal. 5:16 & 17). Jesus’ view of marriage and sexual expression is indeed ‘upside down’ from the world’s point of view.

And Paul reminds the Christians in Corinth that there must be a clear distinction between the Church’s teaching and practice with regard to sexual ethics and that of the surrounding, prevailing culture. So the view, expressed by some today, that the Church needs to change its view on sexual ethics in order to keep up with the morals of our progressive society, seems to me to be actually regressive and to be causing much harm and confusion as well as denying Biblical teaching. (See 1 Cor. 6:9-20)

## Money and Financial Responsibility

There are still those who believe that we must get richer and richer to be happier and happier; that happiness is achieved through material prosperity. But along comes Jesus to turn that on its head! He said, 'A man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions', and that 'the person who stores up more and more for themselves but is not rich towards God, is a fool.' (Lk. 12:15-21)



We know that discussing money and materialism was Jesus' favourite topic of conversation. We can hardly turn a page in the gospels without reference to one of his pithy sayings, challenges and rebukes concerning money and its use or misuse.

'Go sell your possessions and give to the poor' (Lk. 12:33); 'how hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God' (Lk. 18:240); 'this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others' (Mk. 12:43); 'how dare you turn my Father's house into a market!' (Jn. 2:16); 'Take your pay and go. I want to give this man who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money?' (Mt. 20:14&15)

If Jesus had been teaching today, he would surely have included frequent references to the markets, the office for budget responsibility, the Bank of England, inflation, spending cuts, taxes, the IMF, borrowing etc. ~ he addressed all of the underlying financial issues of his own day, but we are sometimes reluctant to follow his example.

The Old Testament prophet Haggai beautifully illustrates a spiritual reason for inflation ~ i.e. not giving God and his Kingdom priority, serving ourselves and our own interests rather than His. The Lord Almighty says through Haggai: 'Give careful thought to your ways. You have planted much, but harvested little. You eat, but never have enough. You drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but are not warm. **You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it.**' (Haggai 1:5&6)

The antidote to this is the upside-down teaching of Christ who said, 'Sell your possessions and give to those in need. This will store up treasure for you in heaven! **And the purses of heaven never get old or develop holes!** (Lk. 12:33)

Recently I was sharing this with two guys, both Christians, who are instrumental in running Foodbank in Harlow. They said they had never quite made this connection before i.e. giving to the poor as a way of making deposits in the Bank of Heaven! This however, is one of the Divine incentives for giving, plus the fact that the Bank of Heaven is not subject to inflation, fraud, theft etc.! ~ Lk. 12:33. It also gives an excellent rate of return! ~ see Mal. 3:10; Lk.6:38.

In our own Town Centre Church, we have recently launched a 'Let there be Light' appeal hoping to raise £60,000 which, together with grants, will be used to rewire the whole site, provide new lighting and new audio-visuals. Each of us in the congregation will have to ask God, 'What do you require of me?'

It may be that some folks are happy to come along to church, sing, pray, maybe take communion, drink coffee and then go home. They are OK until something is required of them, and then they may not be so happy! But the question, 'What does God require of me?' is one we all need to address individually and collectively and in an ongoing way as we follow Jesus.

It was a question the prophet Micah asked the people of God, 'And what does the Lord require of you?' he said, and then answered it himself, 'To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.' (Micah 6:8)

### **Power and Authority and How They Are Exercised**

This is another area in which Jesus turned perspectives upside-down. Power and authority in Jesus' day (religious, political, economic), was vested in the Roman Empire and locally, for the Jews, in the Temple and the Sanhedrin, both in Jerusalem.

The important characters who strutted the stage at this time and in whom power and authority seemed to be invested were: -

**King Herod the Great** (declared to be 'King' by the Roman senate) who had to maintain a delicate balance between Roman power and Jewish nationalism. His outstanding legacy was the Temple he built for the Jews but the taxes he imposed to fund his vast expenditures were ruthlessly exacted.

He also exhibited paranoid tendencies when he had all the children under two years old killed in Bethlehem.

After his death, three of his sons ruled in his stead; **Herod Antipas** in western Galilee, who was a contemporary of Jesus and had John the Baptist's head cut off, **Phillip**, who was given responsibility over the north and northeast of the lake of Galilee, and **Archelaus**, who ruled over Judea and Samaria with Jerusalem as the centre.

Archelaus was removed from office by the **Emperor Augustus** in AD 6, during Jesus' childhood, and banished to Gaul. Augustus was the Emperor who decreed that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world and was therefore instrumental in Jesus being born in Bethlehem. A census was taken mainly for tax purposes. The efficient Roman bureaucracy collected taxes on houses, animals, sales, imports and exports. Land was taxed, as were any crops grown on the land. Then there was a poll tax levied on each male over the age of fourteen and every female over the age of twelve.

Augustus was Emperor until his death in AD 14 and he was then succeeded by **Tiberius** who was Emperor until AD 37.



Tiberias Caesar

**Pontius Pilate**, appointed in AD 26, was the Roman procurator/governor of Judea. His base was in Caesarea and he had 3000 soldiers under his command. 300-500 of them were permanently stationed in Jerusalem in the Fort Antonia overlooking the Temple area to prevent riots.

In terms of the Jewish religious/political/economic structures, power and authority were exercised mainly through the **Sanhedrin** (the Supreme Court), but Archelaus limited its geographical area of jurisdiction, in the time of Christ, to Judea. It was comprised of Pharisees, Sadducees, the high priest, the elders (tribal and family heads of the people and the priesthood), and the scribes i.e. the legal experts.

It exercised civil jurisdiction according to Jewish law and had administrative authority. It could order arrests by its own officers of justice and was empowered to judge cases which did not involve capital punishment. Capital cases required the confirmation of the Roman procurator. Therefore the Jews needed Pilate's permission for Jesus to be killed: "Pilate said, 'take him yourself and judge him by your own law.' 'But we have no right to execute anyone,' the Jews objected." (Jn. 18:31).

Within the Sanhedrin, it was the high priest who exercised most power and authority. At the time of Christ's trial it was **Caiaphas** who exercised this role but very much alongside his father-in-law **Annas** (Lk. 3:2; Jn. 18:12-14). Annas was appointed high priest in AD 6 but was deposed in AD 15 by the Romans. However, five of Annas' sons then became high priests and eventually his son-in-law Caiaphas. It was quite a family business.

Religion and money were inextricably linked in Temple worship. Especially important was the half shekel temple tax which Jewish males over the age of twenty were required to pay each year (Ex. 30:11-16). This tax, the equivalent of two days wages then, was due at the beginning of the Passover month each spring.

Tax collectors were sent out all over Israel to collect the money from those unable to make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem. On one occasion the collectors arrived in Capernaum and said to Peter, 'Doesn't your teacher pay the temple tax?'. 'He does', Peter confidently replied. But there was still no sign of any money changing hands so Peter retired into the house where Jesus was the first to bring up the topic! Read Mt. 17:24-27 to see what happened next. What do you make of it?

Another complication was that the temple tax had to be paid in the form of Tyrian silver coins because it contained higher quality silver than most coins. Since the Roman denarius was the widely used currency, money changers exchanged the denarius for Tyrian silver, usually at considerable profit to themselves.

*So, to bring this into the present, isn't it amazing how the money game continues to be played throughout the world today in bureaux de change, casinos, bingo-halls, some churches, the footsie-100, lotteries, governments, banks, money markets, cryptocurrency etc.?!*

After the temple tax were the various tithes and offerings required of the devout Jew, and after this there were the many personal contributions such as peace offerings, sin offerings, offerings for the dedication of a child etc. It was an expensive and exacting business.

So it was into this hotch-potch of supreme Roman power and delegated Jewish authority that Jesus was born and exercised his ministry. It was into this melting pot of political, religious and economic turmoil that his words, alarming for most, turned things upside down.....

**..... But First He Had To Get Things Sorted Out With The Devil....**

In Jesus' third temptation, the Devil took Jesus to a very high mountain, showed him all the kingdoms of the world, and their glory, and said if only Jesus would bow down and worship him, Jesus could have the lot. (Mt. 4:8-10)

It's interesting that this power and glory could only actually be had through an understanding with the Devil! Many have not realised this and have sought glory, power and fame in the hope that they could lead human beings, by way of their ideologies, their armies, their fraudulent promises, or the sheer force of their charismatic personalities, into brotherhood, peace and prosperity – but always with the same disastrous consequences as any Stalin, Napoleon, Hitler etc. testifies. In the establishment of every human kingdom, a bargain always has to be struck, knowingly or unknowingly, with the Devil.

So, in order to establish his own unique Kingdom, Jesus had to give the Devil short shrift; 'You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve'.

Alas, many folks today seem to equate the Kingdom of God with the kingdoms of this world, without realising that in Christ we have been taken out of the authority/dominion of darkness and transferred into the Kingdom of Christ (Col. 1:13). In trying to fulfil Jesus' call to be the light of the world, many have fallen into the dark trap, like Demas, of being in love with the world (2 Tim. 4:10). It is a fine line to tread, being in the world but not of the world.

With Jesus, there was always a clear demarcation and distinction between Caesar and God, between the Roman Empire and what was due to it, and God's Kingdom and what was due to Him (Mt.22:15-22). Jesus was very keen that we should understand that his Kingdom and his Kingship are 'not of this world' but 'from another place.' (Jn. 18:36&37) and that both His Kingdom and his Kingship operate on upside-down principles, from the world's point of view.

### **Take, first of all, the King's Birth ...**

Jesus came into the world, not as a prince, but as a pauper. Not in the guise of power, wealth and physical beauty, but in weakness, vulnerability, obscurity and humility. And very soon, this King became a refugee, a displaced person fleeing persecution in his own country and thus forever afterwards identifying with the millions who find themselves in this position today.

Mary, in her wonderful song of praise that God had chosen her to bear Jesus, understood fully that He 'has been mindful of the humble state of his servant' and 'has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble.' (Lk. 1:46-55)

### **.... Then The King's Ministry...**

This King had a special concern for the poor, the marginalised, the sick, the infirm and the oppressed. He turned the world's accepted standards upside-down. He chose the foolish to shame the wise, the weak to shame the strong; he said it was the poor in spirit, not the sophisticated, who were blessed; he said we should love our enemies, not hate them; and he taught that in losing we would find and in dying we would live.

He said that we should pursue holiness and righteousness, not power or money or sensual pleasure. And it is worth remembering that Christianity began, not among the brilliant academic minds, not among the wealthy, not among the celebrities of the day with a full set of dental implants, but among the simple, illiterate, work-a-day folk.

It seems to me that God is still committed to destroying the wisdom of the wise and frustrating the intelligence of the intelligent and that Christ and his crucifixion, resurrection and ascension remain as the sure foundation and expression of the power of God and the wisdom of God, though not understood, wanted or accepted by the majority (1 Cor. 1:18-31).

With regard to the call to be holy, I have been noticing recently the words and phrases that some people have on their T-shirts. There are the branding slogans, e.g. 'Just Do It'; the personal, 'I Need My Space'; the vague, 'Believe'; the disturbing, 'Greed is Good'; the environmental, 'Just Stop Oil'; the humorous, 'If your cup is only half full you probably need a different bra'.

Oh, yes, and a mass of tribal football shirts!

And then I read the message that Aaron the priest was commanded to wear, not on his chest, but on his forehead: **“HOLY TO THE LORD”**. How about wearing a T-shirt with that inscription on it and seeing what conversations ensue?! It would of course provide an equally strong challenge for the wearer! (See Ex. 28:36&37)

Jesus’ understanding and demonstration of the exercise of power and authority consistently turned upside-down the world’s thinking and practice. He demonstrated this, for example, when he washed the disciple’s feet ~ ‘Jesus laid aside his garments, and girded himself with a towel. Then he poured water into a basin, and began to wash the disciple’s feet, and to wipe them with the towel with which he was girded.’ (Jn. 13: 4&5)

The towel and basin are the tools of the slave. This upside-down King uses the instruments of the servant. Instead of reaching for the typically powerful symbols of sword, chariot and white stallion, Jesus reaches for the tools of service found at the bottom of the ladder.

Walter Brueggemann has called the towel and the basin ‘the tools and agents of shalom/wholeness/well-being.’ (1) And Jesus invites us to enter the towel and basin ministry with him. We are called to be a Kingdom of towel and basin people (Jn. 13:14&15).

It’s also worth remembering that in the gospels there are two bowls of water in the Passion story. This one in John 13 and the one in which Pilate washed his hands of all responsibility in handing Jesus over to be crucified (Mt.27:24). It seems to me that we can choose which bowl of water to use.

On another occasion, the disciples asked Jesus, **‘Who is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven/God?’**. And in answer, Jesus brought forward a little child and said, unexpectedly, ‘unless you change and become like little children you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.’ (Mt. 18:1-4). This is yet another upside-down truth.

And who can forget James’ and John’s mother, God bless her, keen for her special ‘sons of thunder’ to have special status, position and power at Jesus’ right hand in his kingdom ~ every mother’s dream for her offspring! And then the indignation of the other 10 disciples that James and John’s mother had got in first with the request! Oh, how these accounts ring true!

But then Jesus' upside-down response: 'You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. **Not so with you.** Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave.' (See Mt. 20:20-28)

### .... Then The King's Death...

If we ask the question, 'Why was Jesus killed from a human point of view?', it seems that he was put to death for a number of reasons: -

- Because the truth he spoke and the freedom he offered undermined the authority other men claimed and exercised.
- Because he was breaking the formal and informal religious and social rules created by the powerful religious elite (e.g. Jn. 5:16)
- Because the Sanhedrin believed that the popularity of Jesus would mean that 'the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation'. (Jn. 11:48)
- Because Pilate handed Jesus over to the chief priests, the crowd and the soldiers. (Jn. 19:16). Jesus could not have been crucified without Pilate's permission.
- Because Jesus was presented as a rival King to Caesar (Jn. 19:15)
- Because people were envious of him (Mt. 27:18)
- Because the teachers of the law, the high priest and the Sanhedrin said Jesus was blaspheming i.e. claiming to be God when he was a mere man (Jn. 10:33); calling God his own Father so making himself equal with God (Jn. 5:18); making himself out to be God by forgiving sins (Mt. 9:3); saying he was able to destroy the temple of God and rebuild it in three days (Jn. 2:19); saying they would see him sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of glory (Mt. 26:59-66) and saying he was 'the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One' (Mk. 14:61&62).
- Because he 'stirs up the people' (Lk. 23:5)
- Because 'he opposes payment of taxes to Caesar' (Lk. 23:2)

*Thus Jesus was crucified, from a human point of view, because he was seen as a political and religious insurrectionist ~ someone who turned things upside-down, disturbing the status quo.*

## **The Myth of Progress.**

There was a time when some Christians believed that it was up to us to build the Kingdom of God on earth before Jesus returned; that there would be continuous improvement in the affairs of human beings here on earth; that it was up to us to usher in a 'golden age'.

But does this fit in with how Jesus said things would be just before he returns? I think not. Jesus' view was upside-down.

Nevertheless, I still have a few friends who believe in the ascent of man/ utopianism/ progress, whatever you want to call it, but they are a dwindling bunch and to my mind probably belong more to the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries than to the 21<sup>st</sup>.

They remind me somewhat of the company of Norsemen who, in the prologue of William Morris's epic poem 'The Earthly Paradise', fled pestilence and set sail to seek the fabled Earthly Paradise 'across the western sea where none grow old'. But not having succeeded in their quest, they returned, 'shrivelled, bent, and grey'!

'Up and up and up and on and on and on' was the mantra at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the sure hope of advances taking place through political, financial, artistic and scientific breakthroughs.

It turned out to be the most tragic century in the history of humankind. San Francisco was destroyed by earthquake and fire in 1906; the Titanic sank in 1912; there was the deadly influenza pandemic in 1918; 10's of millions of people died in two world wars, and just think of all the demagogues who came and went having wreaked havoc on their own societies and beyond: Lenin, Mussolini, Hitler, Stalin, Mosely, Mao Tse-tung, Franco, Idi Amin, Pol Pot, Mugabe etc.

Yes, there were lights and luminaries along the way but it seems to me that the overall direction of travel was down rather than up; into physical, mental, and spiritual darkness rather than light.

The Wright brothers and Lindbergh took us into the air; the Concorde (which when built was the fastest and most sophisticated passenger airliner ever constructed) brought us down to earth, eventually crashing just after take-off and sealing its fate.

And whilst we were landing men on the moon, we were dropping more bombs on Vietnam and the surrounding countries than were dropped on all countries during WW2. And whilst antibiotics were curing some bacterial infections, other viral diseases were on the march.

Speaking of the moon (it is 50 years since astronauts from Apollo 17 last walked on its surface), I have just watched the launch of the new NASA Orion spacecraft, hurled into space by the 100-metre tall, Artemis rocket. (Artemis is Apollo's sister in Greek mythology).



Mike Sarafin, NASA's Artemis mission manager, has excelled himself with these words, "Today, we got to witness the world's most powerful rocket take the Earth by its edges and shake the wicked out of it!" His boss, Bill Nelson, not to be outdone, was equally ecstatic, "That's the biggest flame I've ever seen. It's the most acoustical shockwave that I have ever experienced. I have to say what we saw tonight was an A+."

Dream on boys! Reach for the moon, mars, the stars, and remember, each generation needs its vanity projects!

Every new year, every new decade, every new century, and every new millennium seem to bring renewed hope and optimism.... only to be dashed as we entered the new millennium in 2000 by a new wave of violence (the twin towers, the wars in Syria, Sudan, Somalia, Yemen, Ukraine etc.), new viruses causing pandemics and now the climate emergency.

Little wonder that fewer people today believe in the progress of humankind. For many, the burning question (pun intended!), is now, "Can human beings survive on planet earth?"

Recently on the news, I watched some scientists jumping up and down with glee after they had successfully guided a space vehicle to crash into a meteor and alter its trajectory. They say this might be useful if any such meteor should threaten earth in the future. On the same news broadcast there was a film report from Somalia showing a 2-year-old child being buried who had just died from malnutrition.

It is 38 years since the BBC journalist Michael Buerk and pop star Sir Bob Geldof drew our attention to the famine in Ethiopia in 1984, and here we are, still living in a world which actually has a food surplus, watching people die from malnutrition. Is that progress?

Many years ago, when it was being commissioned, one of the power stations I worked at was Drax in Yorkshire. When it was completed and on full load it could burn 30,000+ tonnes of coal every day! Today, 50 years later, and now burning 'environmentally friendly' sustainable biomass pellets instead of coal, it gives off more carbon dioxide than it did when it burned coal!

Only now are they getting round to the idea of installing carbon capture and storage technology but this, as well as being expensive, is unlikely to operate until 2030 and may well be too little, too late. Meanwhile Drax continues to be the biggest emitter of carbon dioxide in the country. Is that progress?

As I write this, COP27 has just ended in Egypt. The United Nations wants the world to halve its carbon emissions by 2030 and reach 'net zero' by 2050. This would limit global warming to 1.5 deg. centigrade.

But at the moment CO2 levels are still rising and Antonio Guterres, secretary-general of the U.N., thinks that without these targets being met, the world is 'doomed' as it heads towards a 2.5 deg. centigrade increase in temperature by the end of this century, compared with pre-industrial levels.

Meanwhile some of the leaders from the biggest polluting nations have stayed away from the Conference ~ China, Russia, India and Indonesia, for example.

And the focus of this 'Community of Parties'(COP27) seems to have turned to money and blame ~ who is going to pay reparations for damage done and how much? It remains to be seen how this new funding arrangement of 'loss and damage' works out in practice. However, many folks are concerned that CO2 emissions have, at this conference, largely gone on the back burner.

And who can forget the poor, weary, bleary-eyed, delegates; some sprawled out, some fast asleep as the final communique was agreed and delivered at 04.15 in the early hours of a November morning? The early hours are never a time when human beings are at their best or make the best decisions.



I couldn't help but remember that it was in the early hours of the morning that the Exxon Valdez Supertanker ran aground on a reef in Prince William Sound, Alaska, in 1989, and spilled 37,000 tonnes of crude oil into the pristine waters. Or that it was in the early hours of the morning that the Chernobyl No. 4 Nuclear Reactor blew up in 1986 in northern Ukraine.

For me, these three early morning happenings are examples of the large strain of irony which is built into our human experience. Life has, what William Blake called, a 'Fearful symmetry', the working out of the true nature of things. This wonderful spirit of irony prevents us from taking ourselves too seriously!

### **Other Causes For Concern**

As we look at the **world's financial system**, we see that the capitalist system is creaking. Is the cult of consumerism collapsing? Recently I heard George Osborne, the former chancellor of the exchequer, say that basically the UK has 'run out of money'.

We are also beginning to see **democracy itself shaking**. It has always shown itself to be a vulnerable and imperfect system of government ever since 44% of the German people voted for the Nazi Party in 1933 and three weeks later the parliament, and democracy, were done away with by Hitler and his entourage!

On the 6<sup>th</sup> January 2021 in America, we saw how fragile democracy has become in that country when the US Capitol was attacked by Trump supporters. Closer to home, Liz Truss was voted UK Prime Minister by 0.26% of the UK electorate and the Northern Ireland Assembly is currently non-functional.

Meanwhile, the Scottish National Party (SNP), having been told by the Supreme Court that it cannot hold an independence referendum without the UK government's consent, has announced it will launch and mobilise a major campaign 'in defence of Scottish democracy.' The gloves are off!

Add to this the fact that our **immigration system** is ‘broken’ and that our **NHS and Social Care** are ‘in crisis’ and it is surely reasonable to ask, ‘Are we really progressing, or is the very idea of progress a myth?’ There is change, yes; growing knowledge, yes, but progress... umm?

However, there was a lovely Christmassy item, I thought, about the NHS on a recent news bulletin. They have been introducing ‘Therapeutic Ponies’ into hospital wards! Yes, Romeo, Pickles and Charlie, suitably trained, shampooed, set and blow dried (and with a nappy strategically placed), have been meeting the patients!

Some of the patients welcomed the visitors, fondling them and even kissing them, others were not quite so sure and seemed a little sheepish! What Romeo, Pickles and Charlie thought, was more difficult to gauge!

If only the visit had been to a maternity ward instead of a vascular ward, I’m sure more of the authentic nativity feel would have been preserved!

Nevertheless, maybe this is another example of Blake’s ‘Fearful symmetry’ ~ 2022 A.D. NHS, meets 4 B.C. Bethlehem stable!

Meanwhile, back in the cut and thrust of the climate emergency, the protestors have been out in force: chaining themselves to fences, tying themselves to goalposts, climbing gantries over bridges and motorways, throwing tomato soup over Van Gogh’s ‘Sunflowers’, and gluing themselves to anything that comes to hand. To some this is commendable behaviour; to others it is unnecessary and frustrating illegality.

*What can be said, however, is that it is much easier to be involved in this kind of protest than it is to accept Jesus’ personal invitation to ‘deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me’ and to allow him to deliver us from the dark and despairing prison cell of our egos, so that we may truly see, hear and understand whereas before we were blind, deaf and dumb.*

### **Did Jesus Promise Progress in the Last Days Before His Return?**

Did Jesus promise progress, an easier and happier life, more peace and prosperity in these last days before he returns? I think not. In fact I would say the reverse is true. There will be a deterioration rather than an improvement; growing difficulties and pressures that will come upon both the world and those of us who are Christians.

‘In the world you will have pressure’, warned Jesus; ‘If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also’ he said. ‘A time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is offering service to God’, he continued.

Deception, destruction, hate, distress, mourning, wars, famines, earthquakes etc are, according to Jesus, just the beginning of the labour pains. Therefore these things will increase in frequency and intensity before his return (Mt. 24:1-35).

‘On the earth, nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea. Men will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken.’ (Lk. 21:25&26)

**‘But Aren’t You Being Pessimistic and Defeatist?’ some may contend.**

To draw attention to the things mentioned in this article is to lay yourself open to the charge of being a pessimist, a defeatist, of failing to see all of the ‘advances’ in society, of being a Luddite (someone who is against technological change), of retreating into inertia and inactivity etc. Nothing could be further from the truth as far as I am concerned!

**Science: To be Involved or Not to be Involved?**

With regard to science, I love science and studied chemistry for 5 years after I left school. Top of my Christmas wish list will be John Lennox’s latest book, ‘Cosmic chemistry ~ Do God and Science Mix?’ (2) I have sat in space vehicles, been on Concorde, could easily spend a week in the Science Museum etc.

Perhaps I should explain that when I talk of the ‘myth of progress’, I am not denying that knowledge is increasing rapidly and can be put to good use.

This week I was excited by the news that some medical scientists are hoping to be able to turn stem cells into red blood cells. This will help those who need regular blood transfusions to have them less often. Wonderful! Science is a noble field of study. Also this week, news has emerged of a new drug which has been developed in America to help those with type 1 diabetes. Wonderful! We must surely thank and praise God for advances in preventing and treating serious medical conditions.

However, what I am saying is that science will be not be able to lead us to a utopian paradise. Science has always drawn some people to God - e.g. McGrath, Lennox - and led others to diminish God or make him disappear completely - e.g. Hawking, Dawkins.

The poet R.S. Thomas has captured this dilemma well in the first verse of his poem 'Raptor' (3):

‘You have made God small  
 setting him astride  
 a pipette or a retort  
 studying the bubbles,  
 absorbed in an experiment  
 that will come to nothing.’

Today’s bioethical issues have been described as ‘the taking, making and faking of human life’. Taking ~ 10 million abortions since the 1967 Abortion Act; making ~ first ‘test tube’ baby in 1978; faking ~ today we have emerging technologies like artificial intelligence, biological enhancement and sophisticated machines that have the potential of faking life.

Mark O’Connell, the 2018 winner of the Wellcome Foundation Book Prize predicted, ‘Ultimately, by merging man and machine, science will produce humans who have vastly increased intelligence, strength, and lifespans: **a near embodiment of gods.**’ (4) Transhumanism is with us.

However, I agree with what Don DeLillo wrote in his 1985 novel ‘White Noise’, that the whole point of technology is that it creates an appetite for immortality on the one hand and threatens universal extinction on the other!

And now we have the metaverse, a 3D virtual reality (VR) world in which we will soon be able to live our lives. We will be able to live in a fantasy world rather than the real world. The tag line of their advertising is: “The metaverse may be virtual, but the impact will be real.”



What the impact will be on our mental health remains to be seen, but the claim is that far from driving us further into digital isolation, the metaverse will, apparently, expand our world.

We will be able to learn without classrooms, spend virtual time with family and friends whilst actually being separated by thousands of miles. We will be able to go fishing together (virtually)! Whether we will be able to eat what we catch is another question! We can be transported back into history (someone's version of it anyway!), and find all of our thrills and entertainment, **not in the real universe, but in the virtual metaverse!**

Of course the Christian technophiles are excited ~ Love Jesus. Love Tech. They have formed 'Kingdom Code' and their aims are to 'inspire and spark serendipity' and they just love 'casting vision'! If all this floats your boat, check them out at [kingdomcode.org.uk](http://kingdomcode.org.uk). And who knows, maybe this new technology will have a considerable impact on evangelism and mission.

But the only antidote, as far as I am concerned, to the world of fantasy ~ in whatever form it takes, political, environmental, technological, financial, media, ecclesiastical etc. ~ is the reality of Christ's Kingdom.

### **Politics: To Be Involved Or Not To Be Involved?**

Back in the real world and with reference to politics, I have been a member of a political party, folded and stuffed envelopes, prayed with and supported candidates, knocked on doors, campaigned on behalf of fair trade, discussed issues with some of the top politicians of the day, campaigned on behalf of the world's poor etc. But I do not believe that politics will save us.

I have just returned from the annual 'Civic Service' in our Town Centre Church which I am a member of. It was an excellent service with a real prophetic edge. The theme was 'Leadership' with an emphasis on 'Servant Leadership'. All of the 'top brass' were present in their chains of office and other adornments, and one earnestly prays that they will have had ears to hear what was said.

Afterwards I asked the Chair of Harlow Council, who is a Christian and gave one of the outstanding addresses at the Service, 'How much do you think Jesus was involved in politics, or do you think Jesus viewed his kingdom as being separate from earthly kingdoms?'

He was very sure that Jesus was fully involved in the politics of the day and gave, as examples, Jesus overturning the tables of the money-changers in the temple and Jesus saying to give to Caesar what was due to him.

I agree with him that, as Christians, we are to be involved with politics in the broad sense, as it applies to participation in, and administration of, life in the

city. But the problem arises when we allow politics to become sectarian. It seems to me that Jesus entirely cuts across the narrow sectarianism of politics, welcoming and forming, a new community of believers into his Kingdom.

Thus Jesus never identified himself with any of the particular sectarian groups around in his day, and there were plenty to choose from: - Scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees, Zealots, Quislings, Essenes, Herodians etc.

And to underline the point, Jesus chose Simon (the Zealot) and Matthew the tax collector (Quisling) to be in his inner circle of 12 apostles. Simon, keen to kick the hated Romans out of the country, and Matthew, collecting taxes on behalf of the hated Romans! How did those two get on together, I wonder?! But the call of Jesus transcends all political divides.

And maybe the nearest Jesus ever got to being involved in a political rally was when he entered Jerusalem for the last time and the crowds were out in force. 'Hosanna' i.e. 'Save us now', was their cry, with the expectation that Jesus would deliver them from their Roman oppressors.

Very soon after, when it became apparent that this was not going to happen, the cry of the crowds changed from 'Hosanna' to 'Crucify him' ~ the same throats now issuing a very different cry. How Jesus must have anticipated this reverse.

*So it is, that politics and politicians will never be able to save us. Yes, we should pray for them and support them where we can, yet at the same time recognise their limitations. Surely, we have learned this lesson by now.*

### **Environmental Issues: To Be Involved Or Not To Be Involved?**

With regards to environmental issues, I was involved with these when I worked in industry. When you are working, as I once was, in coal-fired and nuclear power stations, these things are very much on your mind. And today I regularly write to our M.P. on these issues, support A Rocha, the Christian conservation organisation, and do all I can to live with the environment in mind.

However, I do not believe that human beings alone will be able to prevent growing ecological disasters on planet earth.

What I do believe is that, as Christians, we have a unique view of Creation, namely, that it was made by, for, and through Christ (Col. 1:16; Jn. 1:3). **Any theology of Christ that doesn't include Creation, is deficient.**

So Christians need to be involved with COP conferences (as they have been) and involved in climate and conservation issues.

Positively, the whole of creation is bursting with Divine meaning. It conveys Divine beauty and diversity; it transmits Divine life and grace. It speaks to those who have ears to hear and eyes to see! And we are participants in God's creative purposes for this planet on which we all live ~ a community of parties, politicians, princes, prophets, priests, people.

And yes, the creation is groaning, like a woman about to give birth. There is pain, frustration, and there is hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. This is what we patiently wait for. Creation's liberation, and our own, are inextricably linked. (Rms. 8:19-25)

In fact, it is those people who can **only** pin their hopes in scientists, politicians, world rulers, environmentalists, economists etc. that I feel sorry for. They are often very earnest, very serious, and increasingly I find, very frustrated and very worried people!

But our hope is in Christ and His upside-down Kingdom; a Kingdom that continues to grow throughout the world; a Kingdom of righteousness, peace and joy; a Kingdom which is unshakeable and eternal; a Kingdom which is both here and now and yet is still to come. A Kingdom that comes about, not by exerting coercive power and control, but through love, service, and self-sacrifice.

Our hope is in the Sovereignty of God who works 24/7 and 365 days a year! Everyone who struts the world's stage is subject, knowingly or unknowingly to Him. When Pontius Pilate said to Jesus, 'Don't you realise I have authority either to free you or to crucify you', Jesus replied, 'You would have no authority over me if it were not given you from above.' (Jn. 19:10&11)

*Christians however, and especially preachers and teachers, should be preparing their people for difficult times ahead, introducing them to the upside-down King and his upside-down Kingdom ~ anything else, it seems to me, is to encourage the false hope of 'Peace, Peace' when there is no Peace.*

We are people of hope who believe in a God of hope, yet God's hope never obscures present reality or denies future difficulties. False hope leads to depression and despair.

## Turning The World Upside-Down!

When Paul and Silas arrived in Thessalonica and stayed in the home of Jason, trouble brewed as the gospel was proclaimed in the city. All three of them were accused of 'acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying there is another king, Jesus'. The upside-down king had arrived and these men were rightly accused of having '**turned the world upside-down.**' (Acts 17:5-8)

### Finally.....

There is an 'in' phrase today that we must 'speak truth to power'. I agree with this, but the issue is often that those in power already know the truth but don't want to act in accordance with what they know!

Pilate knew that Jesus was an innocent man, but he still handed him over to be crucified. King Herod knew he shouldn't have been in an incestuous marriage relationship with Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, but he still carried on with the relationship.

So the challenge is not just to 'speak truth to power' but to 'keep on speaking truth to power' ~ and this, of course, is likely to be costly. And so we pray.....

'Our Father God, please give us grace and courage to go on challenging, in Jesus' Name, the financial, political, and ecclesiastical powers of our day, so that your upside-down kingdom may come and your upside-down will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.'

'Endow the King with your justice, O God, the royal son with your righteousness. He will judge your people in righteousness, your afflicted ones with justice.' (Ps. 72: 1&2)

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George Irving – 1<sup>st</sup> Dec. 2022

- (1) Brueggemann W. quoted in Craybill, D. 'The Upside-Down Kingdom', Herald Press, 1978, P. 293
- (2) Lennox J., 'Cosmic Chemistry: Do God and Science Mix?', Lion Books, 2021
- (3) Thomas R.S. quoted in Oakley, M. 'The Splash of Words', Canterbury Press, 2016 P. 73
- (4) O'Connell M., 'To Be A Machine', Granta Books, 2018