

Debt, Imperialism, Eunuchs, and Contemporary Christian Worship

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There are three ways to begin a lecture such as this. The first is to ask people to turn to each other and say why they came to this particular part of the program and what they expect to hear. This approach has the advantage of giving the speaker five to ten minutes less lecturing time. Much as I'm tempted, I think this tactic might leave you feeling short-changed. The second approach is to say: "I don't quite understand the title I've been asked to address" and then waffle for twenty minutes on the semantics before ever dealing with the subject. But since I chose the title, I can hardly quibble over it. The third approach (at least for me) is to admit that the last sixty seconds have simply been an exercise in enabling your ears to be attuned to my [Scottish] accent, so that when I begin to deal with the topic, you might at least acknowledge that you can hear if not understand.

My basic concern is that—as at other times in the history of the church—we have arrived at a time in which liturgists and musicians are faced with the choice between worship becoming a liturgical antique shop or worship being a foretaste of God's coming kingdom. This juncture has been reached before, notably at the Reformation where, for Lutherans, Anglicans, and Reformed Christians, a decision had to be made as to how much of the Roman heritage could be salvaged, and how much of a new and pertinent dispensation had to be developed.

Lutherans and Anglicans kept more or less the canon of the Mass and the principal liturgical anthems. But the language of the liturgy changed both in terms of its content and its move from Latin to the vernacular. To this Luther added theological hymns set to indigenous folk melodies, while Cramner composed collects of pristine poetry.

Calvin and Knox were much more severe, retaining the basic outline of the Mass, but physically reordering the worship space to emphasise the centrality of the scriptures and the sacramental table, while at the same time elevating the status of the reading and preaching of the word, and developing the people's communal and private spirituality by encouraging the singing of metrical psalms.

For the Roman Catholic Church, and for other denominations in its wake, Vatican II was another salutary juncture at which the heritage of what had been was visibly and audibly changed to initiate a different way of celebrating liturgy. Thus Rome adopted some of the innovations of the post-Reformation churches: notably the vernacular tongue, the re-ordering of liturgical space, and a renewed emphasis on psalmody. But the Catholic Church did much more. It complemented revered Gregorian chant with the singing of new hymns and songs. It encouraged (as other traditions had not done) the indigenization of the liturgy in the use of color, symbol, and music appropriate to the nation or region. It discouraged duplicate images of the saints in liturgical spaces to allow for a greater focus on the iconography of Christ. It enshrined in the documents of the church the right of lay people to participate in the celebration of Eucharist as cantors, lectors, intercessors, and special ministers of the Eucharist.

The issue—I will not use the word crisis, though those involved in the alleged Worship Wars might—which confronts us at this present juncture is more subtle. It has to do, among other things, with community, aesthetics, and vocabulary.

Community

It has to do with community, because that is the prerequisite for all Jewish and Christian worship. The *sine qua non* is not an ordered liturgy. Peter and the early church were not given such a thing by Jesus. Nor is it dedicated liturgical space; Celtic Christianity evangelized Britain and part of Europe in the almost total absence of any liturgical buildings. Nor is it the presence of an ordained priest. Jesus didn't ordain anyone, and his ancestors, the Jews, are recorded as worshipping communally long before Melchizedek came on the scene. The *sine qua non*—the prerequisite is *community*.

Those in liturgical churches vindicate this claim every time Mass or Eucharist opens with the words: The Lord be with you. If there is no response, AND ALSO WITH YOU, there is no liturgy, because there is no community. But well in advance of the formulation of this common liturgical greeting, we can discern in the book of Exodus that when God gave the Passover to the enslaved Hebrews as their first communal liturgical rite, it was given neither with a prescriptive set of words nor with designated liturgical space nor with ordained ministers as celebrants. It was given to a tribe of enslaved people who had a common history and a common pain, who lived interdependently, and who were expected at the

Passover time to share this sacred meal in households with an open door to single people and servants who lived in close proximity. And in this meal they not only reflected on their painful present but were given a foretaste of future deliverance.

I do not have the time, but you might like to take time to review the biblical records of communal worship, and you will see that there is no worship where there is no community. And by that I do not mean simply a gathering of individuals in one place—I mean an integrated assembly of people who already know each other and share, to some degree, a common life. God does not give worship to a group of strangers.

And in this country as in my own, and in all those nations from which your ancestors came, the biblical prerequisite of community before liturgy has been exemplified in the past. In North America until the 1940s and in most of Europe until the 1960s, people who went to church—of whatever denomination—went to their local church. And there they would sit: in Norwegian Lutheran fiords with people who fished the same waters; in the German heartlands, with miners who had dug coal together in the same open or underground pit; in Southern England, with other peasant farm laborers who tilled the same soil for their common landlord. Children would sit near children of other families with whom they schooled and played. Women would sit near other women with whom they might share a common waterpump or drying green and with whom they would meet in market places. And in the midst of this would be the church whose presiding minister would live in the community and whose ear would be open for such gossip or complaint as would enable him (in those days only him) to reflect the pain or aspirations of the community in his prayers, preaching, and choice of songs.

I am not painting a romantic or idyllic picture of the past. I am stating what was incontestably true until the 1940s and 1950s when two things happened, one physical, the other philosophical. The physical change was, thanks to Henry Ford and others, the popularization of the motor car as the preferred and private mode of personal transportation. This meant that moderately wealthy people did not need to go either to their local corner store or their local corner church. They could drive to other neighborhoods. The philosophical change was the elevation of personal choice almost to the status of an inviolable human right, which, in church terms, has led to the shopping around for religion that fits easily and causes least pain.

Plot the transportation maps of worshippers in any sizeable northern hemisphere town or city and you will find people driving up to forty miles to get to the church of their choice where the preaching or the music or the

theology or the glorious anonymity is to their liking. This was illustrated in stark relief for me five years ago when I was leading a conference for priests and worship leaders in the Anglican diocese of Worcester. I was exploring the Pauline metaphor of the church as the Body of Christ and homed in on two aspects of that metaphor. The first was the differently gifted nature of members of the body (some have powerful speech, some pastoral gifts, etc.). I asked participants to stand if, as they looked on their congregation, they discerned the differently gifted nature of the assembly. All stood. I then remarked that another feature of Paul's metaphor is that the body is joined-up, interconnected: if one part suffers, others share the pain. If one part rejoices, others celebrate. I asked them to remain standing if, as they looked at their congregation, they saw a joined up body. Two-thirds sat down.

If this is the reality—and for many churches it is—then we can choose to retain the language of engagement and connectedness in the absence of any real and effective community. Thus we pass the peace cursorily, yet sing lustily “We are one in the Spirit” or “Bind us together” or “Who’ever does my Father’s will is surely kin to me” with no intention of getting half an inch closer in body or spirit to those around us. And if that is the case, then perhaps we should put a sign on the church door advertising not liturgy but religious entertainment. For be sure, the more our congregations are not embodied communities, the more we will be tempted to find music that will please and preaching that will lack any note of prophecy or social critique, lest we offend the gathered strangers who may choose not to come back if their private sensitivities are offended. In short, our preaching, our praying, our singing will all be dictated not by the impulse of the Holy Spirit or reflection on what the season or the scriptures direct us to celebrate, but by the fear of people exercising their personal choice as regards to their preferred place of worship.

Or we can take seriously this change which the last fifty years has brought and discover ways in which our geographically and socially diverse congregations can begin to sense mutual accountability and belonging, rather than attraction to the audiovisual pleasures of their liturgy of choice. And I can point to a diversity of places where this is happening and where the underlying evidence is that wherever community and more than cursory hospitality are on a church’s agenda, there is growth and a deepening of that elusive reality we call fellowship. I could look at the success in Britain of the Alpha course—not because its theology is universally acceptable—but because people who never engage

with each other in church eat meals together and talk about what is important.

I could point to a mega-congregation in Michigan where, whenever new people come, they are immediately invited to join smaller units for study or recreation. I could point to a church in Boston where every adult—including the organist—knows the name of every adolescent, because all things they do, they do across the age range, including annual trips to Nicaragua. This is not to say that in such places, everyone agrees with everyone else—far from it. But if you know and respect and have shared some common life, then differences can be held in creative tension as a necessary experience of Christian discipleship.

It is ironic that one of the common factors behind many of the contemporary malaises that send people to therapists for counselling or to doctors for drugs is loneliness and isolation, and that in such a day many churches choose—and it is a choice—to assent to this social disorder rather than to counter it.

So far, I have not said much about imperialism, debt, or eunuchs, but their time is coming.

Aesthetic Taste

I know that when I begin to deal with the subject of aesthetic taste, I am going to upset people, particularly organists and guitar players. It is not that my comments will be barbed, but simply that if you have spent years training to be a church organist or are currently wooing the crowds with praise and worship performances, you will feel slightly threatened if your instruments of choice are mentioned in other than the most glowing of terms. So let lay my heart bare and say that the first long playing record I ever bought was of Jeanne Demessieux playing Bach on the organ of Notre Dame, Paris, and the second LP I bought was of Segovia playing guitar transcriptions. They remain my favourite instruments (with the addition of the cello, bagpipes, or euphonium, depending on the audience to whom I am speaking).

It is undoubtedly true that for at least five hundred years of Christian history, the dominant musical tonality associated with worship has been diapason, produced by one of the few musical instruments not specifically mentioned in Holy Scripture. This has worked in favour of the Western church but to the detriment of churches in the developing world, which in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were told by missionaries that everything apart from the organ was an instrument of the devil. The organ

is primarily a right-brain instrument. It deals mainly with melody, harmony, and tone color. And composers of Western organ and choral music as well as the lesser mortals who write hymn tunes, normally compose seated—whether at the keyboard, a computer, or a desk—which is the reason why so much eighteenth- and nineteenth-century hymnody is so dull. It is inevitably in 4/4 or 3/4 time. There are few dotted and certainly no double-dotted rhythms. And syncopation is, by and large, anathema. You recognise this if I sing through a couple of well-known hymn tunes: [Bell hums several measures of “Praise My Soul” and “Abide with Me.”]

You also recognise the limitation of the organ if you have ever heard any but the best of players trying to play “Jubilate Everybody” or “You Shall Go Out with Joy” on manuals and pedals with mixtures. Before the advent of the primacy of the organ, things were different. The tunes that Luther adopted or adapted were sometimes folk melodies. Tunes like *Ein Feste Burg* retain offbeats and syncopations, which later generations of church musicians in many countries have tried to smooth out. Ditto with the tunes of Calvin. My theory is that he—not the world’s greatest humorist or dancer—prevailed through musicians like Louis Bourgeois and Claude Goudimel in ironing out sprung rhythms and so over-harmonising folk tunes that they degenerated from gaiety to sobriety. [Bell sings *Lobe den Herren.*]

What therefore emerged in the nineteenth century, aided by academics such as Stainer and Kitson, was an expectation that the composed music for hymn and psalm singing in the church should be stately, measured, sometimes mild, sometimes martial—anything but rhythmic or exciting in a more jubilant sense. The net result of this is the Victorian perception of what makes a good hymn tune for congregational use sets the parameters for contemporary wordsmiths who, with diapason tone reverberating through their subconscious, write texts which are—by and large—stately, measured, sometimes mild, sometimes martial, but anything but rhythmic or exciting to the senses and where the vocabulary is predictable. (Now I know that somebody is itching to shout out the names of Thomas Troegger and Carol Dorran, but I’m dealing here with the rule rather than the exceptions.) How many hymns in the popular repertoire deal with such issues as pig-farming, mugging, money lending, housekeeping, physical paralysis, street beggars, or hemorrhaging women? Yet the miracles and the parables of Jesus were about such things.

One reason why these issues do not appear in hymnody in comparison to a baby in the manger and a Savior on the cross is partly to do with the

virtual neglect of Jesus' incarnate ministry in popular preaching in preference to discourses about what Paul really meant in any given letter. But it is also due to the vocabulary associated with such things ill-fitting with the dominant Victorian diapason tone. When did we ever hear the word "kitchen" in a hymn? [Bell sings "Praise to Jesus in the kitchen ..."] Yet much of his ministry was spent in and around food and its preparation. Or what about "prostitute"? [Bell sings "Abide with me, here comes a prostitute. Keep her far off, and keep me, Lord, astute."] Yet Jesus says more about prostitutes than he does about sacraments, and he enjoys their company more than that of priests.

For me, the issue of the restrictiveness of musical language with regard to sung text came to a head when I was asked to write a hymn for the Jubilee Celebration of Christian Aid, an ecumenical development charity in Britain. Their current campaigns were concerned with debt cancellation in the developing world. But what tune in the popular repertoire of the church would deal with the language and casualties of international finance, more so since this song was going to be first sung in St Paul's Cathedral?

It was necessary to move out of restrictive traditional musical language in order that a new text on a hitherto unhymned but wholly biblical theme could be articulated. In the end of the day, it was a Caribbean choir and musicians who led the song, "This We Shall Do."

This we shall do: share our bread with the hungry,
protect the helpless and shelter the poor;
this we shall do: cancel debt, show compassion
and for the ills of the earth seek a cure.

This we shall do: clear a path through the desert
which leads from war and suspicion to peace;
this we shall do: liberate from confinement
the minds and bodies requiring release.

This we shall do: tell with kindness the story
of God who calls us to heaven's employ,
and Christ who shows how to turn worldly tables,
enabling justice to make way for joy.

This we shall pray: that the kingdom of heaven
shall manifest its potentials on earth,
that every nation might curb its ambition
so that each child may discover its worth.

Nor shall we flinch should we face contradiction,
or fear the forces resistant to change.
The earth is God's and God's justice our mandate,
and none can limit that power or its range.

This we shall do: share our bread with the hungry,
protect the helpless and prosper the poor;
this we shall do: cancel debt, show compassion
and for the ills of the earth seek a cure.¹

The answer, however, is not to move from one dominant musical tonality to another and encourage the church of Jesus to gyrate and syncopate *ad lib ad infintum*. The guitar—one of the previously proscribed instruments, particularly in Argentina—is much more left brain than the pipe organ simply because it is strummed. Its specialities are rhythm and harmony. Melody is not its first feature. And while the organ represents the long musical tradition of Old Europe, the guitar represents the longer musical tradition of Old Israel and of South and Central America from about the sixteenth century. While Bach by his singular genius was able to interweave medieval dance rhythms into peerless preludes and fugues, the guitar even in the hands of an amateur has been able to get people singing and dancing in unison all through the ages. And because youth culture since the 1950s has been dominated by guitar-wielding celebrities, its immediate attractiveness as a means of bridging the gulf between the secular and sacred worlds has been extolled. More than that, while we might have difficulty singing words like kitchen and prostitute to a tune by John Stainer or William Bilings and their heirs, such words pose no difficulty for guitar-based tunes, especially of a Country and Western variety.

But the guitar is not the answer. Indeed its very left-brain bias can be part of the problem. The allure of melody which makes your feet tap and your body swing may lead to the experience of being gratified, of being more important than the offering of the song to God. And it is not for nothing that researchers in North America and in Australia have found that in the Praise and Worship outpourings of song, there is a virtual exaltation of sentiment over truth, of stimulus over commitment, of the ego over the Creator. And as I peruse the books of allegedly contemporary praise, I rarely see anything which has to do with lament, a recurrent biblical theme, with the incarnate ministry of Jesus or intercession for the world, with the

¹John Bell, "This We Shall Do," unpublished; © 2005, Wild Goose Resource Group, Iona Community, Glasgow, Scotland.

corporate nature of the church or, indeed, imperialism, debt, and eunuchs, despite the potential of this musical language to deal with such things. With the rawness of human experience—as shared by Jesus—excised from the singing of such songs, people may become born-again Christians by caesarean section.

We are at a juncture where the churches in the West simply cannot allow aesthetic preference, as regards music, to be the determining factor for liturgy, and particularly for liturgical song. If a people have to celebrate with vigor and fervor the exhilarating nature of faith or sing of contemporary realities with the same passion as their forbears sang of soldiering, then the diapason tone has to be supplemented. If a people have to bemoan the state of the earth or earthly politics, and offer to God their penitence as profoundly as their praise, then the orgies of three-chord tricks in the key of D have to be sacrificed for something more plaintive. But beyond that, we live at a time when we know—when we know—that the majority of Christians in the world are not Western, not white, not wealthy, not even English-speaking. Have we whose nations both exploited and evangelized the South and compelled them to live on a diet of Western hymnody nothing to learn from those who are Eastern and Southern, black and brown, poor and fluent in Cantonese or Xhosa?

If our aesthetic preferences rule out the possibility of us sharing some of the creative gifts the Holy Spirit has showered on Asia, Africa and South America, then future generations will rightly accuse the Western churches of spiritual apartheid. Here is a song that introduced me to a biblical text, the relevance of which I had never experienced when I heard it chanted by a polished choir. I heard both the original text and music in the singing of a Salvadorian refugee at a Lutheran musicians conference in Minneapolis ten years ago. The translation was faithful to the Spanish original. Only late in the day did I discover that it was also faithful to Psalm 94.

O great God and Lord of the earth,
rouse yourself and demonstrate justice;
give the arrogant what they deserve,
silence all malevolent boasting.

See how some you love are broken
for they know the weight of oppression;
even widows and orphans are murdered
and poor strangers are innocent victims.

Those who crush your people delight,
claiming God above takes no notice;
they proclaim that heaven is blind,
that the God of Jacob is silent.

Stupid fools, when will you listen?
Now take heed, you ignorant people.
God who gave us sight and hearing
has observed and noted what happened.

God the Lord will not stay away
nor forsake his well-beloved people;
heaven's justice soon will appear
and the pure in heart will embrace it.

Yes, the ones whom God instructed,
who revere and study God's word
will be saved from all that harms them
while a pit is dug for the wicked.

Should the wrong change places with right
and the courts play host to corruption;
should the innocent fear for their lives
while the guilty smile at their scheming;

still the Lord will be your refuge,
be your strength and courage and tower.
Though your foot should verge on slipping,
God will cherish, keep and protect you.²

Vocabulary

It might be expected that in addressing the issue of vocabulary, I might deal primarily with issues such as inclusiveness of gender, but I would imagine that by now that issue has been sufficiently rehearsed and needs little further comment from me. If you want to know my opinion, I would just say briefly that in the church we should never use language that offends the dignity of those made in God's image. We don't call black people "niggers," we don't call Down's Syndrome children "mongols," we don't call women "men," though I might add two addenda. The first is that while this may have percolated even into liberal and conservative

²"O Great God and Lord of the Earth," in *One Is the Body* (Chicago: GIA Publications, 2002), 94.

theological consciousness, it has not had a similar effect within traditionalist or charismatic circles. I was at a meeting of praise and worship musicians two years ago, of whom 80% of the writers were male, and when a woman raised the issue of exclusive language, she was looked upon as if she had just passed gas in public.

The second addendum, particularly for preachers, is that neutering or inclusivizing (such a word!) liturgical texts and hymns is not the terminus. It is merely the beginning. What we need as much as inclusive language is a feminized church where liturgy, which for so long has been conducted in a quasi-adversarial fashion (them and us), becomes more all-affirming and embracing, and where biblical exposition and homiletical illustration draw as much on women's insights and experience as men's. The homily or sermon can be, in male hands, the last stronghold of chauvinism where we are encouraged to be as faithful as Daniel rather than as subversive as Shiphrah and Puah, or where illustrations from the army or the golf course outnumber ten to one illustrations from nursing or housework. (For the sake of the neurotic pedants, I would also add that I am well aware that women can serve in the army and men can be nurses, but I think you know what I mean.)

Or it may be thought that in addressing vocabulary, I might have a prime concern about ridding for once and for all archaicism—that great pestilence which, like exclusive language, distinguishes the in-set from the outsiders. I thought of this not long ago when in a Presbyterian service in Scotland, I heard an ecclesiastical luminary pray: “And Lord, we beseech thee to deliver us from the fond vicissitudes from which, as yet, we have not pled to be ransomed.” Shall I say that again? And I thought that masturbation was no longer considered a sin! But I don't want to spend time debating the merits of beseeching over asking, or of the King James Bible in all its poetic glory over against the New International Version. To paraphrase the reading from Jeremiah on the fourth Sunday in Lent, “The day is coming, when people will not need to turn to each other in church and say, ‘Whatever did that mean?’” If we persist in cloaking the gospel in archaicism, then let us advertise our churches as historical theme parks and their liturgies as regression therapy. And let's be honest about it.

When I speak of vocabulary, essentially I want to point to that dualism which is anathema to the gospel and to our historic traditions, but which has increasingly become a form of liturgical carcinoma, namely, the concentration on a range of vocabulary and issues that are considered appropriate in worship and the avoidance of another range of vocabulary and issues that are deemed inappropriate or irreverent. It is, I believe, a

feature of the creation of consecrated space. If you go back to the Celtic church in Britain and Ireland, you discover that evangelism and preaching was done in the open air. There simply were no big community buildings in the fifth to ninth centuries. You see Jesus depicted in the iconography as a Celt with blue eyes and red hair. If the word had become flesh, he must be made to look like one of us!

And in the popular (by which I mean people's) devotional life, it is evident that, as in ancient Judaism, all of life is lived under the aegis of God, prayer is made at all times and in all places, and there is no distinction in the subject matter of vocabulary for sacred and secular issues, because all of life is holy. So we discover prayers for domestic life from putting the baby to the breast to blowing into the embers of the fire in the morning as well as prayers for industry: for milking the cow, for rowing the boat, for putting the sheep to pasture. And we discover prayers of cursing those whose malicious tongue, evil eye, or predatory instincts threatened the peace. Maybe the joyful human and holistic nature of this type of devotion is best witnessed in a poem from fourteenth-century Ireland:

I would like to have the men of heaven
in my own house
with barrels of good cheer
laid out for them.

I would like to have the three Marys,
their fame is so great;
I would like to have Jesus too
here among them.

I would like a great lake of beer
for the King of Kings;
I would like to be watching heaven's family
drinking it through eternity.³

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the language of prayer and preaching was both topical and comprehensive. Hence, in Scotland John Knox would pray for and against the machinations of local government and preach a sermon entitled "The first trumpet blast against the monstrous regiment of women." In the nineteenth century our hymnody directly reflected current issues of political, moral, and religious concern.

³"The Heavenly Banquet," in Peig Sayers, *An Old Woman's Reflections*, trans. Séamus Ennis, intro. W. R. Rogers (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), xii.

Thus the appalling rate of child mortality aided and abetted by laissez-faire welfare policies lead to songs such as “If I come to Jesus, he will take my hand, he will gently lead me to a better land,” while the exploits of foreign missions, sometimes hand-in-glove with adventures in European colonialism led to texts such as:

Let the Indian, let the Negro
let the rude barbarian see
that divine and glorious conquest
once obtained at Calvary.⁴

The preferential option for an ordered society was encapsulated in these lines by an Anglican bishop’s wife:

The rich man in his castle,
the poor man at his gate:
God made them great and lowly,
each one to his estate.⁵

(One wonders whether Mrs. Cecil Frances Alexander ever read the parable of Dives and Lazarus.) And on the side of the angels and on this side of the water, wordsmiths against slavery such as James Lowell wrote:

Men, whose boast it is that ye
come of fathers brave and free,
if there breathe on earth a slave
are ye truly free and brave?⁶

So where in the twenty-first century are the songs and the prayer and the preaching that deal with the contemporary equivalents of medieval peasant farming as evidenced in the Celtic prayers and poems or of the social concerns of nineteenth-century Britain and America? Where are the texts that speak of the loss of babies through miscarriage, which affects

⁴William Williams, “Dros Y Bryniau Tywyll Niwlog” (O’er Those Gloomy Hills of Darkness), sta. 2.

⁵Cecil Frances Alexander, “All Things Bright and Beautiful,” sta. 2, quoted in Valerie Wallace, *Mrs. Alexander: A Life of the Hymn-Writer Cecil Frances Alexander* (Dublin, Ireland: Lilliput Press, 1995), 70. Editor’s Note: See also “The Cyber Hymnal,” which above stanza 2 states: “Most hymnals omit the following verse.” <http://www.cyberhymnal.org/htm/a/l/allthing.htm>.

⁶James Russell Lowell, “Stanzas on Freedom,” in *The Poetical Works of James Russell Lowell*, Household ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1897), 56.

one in four women? Of sexual abuse of children, as much a menace this century as high infant mortality was in the nineteenth century? Of ecology, which is the scientific term for what Genesis calls the stewardship of or dominion over creation? Of economic injustice, money laundering, money lending, and debt, as is inveighed against in Levitical Law, in the major and minor prophets, in the words of Jesus, in the letter of James, in the book of Revelation, and is as endemic in the relationship between the governmental and multinational corporate engagements of your country and mine, as neo-colonialism tries to make the rest of the globe work, rest, and play to the benefit of the North? Where are the songs, and where is the preaching that offers a biblical critique—I don't care whether it is right wing or left wing, Republican or Democrat—of what your nation and mine is doing in Iraq or in the alleged war against global terrorism?

And if somebody should want to rear up and say, “We can't deal with these issues, they are political,” then I have to say that for me they are deeply spiritual. The killing of anybody made in the image of the living God is a spiritual a matter that should not be entered into lightly, as is the joining together of two people in holy matrimony—except that the Bible and Jesus say a lot about killing and oppression but virtually nothing about marriage. The sanctity of the child in the womb is dear to the heart of God, but so also is the sanctity of the born child shot by the Israeli army, blown up by Palestinian suicide bombers, potentially starved in Central America by a new Free Trade Agreement that will see El Salvadorian sugar cane farmers compete against subsidised crops from the United States I am not concerned whether the critique is left wing or right wing, but I am concerned that in the tradition of biblical witness, wherever injustice or oppression is visited upon a people, the church of Jesus Christ should not be gagged. Otherwise we give the impression we believe in a God who has lordship over sacraments, flowers, rest homes for the elderly, babies in their mother's arms, poor people to whom we give alms, and ecclesiastical architecture. If this is the case, I want to know who is lord over the less hygienic, more contentious areas of human life and discourse.

I am not pleading for a politicization of the pulpit based on single-issue politics. That happened in the Netherlands in the 1960s over the issue of apartheid and in Britain in the 1970s over the possession of the nuclear bomb, and because connections were never made with biblical witness, the churches were discredited. But at this juncture in human history, where the greatest threat to human life is, first of all, the environmental crisis, and second, global terrorism inextricably linked with Western neo-colonialism,

we need a vocabulary which will offer these things in all their complexity for the pondering of our congregations and for the guidance of God.

I've mentioned colonialism and debt, but not eunuchs as yet. I think this is a distinctly English and American problem. For in Scotland we may not have a higher proportion of such people than elsewhere in the English-speaking world, but we do have words that rhyme:

The young apostle Philip
met up with a eunuch;
and after twenty minutes
baptized him in a loch.