Irish Churches' Meeting, October 2011

'Hope'

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It is a privilege and an honour for me to address you on the theme of 'hope'. We in the rest of our little group of offshore islands have long watched across the Irish Sea as you have struggled with painful issues, and with a legacy of violence and misunderstanding. There have been saints here, heroines and heroes who have taught the rest of us something we need to know about Christian humility, sacrifice and wisdom. If I have anything at all to say to you today it is not because I have an inside track on the key issues (indeed, I would not pretend to understand, let alone pronounce on, the complex challenges you now face), but because I hope I can draw together my own biblical and theological reflections with the courage and faith which you have already so manifestly displayed.

My task, as I take it, is to bring into dialogue with one another the major strand of Christian teaching which goes broadly under the name of 'hope' with the major issues of tomorrow's world, especially as it impinges on us just now in our confused late-modern western culture. There would of course be room for a book or two on these themes, and all we can do this morning is to put down what seem to me to be the key markers. So let me begin without more ado by sketching what I take to be the main lines of the biblical vision of hope.

1. The Christian Hope – future and present

All Christian hope is focussed on, and gains its meaning from, the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth from the dead. Unless we begin there we shall be whistling in the dark. But as soon as we speak of Jesus' resurrection there are two things we must clear out of the way as being very misleading. First, it will not do to suggest, as many have done, that what happened at Easter was nothing to do with Jesus' body or an empty tomb, but only with a new awareness on the disciples' part of his presence with them in a new way, or with the strange rise of a belief that somehow his cause was continuing through them, or any such thing. The word 'resurrection' simply didn't mean that, or anything like it, and finding apparently sophisticated ways of saying that he didn't rise bodily from the dead is simply an avoidance technique. Despite what people often say – I had a couple of letters to this effect just a week or two ago, and a strongly worded email to this effect just yesterday – Jesus' bodily resurrection is not an aspect of Christian faith that can be safely jettisoned in order to appeal to modern sceptics. People were every bit as sceptical in the ancient world, too, and the early Christians knew they had to confront that scepticism with the testimony that God really did raise Jesus from the dead. The resurrection isn't an odd, extraneous bit of pre-critical speculation; it is the foundation for everything else. Like the sun when it rises, it is perhaps too dazzling to see clearly; but it becomes the reason why we can see everything else with a new clarity.

Second, though, it won't do to see the resurrection of Jesus simply as the guarantee of our own 'life after death' or 'going to heaven'. There is a reason why the resurrection and ascension are carefully separated in the gospels and Acts – a theological as well as a historical reason. Easter isn't about Jesus 'going to heaven', despite many sermons and prayers. Easter is about the renewal of the whole created order – beginning with this one bit of the created order, the physical body of Jesus himself. The western church has for far too long been fixated on 'going to heaven', ignoring the fact that in the New Testament the greatest future promises are not about us going to heaven but about heavenly reality coming to earth, as Jesus taught us to pray and as the final biblical picture, of the New Jerusalem coming down, would indicate. The meaning of Easter is precisely not that God is abandoning this tired old world and taking his people somewhere else, called 'heaven', instead. That popular belief is perhaps why some have felt able to leave the Easter stories as later pious legends since they imagine the real point to be that Jesus' body, like that of John Brown in the song, lies a-mouldering in the grave while his soul goes marching on. Not so. Much easier to believe, but nothing to do with Christian faith.

You see, if you take the first wrong view of Easter, you may well have in your heart a wonderful dream of how you'd like to see the world transformed, healed, turned around from its present folly to embrace God's wisdom – but you won't have the solid basis on which to work for that dream. There have been many zealous Christians who have seen the church's traditional teaching as simply escapist, and have insisted that our real hope is all about working still harder for peace and justice in the world. But without Easter that is whistling in the dark, as the history of such movements might suggest. Easter is in fact the *ontological* as well as the *epistemological* basis for all Christian hope, because, as well as teaching us about it, Easter provides the groundwork. With Easter, God has begun something; and what God begins he will surely complete.

By the same token, if you take the second wrong view of Easter, you will share the view of most western Christians that the point of the whole game is to leave the present world altogether and go somewhere else, somewhere far better, called 'heaven'. Of course, there is an ambiguity about this. Preachers sometimes ask for a show of hands as to who wants to 'go to heaven': all hands go up. They then ask for a show of hands as to who wants to go there today, this afternoon. Mysteriously all the hands go down again. Actually, I think this shows a deeper wisdom, not just fear or a lack of faith. There is no doubt a sense in which to die, for a Christian, will mean going to 'be with Christ, which is far better' (Philippians 1.23). But there is also the proper sense that death is a real enemy, indeed the last and ultimate enemy, and that there is a residual goodness about the present creation, and about our present life, which must not be despised or trampled on, however much evil and sorrow will invade and corrupt the world and our own lives. And of course if you think that 'going to heaven' is the only real hope, then what reason do you really have to improve things in this present world? Why oil the machine that is going to the scrap-heap tomorrow? Why plant roses in the bed that will soon be paved over with concrete?

In fact, as the early Fathers all saw (in company, interestingly, with the early Rabbis, who also believed in bodily resurrection), the biblical hope for resurrection is the place where two key doctrines meet, beliefs without which there is no basis for hope at all. The two key doctrines, the anchors that hold Judaeo-Christian hope in place, are creation and judgment (judgment, as I shall explain, in its good sense). The doctrine of creation insists that a good God made this world. The doctrine of judgment insists that this God will sort it all out, will put it right, in the end. Embrace those two, and you will have resurrection, in which God

reaffirms the goodness of the present creation while ridding it of all that corrupts, distorts and defaces it, including ultimately death itself. And it is because as Christians we believe in creation and judgment, a belief made more sure because of the resurrection of Jesus, that there is hope. Without the goodness of creation, we would be relying on a saviour-God to invade this world and snatch us away from it, which leaves no hope for the present. Without the promise of judgment – think of the Psalms, of the trees and the animals celebrating because YHWH is coming to judge the world – we would be left with the creator God surveying the wreckage of his beautiful world but unable to do anything to reverse the damage. And without the resurrection – the resurrection of Jesus at Easter, and of all his people at the end – we would have no guarantee that either of these would prove to be solid. With it, as we shall see, we are promised that what we do in the present time is not wasted.

This is because of the other great thing which we must say about resurrection and hope, something I've just hinted at. With the resurrection of Jesus, the future hope promised to God's people divided, as it were, into two. Jesus' rising is resurrection mark one; our future rising is resurrection mark two. But what about the time in between – the time where we now live and love and hope and struggle? For many Christians, this present life is simply a matter of muddling through, saying your prayers, keeping your nose clean, and hoping for the best. But to look at Christian life like that is to rob it of its key meaning. *To live in Christ means to live as Easter people; and Easter is not just an event, it is God's healing, restoring energy at work*. Paul speaks in Ephesians of God giving us, us who believe, the same power by which Christ was raised from the dead. Most Christians, I think, have hardly begun to think out what this might mean – or, if they have, they have confined it simply to the sphere of personal ethics, of being able to live the life of holiness to which Paul points later in the letter. But the challenge, I believe, goes both deeper and wider than that. We are called to be people of new creation; not just new creations in ourselves, or even in our churches, though both of those are vital, but people of new creation in the sense of being people through whom God's new, healing, restorative creation comes to birth in the world, in the *present* world. This can happen; Easter is all about it happening, about God's promised future breaking into a surprised and unready present. Not to see this, not to pray for it and work for it, is not to understand the gospel itself.

In particular, it would be not to understand the kingdom of God. This is of course a huge topic in itself, but we can hardly omit it if we are thinking about hope. In my experience many Christians manage to get by with only minimal reflection on God's kingdom, and such as they give may be woefully misdirected. People still talk (and sing, and pray) as if God's kingdom was simply the place, called 'heaven', where his people go when they die. But, as I insisted a few minutes ago, the point of God's kingdom is that Jesus taught us to pray that it would come 'on earth as in heaven', and that he went about not only announcing the kingdom – announcing, that is, the fact that God was launching his project of healing, restorative, powerful love right here in the middle of history and in the middle of the planet, at the place where all the tectonic plates of world history still seem to grind together. He was announcing it, he was *doing* it – in his healings and his endless parties with all the wrong people – and he was *explaining* it, in parables and other cryptic sayings. 'God's sovereign rule is breaking in,' he was saying in this way and that, 'but it doesn't look like you thought it would'. Jesus' contemporaries were expecting that God would step into history and sort out the mess in the way an earthly monarch would do it, by sending in the troops. But the troops that God is sending in, so Jesus indicates in word and deed, are the meek, the mourners, those who are hungry for justice, the pure in heart and the poor in spirit. When Jesus listed those 'Beatitudes', he wasn't just explaining what sort of a person you would have to be so that

God would bless *you*. He was explaining what sort of a person you would have to be so that God *would bless the world through you*. 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven'; in other words, when God's kingdom comes on earth as in heaven, God will be implementing his sovereign, saving rule *through* the gentle and meek, the poor in spirit. This is the surprise of the kingdom; and it is exactly cognate with the biggest surprise of all, that when God wants to establish his rule on earth as in heaven he does it by coming in person and being killed, allowing all the forces of evil to do their worst to him so that their power is spent, exhausted, and new life can arise after death has been defeated.

The gospels, in fact, tell the story of the resurrection of Jesus not as a detached 'happy ending' after the otherwise tragic and horrible tale of the crucifixion. They are all, in their different ways, writing up the story of how Jesus announced and inaugurated God's kingdom; and when Jesus says, in Mark 9.1, that there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see God's kingdom come with power, we would be quite wrong to suppose that Mark meant, or that Jesus meant, that some of those alive then would witness the second coming. That view grew up at a time when many New Testament scholars had quietly bracketed out the bodily resurrection, so that there was nothing particularly powerful going on, or to be expected, until the second coming. But, for the early church, a mention of God's kingdom and power was a mention of Easter. When Easter happened, God's rescuing power was launched upon the world in a quite new way. Paul speaks in Colossians of the gospel 'already being announced in all creation under heaven', even though he himself is in prison and the vast majority of humans then alive have heard nothing about Jesus. What he must mean is that with the resurrection of Jesus a shock wave has gone through the entire cosmos, as a new force of life has been unleashed. When we go into the world as God's Easter people, experiencing that new life ourselves but equally important going as agents of the new life in the world, we are not going, as it were, into virgin territory. This is why there is, deep down, a hope that cannot be quenched: because we are going into a world that has already, at a level for which we don't have language, heard the news that with Jesus of Nazareth God's new creation has begun. When we are working for God's new life in the world it will often seem as if we are working against the grain of the world of corruption, deceit and decay. That is why the temptation to despair is always near at hand. But this will not be the ultimate truth. Deeper far, down below the surface noise and resistance, there will be the reality: that in Jesus the Messiah, the Lord, the creator God has *already* reaffirmed the goodness of his creation, has *already* pronounced the judicial sentence whereby death and sin are judged and life and joy inaugurated in their place. Resurrection people are working with the grain of the true creation, with the grain of God's new creation. Sin and death will squeal blue murder, as usual, but the faith that keeps its eye on the risen Jesus will know the truth. We are therefore called to be kingdom-builders, even in the present time.

This notion of kingdom-building has always been problematic and controversial. People often say, and rightly, that we are wrong to think of 'building the kingdom' ourselves. Only God does that, and any suggestion otherwise is a form of corporate Pelagianism. Yes, I agree. But, equally, there are those who try to insist that we must therefore simply wait until God does whatever he's going to do in his own time and way. That is like saying that there's no point in even struggling against sin in my personal life because one day God will make me perfect and there's no point trying to do it myself ahead of time. All this is, of course, to ignore the Holy Spirit, as sadly some of our traditions have done at this point. And it ignores, too, the fact that what we are called to do is not to 'build the kingdom' by our own efforts but to build *for* the kingdom. Let me explain what I mean.

The illustration I've often used is that of the stonemasons who, in the Middle Ages, would be working on some great Cathedral. Let's assume for the sake of argument that the stonemasons are basically illiterate; they can't understand an architect's drawing. They have no conception of what the Cathedral is supposed to look like when it's finished. All they know, all they need to know, is that the master mason has come into the stone-yard and has given them particular tasks. This man is told to carve his stone with a particular groove down one side. That one must make a notch in the corner. The man over there is working on a stone that will end up as a cylinder, perhaps part of a small pillar. And so on. None of them needs to know how the whole thing will fit together; in fact, they may do their work better if they do not know. They have been given their tasks and they must get on with them. They are not building the Cathedral; they are building *for* the Cathedral. One day the master builder will come down to the yard and collect up all the pieces of carved stone. Then, a few days later, they will come out and look up at the west front, or the south transept, or whatever, and there will be their little piece of stone, part of a structure whose shape, purpose and innate beauty they could never have imagined, but whose shape, purpose and beauty would all have been diminished without their humble contribution. That is the nature of Christian work, of kingdom-work, in the present. It needs to be wise and skilful but it also needs to be humble and obedient. We will never know, until the day when the master builder completes the job, which of the thousand tasks we have undertaken is the really important one. Quite possibly the great sermons we've preached and the long and fancy books we've written will turn out to be trivial, little decorations, like an ornate gargoyle on some high-up gutter; and quite possibly the gentle, kind word to a small child, or the moment when you went to confront the chair of the local housing authority about some continued injustice, will turn out to be the piece of carved stone that provides vital and elegant support for a flying buttress. Part of the fun of it all is that we have no idea which is likely to be which.

As solid and perhaps surprising evidence for this, consider the single verse with which Paul rounds off one of his longest discussions. The fifteenth chapter of 1 Corinthians is all about resurrection. Paul is looking to the future, with the resurrection of Jesus at his back, and declaring that what God did for Jesus at Easter he will do for all his people at the end. He will raise us from the dead, giving us an immortal physical body, the solid reality beside which our present decaying bodies will be trivial, ghostly and insubstantial. But what's that got to do with the present time? Well, at the very end of the chapter he doesn't say, 'Therefore look ahead to that glorious future.' He says, 'Therefore, my beloved, be firmly fixed, unshakeable, always full to overflowing with the Lord's work. In the Lord, as you know, the work you're doing will not be worthless.' Or, in the New Jerusalem Bible, 'be sure that in the Lord none of your labours is wasted.' Or, in the King James version, 'inasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord.' What has this got to do with resurrection? Simply this: that just as Jesus' resurrection is the vindication and validation of Jesus himself and, in him, of the goodness of God's whole creation, so the ultimate new creation will take up and transform everything in the present world which has been of God. Everything you do in the present in Christ and by the Spirit will be part of that wonderful new creation; it will be transformed, like the carved stones from the builders' yard, because the master workman knows where in the eventual building he intends to put it. And this is why we have hope: hope that all our work in the present, all our work to bring justice to God's wounded world, to bring beauty into God's lovely but defaced world, to bring the gospel of Jesus to God's despairing world – all such work will be part of that new creation.

But the point of the resurrection of Jesus – the point of resurrection having, as it were, divided into two – is that we don't have to wait for that ultimate future for all this to come

true. This is where it has become clear – to me, at any rate! – that the denial of the bodily resurrection of Jesus is far from being a neutral or 'scientific' position, still less a 'modern' one. To deny the resurrection of Jesus is to deny that real change, real transformation has happened and can happen in our world. There have been several powerful vested interests in the last two hundred years who have been every bit as keen to see Jesus safely dead and buried as Pontius Pilate and Caiaphas were two thousand years ago. They are quite happy to suppose that some new spiritual transformation has happened to Jesus' followers. As all empires know, new merely spiritual movements not only pose no real threat; they are to be encouraged, because they keep people quiet and compliant. But if Jesus is raised from the dead then something new has happened in the world, something which creates a bridgehead into the world of corruption and decay, of sin and of death itself. The Holy Spirit works in the world with the energy that was unleashed at Easter to make change possible, to make transformation possible, to bring about healing and reconciliation, to turn impossible situations into possibilities and to turn possibilities into realities. And empires therefore oppose it, as they always have – including the multinational empire of post-Enlightenment western arrogance.

To affirm the resurrection and live by it, therefore comes at a price. As T S Eliot said, it will cost 'not less than everything'. All the early Christian writers knew that to sign on to be part of this transforming work was to sign on to share the sufferings of the Messiah. Many of you here today know more about that than I can begin to imagine, and I honour that and thank God for you. But perhaps you especially need to be reminded that when we share the fellowship of the Messiah's sufferings we do so in order that we may share in the glory of his transforming, healing work – not only in the ultimate future but also, in a measure as he gives us the grace, in the present as well. That is the hope of the gospel.

And of course things are more complicated still, because sometimes the churches, including those churches who have remained officially 'conservative' about the resurrection, have often hidden behind that apparent orthodoxy and have failed to allow that which they affirm to have its full weight. It is, sadly, possible for someone to affirm the divinity of Jesus but to hold at bay the breaking-in of God's kingdom. It is, sadly, possible for someone to affirm that Jesus the Messiah died for our sins but to use that simply as an assurance of heaven after death rather than to see it as the breakthrough to the reconciliation of the world to God and of one human being to another. And it is, sadly, possible for someone to affirm the bodily resurrection of Jesus but to hold at bay the Pauline insistence that this means the emergence of a power greater than Caesar, greater than all human empire, greater than death itself, a power which is made perfect in the weakness of Jesus' humble followers. Please God may we in our generation learn these lessons and learn them well. I have a sense that we are going to need them in the days to come.

So what might all this mean for us in the twenty-first century, and especially for you here in your lovely island with all the glory of your early history and all the pain and puzzlement of your more recent history? To answer that we must take a deep breath and turn from biblical theology to contemporary challenges – and to the question of what, if anything, we in the churches can do to be people of hope in the world that is now coming to birth.

2. The Challenge of Tomorrow's World

There are a thousand ways of analysing where we are in today's and tomorrow's world, and of addressing such an analysis with the insights gained from a biblical theology of hope, of new creation through the resurrection of Jesus. Again and again we find ourselves back with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, saying plaintively to the Lord, 'But we had hoped…' – we had hoped that the economic boom would last for ever; we had hoped that democracy would produce justice and a well-ordered common life; we had hoped that with the end of the Cold War the world would become a safer place; we had hoped that with our modern know-how we'd have worked out how to solve the problem of feeding the world's hungry people; we had hoped that with the collapse of the old taboos and hang-ups nobody would have any more problems about gender and sexuality; we had hoped that modern medical technology would help us sort out the key issues of life and death. And so on, and so on. Our culture has urged us to hope in all these ways, and as we look back on the bonfire of yet more vanities we are back on the Emmaus Road once more, with no sense that the wandering stranger who joins us might have anything to say that would help. It isn't that we had hoped for the wrong things, exactly: security, prosperity, generosity, wisdom, fulfilment are all good things, and our creator God wants us to hope for them and to work for them. But, my goodness, the western culture of the twentieth century taught us, urged us, to hope for them and work for them in many ways which have been deeply counter-productive, and which have led to the failure of so many hopes that some are recommending cynicism instead. You don't get hurt so badly that way. (You can, I'm sure, fill in the gaps here in terms of your own very specific situations.)

What does Jesus have to say to this muddle of failed hopes? I ask this question, conscious that the way Jesus wants to answer the question today is to do so *through you and me*. We are called to be the incognito stranger on the road, the one who knows how to tell the story differently, and perhaps even how to break the bread, literally or metaphorically, so that people's eyes are opened and they recognise, not us of course, but the Lord himself. This remains the task of the church, even today. May it be so as we learn again what it means to be resurrection people for a world in confusion.

To try to get a handle on the dense and slippery package of today's problems, let me introduce two sets of three themes. There isn't time of course to explore these properly but you might find them helpful as analytic tools when you are thinking through the issues in groups and afterwards. Jesus told us we should be prepared to interpret the signs of the times, and this is one attempt to do just that. The first set of themes is a trio that, separately and together, are affecting almost everything we do and think these days. We live in a world of neo-gnosticism; we live in a world of neo-imperialism; and we live in a world of postmodernity. A word about each of these; and I'm then going to put them on hold for a moment and return to them later. Unless we recognise these forces and impulses under the surface we won't be really engaging with the presenting issues.

First, neo-gnosticism. One of the great cultural imperatives of our time is to discover 'who you really are'. It is often assumed that we each have a secret life, a hidden identity, which might be quite different from our public persona; and the challenge then is to identify this hidden identity and to have the courage to be true to it and so to become truly authentic. (This gives extra energy to all the challenges of 'identity politics' about which you, here, know so much.) There are many who assume that something like this is what Christianity is really all about. That is why the so-called 'gospel of Thomas' and, of course, the *Da Vinci Code*, have had such a good run for their money, and I mean their money. But it isn't true. Like all gnosticisms, the new varieties are not about rescue or redemption; they are about self-

discovery, self-realization. They are not about being transformed into the likeness of Christ; they are about being transformed into the likeness of ourselves. They are not about the goodness of creation, and God's determination to reaffirm it; they are about the accidental nature of creation, and the need to escape it. The internet has given neo-gnosticism a massive boost, as millions of young people invent and re-invent their own personae on websites and live countless hours a week in the fantasy-worlds that result. Fantasy is fun for a while but deeply disappointing even in the medium term, let alone the long term. *What hope have we*, as Easter people, to give to those trapped in this esoteric but empty world?

Second, neo-imperialism. The western powers do not actually run the rest of the world in the way that nineteenth-century Britain ran half of the world, with Viceroys and colonial administrations. But there are many parts of today's world in which all the important decisions are made by banks and businesses based in America, or London, or Switzerland. There are many countries whose economies are directed simply to paying the compound interest on massive debts incurred by corrupt regimes from decades long gone, and who look at the way we bailed out our greedy bankers as another example of our residual hypocrisy, the very rich doing for the very rich what they had refused to do for the very poor. And, learning nothing from the massive mistakes of the British a century ago, the Americans have gone around the world in the mistaken impression (a) that everyone really wants to live in an American-style liberal democracy and (b) that a few well-placed guided missiles will take out the bad guys who are stopping it happening. As some of us said eight years ago, and all of us now know, this extraordinary way of behaving was designed to end in tears, and the tears have included those of the millions who have lost loved ones in a war which was far more about the flexing of western muscle and the settling of old scores than about making the world a safer place. This and other exercises of neo-imperialism show up the hollowness of the democratic ideal: nobody voted for the war, nobody planned how it would work or what would happen later. The imperial ideology (or, if you like, the rule of the god Mars) dictated that it should happen, and it did. Like all pagan worship, it demanded sacrifices, many of them human. We had hoped that we would make the world a safer place, but instead we fostered many more hornets' nests of angry anti-western sentiment. *What hope have we*, as Easter people, to give to a world worried at the mess its own empire has caused?

Third, there is postmodernity. Or rather, the uneasy to-and-fro between high modernism and postmodernity. Modernism propounds the myth of 'progress': we are advancing into the sunlit uplands of a brave new world. Postmodernity deconstructs all such grand narratives. Modernism says we must crank up our courage and live, once again, the dream of limitless economic growth and prosperity for all. Postmodernism reminds us of the credit crunch, the tiger economies that have now lost their claws, the dreams that have turned into nightmares without anyone really knowing quite why. Modernism says that our new technologies are making the world a better place. Postmodernity reminds us that some of the finest technological achievements of the last century were gas chambers and cluster bombs. Modernism wants to get us all together into one big conglomerate, a single entity; yes, that's the impetus behind the whole Europe project. But postmodernity deconstructs that into loose multi-multi-culturalism and says we must affirm all the little stories independently instead. These forces have been clashing against one another, and often real communities are caught up in the middle and don't know where there is solid ground on which to stand. We dare not, as Easter people, simply produce a vaguely Christian version of the modernist dream which has now let us down so badly. Postmodernity, after all, has had the role under God of preaching the doctrine of the Fall to arrogant modernity. But the doctrine of original sin isn't the place to stop. After that you need the gospel. But what will that look like? *What hope*

have we got to give to a world which hears with one ear that things will pick up and with the other ear that they will fall again, further and faster?

Gnosis, empire and postmodernity: these three reinforce one another. The gnostic imperative is to escape, which lets the empire proceed on its way without critique; and, as Pontius Pilate knew, the postmodern questioning of all truth is likewise a key factor in allowing the empire to do what it wants. These set the underlying themes within which the challenges of church and society are perceived: how dare the church (people think, following Pontius Pilate) – how dare the church still talk about 'truth'? What does it mean to be people of hope in a world like this?

Before trying briefly to answer that, let me move to my second set of three themes: our old friends money, sex and power. These, of course, overlap with the first three, each in the first interacting with each in the second. And again I want to ask, what do Easter people say and do in a world where these three reign unchecked? What hope have we got to offer in a world of Mammon, Aphrodite and Mars?

What do we say, in particular, when the only apparent solution to the credit crunch and the Eurozone crisis is to bail people out and urge everyone to go into personal debt in order to spend more in order to re-boost the economy? That could only be good advice in a panicking world that has forgotten some of the most basic truths of economics, as though the whole world were living in a giant Ponzi scheme, continually borrowing more and more from the future to make amends for our past profligacies. Somewhere in the background you may just recall that both the Old Testament and the Qur'an forbid the taking of interest, the principle upon which so much western society is based, the principle which is of course designed to take money from the poor and give it to the rich. Somewhere in the background you may just recall that the Bible speaks of Jubilee, of forgiveness of debts, of fresh starts; and you may recall that Jesus himself borrowed from that theme in some of his most basic announcements of God's kingdom. And somewhere you might imagine that, having tried everything else, people might just be ready to listen to the message of forgiveness, not simply in terms of forgiveness of personal sins, but in terms of forgiveness of the debts which should never have been incurred in the first place and through which the rich are continuing to get richer. I know it's more complex than that, but I also know that the rich routinely hide behind that complexity – until, of course, they need bailing out themselves, when suddenly it all becomes very simple. We in the church need to recover our nerve to speak and live as those who serve God, not Mammon.

There is, then, hope for those who will turn away from Mammon. The multiple crises and confusions caused by Aphrodite, the goddess of erotic love, are all too well known. There were many in the church, as in the wider world, who in the heady days of the 1960s thought that we could throw off the old constraints on sexual behaviour. We now know that human beings, and especially young human beings, are even more damageable than we had realised, and that as with banking so with sex the casting off of the old rules merely allows the strong to prey on the weak. There is of course so much anger and frustration on this score that it may be very difficult even to think, let alone to speak, a word of wisdom, still less of hope. But here is the irony: that in the good creation which is the foundation of all our hope God made us male and female in his image as the crown of his creation; so the corruption which has defaced both church and world in this area is the corruption of the best gift into the worst nightmare. And we are called to be people of hope by making and sustaining wise, humble, marriages and homes, and by making and sustaining the calling and choice of some to the

celibate lifestyle of Jesus himself. Let's be clear. Marriage is difficult, especially today. Celibacy is difficult, especially today. The alternatives may look easier but they routinely end in chaos and confusion. Being people of hope in tomorrow's world means modelling the humble, faithful lifestyles which reflect both creation and – as in the book of Revelation, with the marriage of heaven and earth – the new creation. We in the church need to recover our nerve to speak and live as those who serve Jesus, not Aphrodite.

Third, there is Power, which when worshipped turns inexorably into the god Mars, the god of violence and war. Despite centuries of Christian teaching we have seen in the last fifty years such violence – precisely within the so-called 'Christian' world! – that it's no wonder many turn their backs on the message of the Prince of Peace. Layer upon layer upon layer of bad memories, of old grudges and sorrows, of ancient vendettas and tribal prejudices – all this is well known in many parts of the world, not only in your beloved country. People sometimes say, disparagingly, of the church in Africa that it is a mile wide but only an inch deep; but I fear that we in the supposedly Christian western world should look at ourselves in the mirror and say the same. Out of all the leaders of the self-styled civilized world it was the two who most obviously claimed to be Christian who led the way to the bombing of Iraq. We who are people of hope need to learn the lesson taught by Bishop Desmond Tutu, that there is another way, the way of costly reconciliation and truth. The empires of the world don't want to hear this message, but without it there is no hope, no future. The very heart of the message and mission of Jesus, as we know, is the cross; and, as all four gospels insist, part of the meaning of the cross is the standing on its head of the world's ways of power. Once again, it comes back to forgiveness. When the risen Jesus told his friends that they were to announce 'repentance and forgiveness' to the world, this was not simply a message about personal sorrow for sins and personal release from guilt, vital and central though that is. They were to announce, and to live, a whole new way of being human. If we live in the past, the multiple memories of different communities will continue to shape our future in distorted and damaged ways, with each memory claiming, in good postmodern fashion, the status of the victim. We must, rather, name what has happened in the past as a way of seeking healing and forgiveness, in order to go forward in fresh hope. Where this all comes out is that instead of focussing on money, we should concentrate on *resources*; instead of obsessing about sex, we should foster *relationships*; instead of wielding power, we should exercise *responsibility*. Jesus' first followers went out into the world as people of hope; and we who stumble along in their tracks need to learn again the same lessons, recognising that we too have fallen short on all fronts but that we, too, are given grace to find repentance and forgiveness, so that we may help others on the same pathway.

Come back, then, to the road to Emmaus. Here, this time, are three friends, walking along and shaking their heads. We had hoped, with neo-gnosticism, that we would discover our true identity, who we really were. But when we looked deep inside ourselves, we found confusion, arrogance, fear, greed, a complex mass of identities which simply restated the problem. We had hoped, with the new world order of liberal democracy, that we could run the world in a way which would bring justice, equality and peace for all. But we found that while democracy is better than totalitarianism it hasn't solved the basic human problems, and that we have defended our delightful western world at the cost of bombing people in the middle East and enslaving many in the third world with unpayable debt. We had hoped, with postmodernity, that the big oppressive stories would be swept away and all the small stories, all the minority interests, would have their day in the sun. But we found, not a wonderful rainbow world of varied cultures, but a cacophony of voices competing for the nebulous high

moral ground of supposed victimhood. And, like Cleopas and his friend, we stand there, telling our tale of woe to the mysterious stranger.

And the story which Jesus then tells is his own story, his own story rooted in Israel's scriptures. It's a story of strange reversals: of a slavery which ends in dramatic rescue, of failure which ends in God's redemption, of exile which produces an astonishing return. It's a story of God himself at work in his world, not by blasting it out of the way and making a new one entirely, not by sending in the tanks to smash all the wicked people, but by coming himself as the servant to rinse clean the deep and dark recesses of the human heart, to overthrow the love of power with the power of love, to take every single lonely voice in the world and to teach them to sing a million-part motet which will outdo the angels themselves. The foolishness of God is wiser than mortals, and the weakness of God is stronger than mortals. The answer the resurrection provides for our three puzzles is Trinitarian: God the Father for the world stuck in Gnosticism; Jesus the Lord for the confused world of power-politics; the Spirit of Truth as the ultimate answer both to modernity and to postmodernity. There is life to be had in the old tree, life that offers hope for tomorrow's world. We in the church, for all our own failures and muddles, are still the cracked earthenware pots in which God's treasure is contained (as Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4). We cannot any longer presume upon an automatic place of leadership within our society. But we can, and we must, live in public as people of hope, as followers of Jesus.

So we who are people of hope, people who dare to believe in the resurrection of Jesus the Messiah from the dead, are to be people who know how to tell that story because we ourselves are learning how to live it; indeed, people who tell that story precisely *by* living it, not only in church but in the housing estate and the council chamber, in the trade union and the business park, in the school and the hospital and the care home and the prison. Perhaps at the moment, granted all the sorrow and shame which the church itself has brought upon itself, the only way the story can be told, the only way the story can be heard, is if we get on and live it, if we do what Jesus did and humbly serve our generation, giving ourselves as we are able, and as God calls us, in humility and love. The strange challenge of the gospel, of the story of the Emmaus Road, is that what Jesus was for those two originally, and for our three just now, we are called to be for our neighbours and friends, for those we traditionally sit down with and those we traditionally don't sit down with. We are called, in the power of the Spirit, to break the bread, literally and metaphorically, so that people will suddenly recognise Jesus once again, risen and in their midst. The church must not retreat into private piety, hiding away from the world. But the way we shall bring Jesus' healing story to the world is by making that Jesus-shaped contribution to public life through which people will again recognise his presence and his kingdom. In other words: We are called to be people of hope for a world that has all but forgotten what hope might mean. We are called to be resurrection people for a world that has looked death, debt and despair in the face. We are called to be Jesus' people in a world that's fed up with Caesar's people. My friends, we are not sufficient for these things. Of course we're not. But Jesus is risen; he has given us his Spirit; and if there is no hope here there is no hope, period. The late Bishop Lesslie Newbigin was once asked whether he was an optimist or a pessimist. I close with his answer. 'I am neither an optimist,' he said, 'nor a pessimist. *Jesus Christ is risen from the dead.´* Amen.