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Inaugural Lecture

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'Imagining the Kingdom: Mission and Theology in Early Christianity'

The four gospels stand magisterially at the head of the canon and the centre of early Christianity. They are remarkable documents. If they had been lost for centuries, and then dug up last year in the sands of Egypt, they would be hailed as among the most extraordinary writings from antiquity. Despite the occasional efforts to push them out of their central position and substitute other documents, whether actually existing (such as the wrongly named *Gospel of Thomas*) or reconstructed (such as the hypothetical document 'Q'), the majority of scholars still believe, rightly in my view, that Matthew, Mark, Luke and John deserve their place. The fact that they are well known should not blind us to their remarkable blend of page-turning narrative, vivid portraiture (especially of their central figure), historical verisimilitude and sophisticated theology.

And yet. Reversing what St Paul says about himself, the gospels, though well known at one level, are unknown at another. An oversimplification, of course; but I refer to the overall drift of gospel studies, and to the perception of the gospels in the church community to which biblical studies remains tangentially, and sometimes uncomfortably, related. Huge strides have been made, not least by my predecessor but one, Professor Richard Bauckham, both in his work on the wide intended readership of the gospels and in his award-winning book on the gospels and the eyewitnesses. If he is even half right – and I think he is at least that – then all kinds of assumptions, including some of those blessed things they used to call 'the assured results of criticism', will need to be torn up. But we need to go further still. Despite generations now of redaction criticism and narrative criticism, I am not convinced that the main message of the gospels has been grasped, let alone reflected in the methods employed for further study. And since I shall contend in this lecture that the four gospels stand at the centre of the *missionary* and hence *theological* life of the early church, a failure to understand their central thrust is most likely an index of a failure to grasp several other things as well about the life and work of the first Christians.

I am not being alarmist. Fine work in many directions has been done on the gospels, a generation ago by another predecessor, Matthew Black of blessed memory. And of course Robin Wilson, of more recent memory, contributed much to our understanding of the early Christian hinterland

within which the gospels and their early reception must be understood. But there comes a time in every discipline to take a deep breath, stand back, and say, 'Well and good; but perhaps we're still missing something.' That's when we need, not simply more attention to detail, vital and central though that remains, but precisely *imagination*: a willingness to think beyond the fence, to ask questions hitherto screened out. And, to complete the list of recent predecessors, Markus Bockmuehl in his short stay here published a remarkable book, *Seeing the Word*, offering an eloquent and wide-ranging plea for just such an imaginative leap, a reassessment of the tasks and methods of the whole discipline. That is the kind of exercise which I want to share with you this afternoon, with due gratitude both for the invitation to occupy this chair and for the warm welcome I have received in St Mary's College and in the wider University community. (It occurs to me that within this succession it has been over fifty years since someone was appointed whose name didn't begin with either a B or a W. Make of that what you will.)

My remarks will fall into three sections. First, I shall propose a fresh thesis about the gospels, stressing the way in which they summoned their first readers to imagine a new state of affairs being launched into the world, a state of affairs for which the obvious shorthand was 'the kingdom of God'. This might seem obvious, but the history of gospel scholarship has included many avoidance mechanisms, drawing attention away from the gospels' uncomfortable claim. Thus, in the second section, I want to pull back and survey the wider intellectual and cultural climate in which the discipline of 'New Testament Studies' was born and nurtured, and suggest that the failure to grasp the central message of the gospels flows directly from various philosophical and cultural agendas which have dominated the discipline. This will send us back, third, to the gospels and the other New Testament writings, to look afresh at early Christian mission and the theology which grew up to support and explain it.

1. How God Became King: The Story of the Gospels

My proposal about the gospels is that they all, in their rather different ways, tell the story of Jesus of Nazareth as the story of *how God became king*. They all, in other words, announce the launch of a 'theocracy'. Research into the gospels has, by and large, managed to screen out this claim, which would have been obvious in the first century and which sustained the early church in its life and mission.

The word 'theocracy', of course, sends shivers down many spines today. In our current climate, with the uneasy stand-off between secularism and fundamentalism, the idea of 'theocracy' sounds uncomfortably like a return to what people vaguely imagine as the situation of the Middle Ages, with popes, bishops and priests ordering everyone about – or, indeed, to the forms of theocracy envisaged and sometimes even implemented in other religions today. (When I was lecturing in Ireland recently, someone asked me to comment on the fact that only two countries in the world have clergy sitting as of right in the upper chamber of Parliament: the UK on the one hand and Iran on the other.) Most modern westerners, not least in our great universities, react to this very strongly, upholding freedom both of action and of thought. Theocracy is what we thought we'd got

rid of, not something we wanted to discover in some of the western tradition's most cherished central texts.

But 'theocracy', in a sense yet to be defined, is of course what is meant by 'the kingdom of God', which the synoptic gospels highlight at the central motif of Jesus' public announcements and which the fourth gospel presupposes as his central theme (the first time we meet it in John it seems to be assumed that this is what Jesus is all about). We know from Josephus that the revolutionaries, in the last century before the disastrous Roman-Jewish war, took as their battle-cry the slogan 'no king but God!' Presumably they thought they knew how God would exercise that kingly rule. Probably they imagined themselves having some role as divine agents. But we should not doubt that 'God's kingdom' denoted the long-awaited rule of Israel's God on earth as in heaven. The widespread assumption today that 'the kingdom of God' denotes another realm altogether, for instance that of the 'heaven' to which God's people might hope to go after their death, was not on the first-century agenda. When Jesus spoke about God's kingdom, and taught his followers to pray that it would arrive 'on earth as in heaven', he was right in the middle of first-century Jewish theocratic aspirations.

So when the gospels tell the story of Jesus as the story of 'how God became king', this wasn't just an aspiration; it was an accomplishment. We can see this in three narrational strands which work together in all four gospels (though not, interestingly, in any of the non-canonical gnostic materials). As with this whole lecture, I here summarize and simplify a large mass of complex material.

The three strands in question come in addition to, not in competition with, the two more normally observed. First, the gospels are biographies: gone are the days when people could confidently deny that. Several studies have indicated the reverse: when placed alongside Greco-Roman *bioi*, the four canonical gospels clearly belong in something like the same genre. Second, the gospels reflect the life of the early church. How precisely they do that is another matter; that they do so is not in question. But the further three further dimensions have all too often been missing from the discussion. And these – which all interlock – explain what God's kingdom is all about.

The first of these missing dimensions is that the four canonical gospels tell the story of Jesus as the *continuation* and *climax* of the ancient story of Israel. To say this is more than to say that the gospels portray Jesus as the fulfilment of ancient prophecy. That is obvious. It is the *kind* of fulfilment that matters here. In the wider Jewish world of the day, some people were telling the longer story of Israel was being told in search of an ending; the gospels are written in order to provide such an ending. What matters, though it cuts right against the grain of modern western thought, is the idea of *narrative continuity*. Not just 'narrative' as such; that might lead simply to a repeated pattern, which we naturally find as well, for instance in the strong sense of a 'new exodus', the fresh and final repetition of ancient Israel's greatest story. That is important, but it points beyond itself to the belief that all these repeated patterns were part of a larger sequence that was going somewhere. History might be in some sense cyclic, but the cycles contributed to a forward, linear movement. Thus the book we call Pseudo-Philo tells the ancient story of Israel and

breaks off at the point where David is about to become king. Its recounting of the tales of the Judges seem to be designed as a model for militant messianic movements in the writer's own day. The book of Wisdom recounts the story of the Exodus, not simply as a great historic moment in Israel's ancient past, but as the model for the new and decisive act of judgment which Israel's God is about to perform, condemning the wicked and vindicating his wise and righteous sufferers. At that level, despite the radical difference of genre, we find something similar in 4 Ezra and 2 Baruch, who look back to the horrible events of 586 BC as a kind of model for what they have experienced in AD 70, and retell the ancient story as a way of leading the eye up to the great messianic deliverance which is about to burst upon the world, with (in 4 Ezra's vision) the messianic lion triumphing over the pagan eagle.

All of these, in their different ways, look back to the scriptures, and particularly the book of Daniel, with its intriguing combination of wisdom and apocalyptic. In fact, the storytelling we have just glanced at belongs within a much larger movement of thought in which Daniel 9 in particular became seminal. In Daniel 9 the prophet asks how long the exile is going to be: will it not, as Jeremiah prophesied, last for seventy years? Back comes the answer: not seventy years, but seventy times seven. There are important echoes here of the Jubilee theme from Leviticus 25, but for our purposes the point is that this predicted 490 years haunted the minds of devout Jews in the centuries immediately before and after the time of Jesus. There is plenty of evidence to indicate that people were calculating, as best they could, when that time would be up, and when the long-awaited deliverance from pagan domination would therefore occur. Their answers varied wildly. The Essenes, it appears, pinned their hopes on the climax coming around the time when Herod the Great died. Some Rabbis, however, did their sums quite differently (it all depends, of course, where you begin the sequence), so that when Akiba hailed Simeon ben Kosiba as Messiah in AD 132 some of his colleagues opposed him, not so much because ben Kosiba was not a suitable candidate but because, according to their calculations, the Son of David was not due for at least another century. All of this, interesting though it is, simply points to the widespread phenomenon which is, I suggest, the presupposition for the story the gospels tell in the way they tell it: that Israel's history, under the guidance of a strange and often opaque divine providence, had not come to a standstill, but was moving forward towards its appointed goal. The story has many twists and turns, many flashbacks and indeed flash-forwards, advance hints of what is to come. But it is a single storyline, still awaiting its proper and fitting fulfilment.

My first point, then, is that all four gospels, in their different ways, are written so as to say that the story of the public career and fate of Jesus of Nazareth provides that proper and fitting, if highly surprising and subversive, fulfilment. Jesus is not, for the evangelists, simply the antitype of the various types such as Moses, or David, or the Passover lamb. He is the point at which the millennia-long narrative has reached its goal. Matthew makes the point, graphically, with his introductory genealogy. Mark does it with his opening quotations from Malachi and Isaiah; Luke, by telling the story of John the Baptist as a reprise of the story of Samuel. (They do it in many other ways, too, but these stand out.) John goes right back to the beginning, to the opening of Genesis, and structures his gospel so as to say that in Jesus not only the story of Israel but the story of all creation is reaching its decisive goal. And in all four gospels there are clear echoes and

references back, in a variety of ways and contexts, to the various prophecies of Daniel, including those of chapter 9. It is in Daniel, of course, that we find the strongest statement of what the climax will be, when it comes: it will be the arrival of God's own kingdom, his sovereign rule, trumping the rule of all pagan powers. And it is to Daniel that we should look to find the text which, according to Josephus (echoed at this point by Suetonius), most incited Jews to rebel against Rome: the text according to which a world ruler would, *at that time*, arise from Judaea (*Jewish War* 6.312-3; cf. *Antiquities* 10.267, where Josephus singles out Daniel as the only prophet who gave an exact chronology for when his predictions would come to pass). Josephus and Suetonius, of course, refer this to Vespasian, called back from the campaign against Jerusalem to become Emperor in Rome. The four gospels, clearly, have another candidate in mind. And, for that matter, a different sort of kingdom. But to that we shall return.

There is of course much more that could be said about the way in which the four gospels tell the story of Jesus as the climax of the continuous story of Israel, with the kingdom of God arriving at that climax. But I move rapidly to the second point, which is that the gospels tell this story as the story of Israel's God. In the world of second-Temple Judaism there was a strong sense, not just that Israel's fortunes needed to change, but that Israel's God needed to come back to his people, to the temple. Ezekiel had described the divine glory leaving Jerusalem, and had prophesied that it would return to a rebuilt temple, but nobody ever said they'd seen it happen. There is no scene anywhere in the literature of the period to correspond to Exodus 40, where the divine glory fills the newly constructed tabernacle, or 1 Kings 8, where the same thing happens to Solomon's Temple. There is no sudden appearance, as was granted to the prophet Isaiah. Plenty of texts say that it will happen (I think, obviously, of Isaiah 40 and 52, the two biblical passages, interestingly, where the word 'gospel' occurs; of Zechariah and Malachi), but none indicate that it already has. And here the four evangelists are quite explicit. John is perhaps the most obvious: 'the word became flesh,' he says, 'and tabernacled, pitched his tent, in our midst; and we beheld his glory.' In case we missed the point, John rubs it in again and again. Mark, outwardly so different to John, hits the same note with those opening quotations from Isaiah and Malachi. Both passages concern the return of the divine glory, and the messenger who will prepare for it. Mark leaves us in no doubt that he thinks it has now happened, in and through Jesus. Matthew and Luke in their own ways get at the same point, Matthew not least with the Emmanuel promise and Luke not least through the terrifying scene in chapter 19 where Jesus, arriving in Jerusalem, tells the story about the king who comes back at last, and then announces Jerusalem's imminent destruction because 'you did not know the moment when God was visiting you' (to;n kairo;n th'~ ejpiskoph'~ sou).

I hope you see that this puts the cat among several older critical pigeons. I grew up in a scholarly world where it was taken for granted that while John had a high, most probably Greek, Christology, the synoptics had a low, most probably Jewish one. That only shows the extent to which people were asking the wrong question in the wrong framework. Once we think first-century Jewishly, a different picture emerges. To the old sneer, that Jesus talked about God but the early church talked about Jesus, we may reply that Jesus did indeed talk about God and God's kingdom – in order to explain what he himself was doing and would accomplish.

Israel's stories normally confronted, not other Jews, but the might of pagan empire. If the gospels bring this story to a climax, it shouldn't surprise us to find – this is my third main point – that they are all written to tell the story of Jesus as the story of Israel, and of Israel's God, reaching their proper climax, *so as thereby to tell the story of how Israel's God becomes king of the whole world*. This is the clue to the mission, and the missionary theology, of the early church, to which I shall return.

Think of the other narrative which had exploded around the time that Jesus was born. The intellectual coup d'état which Augustus accomplished through his court poets and historians was every bit as stunning as the political coup he achieved in the double civil war that followed the Julius Caesar's assassination. Everybody in Rome knew that Augustus's attaining of supreme and unchallengeable power meant the overthrow of a centuries-long tradition of fierce republicanism (Augustus, of course, insisted that he had merely restored the republic, but nobody was fooled). But for Livy to tell the history of Rome through the long years of the Republic and climaxing with the rule of Augustus, with whom he had a lasting friendship, was a remarkable achievement. Scholars differ on the extent to which Livy himself believed that the rule of Augustus was an unqualified good thing, and Tacitus records (*Annals* 4.34) that in one of the later, and sadly lost, books of his great work Livy felt able to praise the conspirators Brutus and Cassius. But he knew which side his bread was buttered on, as is evidenced for instance by his distorting of key political details to suit the new regime (e.g. 4.20, where Livy suggests that Cornelius Cossus was consul, not merely a military tribune, when celebrating his single-handed victory over an enemy commander four centuries earlier, thus supporting Augustus's jealous retaining of military glory for himself in his own day).

But the greatest writer to tell the long story of Rome as a history leading the eye up to Augustus was Virgil. His early *Eclogues* refer to the turbulent events of the civil war, and include the mysterious fourth, hailing the birth of a child who will usher in the golden age. Virgil read the *Georgics* to Augustus in person after his victory at Actium in 31 BC; and he was regularly in the company of Augustus during the years in which he composed the *Aeneid* itself, the greatest poem of the period. Here there is, as is well known, a 'strong narrative teleology' (*OCD* 1606), invoking 'Fate' as the force which will lead Aeneas to found Rome and Rome to produce, eventually, the wonderful new empire of Augustus. Already in the first Book the scene is set, with Jupiter himself prophesying to the world, back then in the time of Aeneas, that from his noble line there will be born 'a Trojan Caesar, who shall extend his empire to the ocean, his glory to the stars' (1.286f.). His empire will be lavishly prosperous, and will bring peace to the world (1.289-95). Aeneas himself is seen as a type of the coming Augustus, an indication that here, too, typology can flourish within an overall grand narrative. I am not aware of any monarch before Augustus causing the story of his own accession to be told as the climax of a much longer narrative.

When these three points are grasped together, we observe a remarkable phenomenon. There is no sign that the Romans are borrowing from Jewish tradition the idea of a thousand-year history climaxing in a surprising but victorious, prosperous and peace-bringing reign. Nor is there any suggestion that Matthew, Mark, Luke or John had read Livy or Virgil. But their story of Jesus as

bringing the long history of Israel to an unexpected climax offered a remarkable parallel to the great Roman narrative, which Augustus and his successors were busily reinforcing in statues, coins and other symbolic artefacts. It was bound to be set on a collision course. The Jews, too, had cherished a prophecy about a coming king whose peaceful rule would extend from one sea to the other, from the River to the ends of the earth (Psalm 89; Zechariah 9). And the four evangelists declare that this king has arrived, and that his name is Jesus. It is not surprising – to anticipate a later point – that we find the early church accused, in northern Greece which was such key terrain for the early Empire, of behaving contrary to the dogmas of Caesar, and saying that there was ‘another king [*basilea heteron*], namely Jesus’ (Acts 17.7).

Rome is, of course, scarcely mentioned in the four gospels. Yet, for those with first-century ears attuned, its presence is everywhere presupposed. John’s great climactic scene of Jesus and Pilate – the kingdom of God against the kingdom of Caesar, challenging one another’s visions of kingdom, truth and power – shows where, for him, the story was heading all along. Luke stages the birth of Jesus carefully in relation to the decree of Caesar Augustus, and his second volume ends with Paul in Rome announcing God as king and Jesus as lord, ‘openly and unhindered’. Matthew and Mark draw heavily on Daniel 7, the passage above all where God’s kingdom confronts and overthrows the kingdoms of the world, seen as a succession of four increasingly horrible monsters. There is no doubt, in the first century, that the fourth monster would have meant Rome. And if recent suggestions are right, Mark himself may have deliberately framed his gospel with strong hints that in Jesus an empire was coming to birth of a completely different character to that of Caesar. A current article (NTS 2010) contrasts the dove which descended on Jesus at his baptism with the Roman eagle, appearing as an omen to further the cause of Augustus or his successors. And an increasingly common interpretation of Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem is to see that event not only as the staged fulfilment of Zechariah 9 but also as a deliberate parody of the regular entry into Jerusalem of Pontius Pilate, on horseback surrounded by soldiers, coming from his quarters in Caesarea.

Whether or not that is correct, we should certainly see the muttered remark of the centurion at the foot of the cross as vital. Mark hopes that his Roman readers will come to share this astonishing viewpoint. In a world where Caesar, unambiguously, was hailed as ‘son of God’, the centurion looks at the dead Jesus and transfers the title to him. It is the point where all the lines meet – the lines that run from Abraham, David and the exile; the lines that run from 2 Samuel 7, Psalm 2 and Psalm 72; the lines that run from Exodus 40 to 1 Kings 8 and Ezekiel 43; and, above all, from Isaiah 40—55 all the way into the mindset of Jesus himself and the interpretative work of the evangelists. The story told by all four gospels is the story of How God Became King: not by the usual means of military revolution, but by the inauguration of sovereignty during Jesus’ public career, and the strange but decisive victory on the cross itself. All four report that Jesus was executed with the words ‘king of the Jews’ over his head; and, as they all knew though many scholars have long forgotten, the ancient Jewish dream was that the king of the Jews would be king of the world. Of course: if Israel’s God was the creator of the world, one would expect nothing less. And what the four evangelists are asking their readers to do, as they ponder this strange multi-layered narrative, is precisely to *imagine*: to imagine that *this*, rather than something

else, is what it would look like when God became king. Along with music and the visual arts, narrative is a primary human means of stimulating the imagination. And this is precisely, I suggest, what the four gospels are aiming to do.

These are the themes which I see prominently in the gospels but not so prominently in contemporary scholarship. Indeed, much of the effort expended on the gospels over the last hundred years and more has been directed, not towards grappling with these issues, but precisely towards holding them at bay. Narrative and imagination have been at a discount; the mechanical study of dismembered fragments has been the rule. Most of the much-vaunted ‘methods’ proposed in gospel scholarship have been generated from within a world where all that I have just said has been ignored. Such methods are not neutral; they reflect the underlying assumptions of their makers, and I am suggesting that those underlying assumptions were deeply flawed. But why should this have been so? To try to understand that I turn to the second main section of my lecture.

2. Avoiding the Kingdom: The Story of Biblical Scholarship

If we are to engage with our predecessors as historical critics of the New Testament we must contextualize them in the climate of thought in which they lived. An obvious example, not least in connection with dismembered fragments, is the great German Rudolf Bultmann. He was himself keenly aware of his own presuppositions, though many of his followers, not least in the UK and America, treated his work as the objective results of neutral scholarship. Anything but: he was writing his major work on the gospels at a time when, after the First World War and the demise of the Kaiser and other ‘great men’, Germany was trying to become simply a ‘community’, a *Gemeinde*, in the Weimar Republic. What did Bultmann do? He wrote about the gospels as the collections of stories which *die Gemeinde*, the ‘community’, told amongst themselves to sustain their present faith, not at all intending reference to a recently departed ‘great man’, except for the sheer fact of his crucifixion. No thought of ‘kingdom’ there in any sense that a first-century Jew might recognise.

But that observation is simply the tip of the iceberg. So, too, is the necessary warning issued a generation ago by Hans Frei, that for much of the last two centuries narrative itself has been ‘eclipsed’ in biblical scholarship, which had regarded stories as secondary and looked instead for nuggets of doctrinal and ethical teaching. (We might compare the recent anti-Bible put out by the philosopher A. C. Grayling, which despite its attempt to parody the actual Bible, with its chapter-headings and its ‘verses’, consists of no narrative at all, but only wise sayings and advice.) But, again, one has to ask why. This is a question which demands a multi-volume answer. All I can do here is to put two or three items on the table for further discussion. I shall once again oversimplify. My aim is to stimulate the disciplined imagination.

First, ever since the Renaissance the implicit narrative of western culture has included a fracture. There is the good early period; then there is the bad or boring middle period; then there is the sudden reawakening, the shining of a great light, in which we retrieve the good early period – or

some of it, anyway – in a newly formed culture or worldview. Thus the Renaissance itself, fed up with what was seen as the stodgy and unimaginative categories of the late Middle Ages, saw itself as breaking with the immediate past and retrieving an earlier golden age. The Reformation, in its turn, went back not (of course) to the Renaissance's pagan sources but to the Bible and the early fathers, though largely agreeing about the dark middle period from which one needed a clean break. The Enlightenment, some of whose seeds were sown in both the Renaissance and the Reformation, constantly tends to portray everything before it as ignorant superstition, hailing modern science and technology as the signs of the brave new world which enable us to draw an even thicker line between ourselves and our predecessors, retrieving only those bits and pieces of earlier wisdom which may commend themselves from time to time.

One way or another, though, all these great movements have contained an implicit (and often explicit) narrative in which what one precisely does not want is continuity. Within Protestantism in particular – and until fairly recently most of the running in biblical scholarship was made by Protestants of one stripe or another – the sense of a major break in the narrative is deeply important. Anything else might signal, at least by implication, that the Catholics had been right all along, even though ostensibly the story being told would have been about the first century rather than the sixteenth. There has, then, been deep visceral resistance to any idea of a continuous narrative, and this itself has greatly impeded a recognition of what the gospels were actually doing.

Second, however, the movement of thought from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment can be characterized especially by the major revival of Epicureanism. Ever since Poggio Bracciolini rediscovered Lucretius's great poem *De Rerum Natura* in an obscure European monastery in 1417 – exactly a century before Luther's supposed rediscovery of Paul's theology led him to nail his thesis to the Wittenberg door – the great alternative philosophy of the first century (alternative, that is, to the otherwise dominant Stoicism) had been making its way in European circles (see now Stephen Greenblatt, *The Swerve: How the Renaissance Began* [London: The Bodley Head, 2011]). It came to its full flowering with the thinkers of the Enlightenment, taking in such seminal figures as Giordano Bruno, Montaigne, Galileo, Bacon, Hobbes, Newton, Hume and, not least, Thomas Jefferson, who famously proclaimed 'I am an Epicurean'. (That claim has to be taken seriously, despite Jefferson's attempts to have his cake and eat it by also noting his admiration for Epictetus, a first-century Stoic, and of course for Jesus himself; the latter two being subject to Jefferson's own rather heavy-handed attempts to decontextualize them and present the cleaned-up results in a way that sustained his other agendas rather than undermining them, as left to themselves they might have done.) The point is that in Epicurean philosophy, over against the confused and frightening paganism of the ancient world and the confused and frightening religion of the middle ages, the gods are removed far away, off to a distant heaven from which they don't even bother to get involved in the affairs of the present world. The world itself, according to the first-century atomism of Lucretius, consists of, well, atoms, and the objects made up of them, moving under their own steam, without divine intervention, developing and transforming themselves according to their own energy, their innate 'swerve' (*clinamen*, a crucial Epicurean term), and the survival of the fittest. Darwinism before Darwin. Human society, likewise, should be able to order itself from within, needing no divine intervention whether through kings or priests or anybody else. The modern

movement of liberal democracy is thus the twin sister of modern atheistic science, sharing Lucretius as the primary ancestor and the Enlightenment philosophers as immediate parents. Biblical scholarship as we know it today was born in a world where the gods had been banished far away, a world in which humans and their societies moved under their own steam.

The majority of westerners today simply do not realise either that they are Epicureans by default or that Epicureanism was always only one philosophy among others. As a young theologian I was taught that the Enlightenment had opened up a new *saeculum* (as indeed the American dollar bill declares to this day), and that we could not think of challenging it. That, of course, was the shrill protest that presaged the arrival of postmodernity, when the old Enlightenment certainties were shaken to the core. But people usually do not realise that the Epicurean stance of separating God or the gods from the world was always simply one option; that it was always an unstable option (since the gods always tended to sneak back in by other means, as in the Romantic movement's pantheistic answer to Enlightenment rationalism), that it was always a costly option, easier to embrace if you were rich and healthy enough to enjoy the Epicurean lifestyle. But the most important point is that this unstable and costly option was always going to be a very bad framework for understanding the Jewish traditions, especially the New Testament itself.

Now of course, as a historian I believe that people with all kinds of different worldviews can and should study the evidence of the past and offer what interpretations they can of it, and particularly – the heart of good history – what made people tick. As the great contemporary historian Asa Briggs has written in his recent account of his time at Bletchley Park, what made young historians such good codebreakers is that they were 'well read, drawn to lateral thinking, and taught to get inside the mind of people totally different from themselves' (*Secret Days* p 78). But there's the point. To use the anthropologist's jargon, historians of whatever background and context ought to have a stab at offering an *etic* account of the societies they are studying, that is, an outsider's fair analysis of the phenomena before them. But, as with anthropology, so with history, the insidious pressure is there to provide what purports to be an *emic* account – an account of how the people themselves actually thought – but which is in fact the *etic* one in disguise. And when, in the case of Enlightenment historiography, the *etic* account was offered from within Epicurean principles, the chance of getting anywhere near the *emic* account that first-century Jews (including the early Christians) might have offered was severely reduced. In fact, within the Epicurean worldview Judaism was reduced, first, to being a 'religion' (the word 'religion' itself having been already severely redefined to reflect Epicurean principles, now meaning 'that which humans do with their solitude'), and then to being *the wrong sort* of religion (since it persisted, perversely from the Epicurean point of view, in believing that the real world of creation, and human actions within it, actually mattered as part of the whole). Those who embraced the Enlightenment but sought still to be good Christians thus portrayed themselves in a different light. Martin Luther's Protestantism, in which Paul rose and smote the wicked Judaizers, came to birth in a new form, as Christianity had to become unJewish in order to hold up its head in European culture. I'm talking here about the 1830s, not yet the 1930s. Religion and ordinary life had to be kept as far apart as possible. The French went all the way with the Enlightenment agenda, and tried to wipe out religion entirely – as they are still trying to do, with the banning of Muslim headscarves. The Americans compromised, and insisted

on a rigid separation of church and state: you could still be a Christian, but you'd better not bring it into public life. The English, as usual, looked this way and that, took a pragmatic approach, and muddled along. As a newcomer, I had better not try to describe what happened in Scotland, though the simultaneous influence of John Knox and David Hume offers an interesting legacy. As for Ireland, I am reminded of the remark of my good friend the Irish American biblical scholar Dominic Crossan, who said that the Irish never really got the Enlightenment, but they got the British instead, which they found most enlightening in other ways. But my point is this: Epicureanism, and its social and political outworkings, may or may not be the best way for us today to organise our world. I would argue not, but that's not the point. But it is certainly not a good framework for us to understand the world of the early Christians.

The discipline has reflected this, on both sides of various great debates. The fateful Enlightenment split between the gods and the world has generated a new meaning for words like 'natural' and 'supernatural'. It is now widely believed by would-be Christian apologists that part of the task is to defend something called 'the supernatural', in which a normally distant divinity invades the 'natural' world to perform 'miracles' or even, in the Christian story, to become human. But this merely reinscribes and perpetuates the Epicureanism which still serves as the framework for the discussion. Thus, in the study of the gospels, so-called 'liberals' have done their best to offer would-be historical accounts in which Jesus was 'really' a Jewish revolutionary or teacher or apocalyptic prophet (the notion of 'apocalyptic' itself, by the way, has suffered radically through this process, but that's another story), while the so-called 'conservatives' have done their best to offer a historical account in which Jesus really was a 'supernatural' being who really did do miracles and rise from the dead. And since in my own work I have done my best to counter some of the revisionist proposals it might be easy to suppose I was simply taking the latter path. Rather, I want to insist that to understand the first Christians we must understand the radical difference between the ancient Jewish worldview and the ancient Epicurean worldview (remembering not least that one of the sharpest insults a Rabbi could offer to heretics was to call them *apikorsim*, Epicureans). In the ancient Jewish worldview, the one God was not removed from the world, but was mysteriously present and active within it, at least in theory, so that if he remained absent, as in the second-Temple period, there was precisely a sense of that absence. And the modes of his presence and activity were concentrated on the major Jewish symbols: Temple, Torah, land, family, and not least the great narrative which was continuing and would be fulfilled even though it might have seemed for the moment, like a submerged stream, to be running underground. This was the air Jesus and his first followers breathed. And the task of describing, from an *emic* viewpoint, the mindset and motivation of the earliest Christians is thus one for which the Epicurean worldview is singularly badly suited. And to the extent that the movement of nineteenth-century biblical scholarship was done from within that Enlightenment framework, in its various forms owing much to Kant, Hegel and later Feuerbach, it was bound to misunderstand and misrepresent what the earliest Christians were about. And since some of the nineteenth-century proposals are still alive and well, kept alive by the sheer inertia of a complex discipline long after their sell-by date, we still find ourselves facing categories like 'Jewish Christian' and 'Gentile Christian', like 'Early Catholicism' and 'apocalyptic', which actually demand such radical overhaul that it might be better to draw our own heavy line across the false *Heilsgeschichte* of triumphalist scholarship, and try to

start again.

There is another element to all this which I just mention before turning to my final point about the cultural context of modern biblical scholarship. Much of this work has been done within the Lutheran tradition. But, for all its strengths, the Lutheran world has long embraced a 'two kingdoms' theology in which God and Caesar simply won't mix. When coupled with the Enlightenment's Epicureanism, this has produced several generations of scholarship in which, for instance, it is off limits to imagine that Paul might have regarded Jesus as the Messiah, with all the overtones of world sovereignty that word carried. The general scholarly view has colluded with the general popular view of western Christianity, that the purpose of the whole thing is to go to heaven when you die rather than discerning, 'imagining' shall we say, the kingdom of God on earth as in heaven and working for that end. Of course, liberation theology and its various exegetical offshoots have offered a rival view. But, as with the so-called 'conservative' reaction, this has often simply maintained the split world of the Enlightenment, proposing (for instance) that Paul was 'really' a politician *and therefore not really a theologian after all*. Similar things might be said about some of the work, important in its own way, that has gone under the umbrella of 'sociology' or 'anthropology'. From the post-Enlightenment standpoint, this appears to be on the 'worldly' side of the divide while God, or the gods, remain elsewhere. From the Jewish and early Christian perspective, such a division already gives in to one version of the paganism which both were determined to resist.

One final element of our modern world which has militated against imagining the kingdom in our reading of the gospels, and much else besides, is the triumph of left-brain thinking over right-brain thinking. This has been massively and memorably set out by Iain McGilchrist in his breathtaking book *The Master and his Emissary*. McGilchrist has of course inevitably been criticized from within his own field; he is both a brain scientist and a literary critic, and as such has a unique perspective on the history of ideas, though some of his fellow scientists insist that the left/right distinction is not nearly so hard and fast as his book (despite frequent disclaimers and modifications) might indicate. But, whatever caveats may be needed at the level of the study of the physical brain, as I read his account of the way in which, in the last three centuries, the apparently left-brain activities of analysing, calculating and organising have steadily taken charge of our world, squeezing out the apparently right-brain activities of imagination, story-telling, and intuitive thinking, I find it uncannily accurate as a description of our world in general and of biblical scholarship in particular.

McGilchrist argues on the basis of brain science itself, in fact, that our brains are designed to work in a two-way movement: from the right brain, with its initial intuitions, metaphors and imagination, to the left brain which works on the detail, and back to the right brain again to engage with the real world. The right brain is thus the 'master', and the left brain the 'emissary', working at its best within the framework given by the right and intending to pass the results back across. But, as with some observable pathologies (not least schizophrenia), the left brain has taken over, and we live (says McGilchrist) in a world in which the master has been betrayed.

McGilchrist does not refer to the world of biblical scholarship, but the following paragraph jumped out at me as a pretty accurate summary of how the discipline has often gone:

‘We could expect’ (he writes) ‘that there would be a loss of the broader picture, and a substitution of a more narrowly focussed, restricted, but detailed, view of the world, making it perhaps difficult to maintain a coherent overview . . . This in turn would promote the substitution of information, and information gathering, for knowledge, which comes through experience . . . One would expect the left hemisphere to keep doing refining experiments on detail, at which it is exceedingly proficient, but to be correspondingly blind to what is not clear or certain, or cannot be brought into focus right in the middle of the visual field. In fact one would expect a sort of dismissive attitude to anything outside of its limited focus, because the right hemisphere’s take on the whole picture would simply not be available to it.’ (428f.)

I recognise this picture. Having worked for the Church of England for nearly twenty years, I recognise it as an account of what has happened, damagingly, to our institutions. Whether it has happened in the universities too, in the years I have been absent, I couldn’t possibly say. My point is that it has manifestly happened in biblical studies, and especially in New Testament studies, and not least in the study of the gospels. All too often the microscopic analysis of details, vital though it is in its place, has been made to seem an end in itself. ‘Objective facts’ are all the rage, and whether you’re a left-wing hunter of objectivity, determined to disprove the gospels, or a right-wing hunter of objectivity, determined to show that they are after all ‘factual’, you may still be missing the point and losing the plot. Facts are left-brain business; vital in their place, but only part of the whole. Thus, on the one hand, those who presently trumpet the need for a purely and exclusively ‘secular’ study of the Bible are simply following through the anti-metaphorical agenda of the French Revolution (McGilchrist 347); while those who respond with an attempted rationalistic proof of, say, Jesus’ divinity are often themselves remaining within the same sterile antithesis. Like Marxism and capitalism, secularism and fundamentalism are simply the left and right boots of Enlightenment Epicureanism. Only when the detailed left-brain analysis can be relocated as the emissary to the right-wing intuition, with its rich world of metaphor, narrative and above all imagination, can the discipline become healthy again.

The good news is that the gospels themselves resist the destructive, atomising, Epicurean left-brain analysis. They go on telling the story of How God Became King, and demanding that serious readers learn to imagine a world in which that might be the case, a world reshaped around their account of Jesus. Perhaps, after all, biblical studies might be one place where the return of the Master, a theme indeed made famous by some of Jesus’ own stories, might begin to take place. This is a challenge, particularly, for those engaged in doctoral studies. It is much easier to do a purely left-brain doctorate, and there is still plenty of room for that. But we also need, and quite urgently, a new generation who won’t be afraid to see the bigger picture and, without in the least going slack on the necessary left-brain analytic and philological exactitude, come back and articulate a new, freshly imagined vision of the kingdom of God.

3. Early Christian Mission and Theology

All this leads to my concluding remarks on early Christian mission and theology. For over a century now it has been commonplace within the discipline called New Testament Studies to assume that the early church had to jettison its Jewishness in order to be relevant to the Gentile world into which it quickly went. Thus it has been assumed, again, that Paul had to downplay the idea of Jesus as Israel's Messiah and to switch, instead, to the more readily available category of the *kuvrio~*, the 'Lord'. But this proposal, hugely influential though it has been, simply fails to imagine what 'the kingdom of God' meant to the early Christians, Paul included (he doesn't use the phrase that often, but when he does we can see that it remains at the centre of his worldview). Paul, in fact, held firmly to the ancient Jewish belief, rooted in the Psalms, in Isaiah and in Daniel, that a world ruler would indeed arise from Judaea, that Israel's God would thereby return to dwell amongst and within his people, and that through this means the long-awaited new creation of peace and justice would be inaugurated for the whole world. All of that standard Jewish expectation came to fresh flowering in Paul's work. Of course, the communities which Paul founded were determinedly non-ethnic in their basis. But this was not because Paul had as it were gone soft on the essential Jewishness of his mission, or because there was something wrong (as Epicureans imagine) with Judaism, but because he believed that it was precisely part of the age-old divine plan that when God did for Israel what he was going to do for Israel then the nations would be brought under the healing, saving rule of this one God. Paul's 'gospel', his *eujaggevlion*, was thus much closer in meaning to the various *eujaggevlia* of Caesar than most of modern scholarship has imagined. It was, as Acts 17 (already quoted) indicates, the royal announcement, right under Caesar's nose, that there was 'another king, namely Jesus'. And Paul believed that this royal announcement, like that of Caesar, was not a take-it-or-leave-it affair. It was a powerful summons through which the living God worked by his Spirit in hearts and minds, to transform human character and motivation, producing the tell-tale signs of faith, hope and love which Paul regarded as the biblically prophesied marks of God's true people.

The communities which sprang into surprised existence as Paul went around making this royal announcement were remarkably devoid of an obvious symbolic world. They were precisely not defined by the worldview-symbols of Judaism – Temple, Torah observance and so on. They certainly didn't adopt the symbols of the surrounding pagan culture. How could this new community, this new *sort* of community, retain what for Paul was its vital centre, namely its strong unity across traditional social divisions, and its strong holiness in matters of our old friends, money, sex and power? For Paul the answer was simple. The community needed to understand what it was that had happened in Jesus the Messiah, and in particular who the God was into whose new world they had been brought. What we see in Paul is thus properly characterized as the birth of the discipline which later came to be called Christian theology, by which I mean the prayerful and scripture-based reflection, from within the common life of the otherwise disparate body called the church, on who exactly the one God was and what his action in Jesus and by the Spirit was to mean. Early Christian theology was not an exercise undertaken for the sake of speculative system-building. It was load-bearing. If the unity and holiness of the early church were the central symbols of the movement, they could only be held in place if a vigorous theology was there to stabilize them

in the winds and storms of the first century. Theology, in this sense, serves ecclesiology and thus the kingdom-based mission. Actually, I have come to worry about a post-Enlightenment theology that doesn't do this, that thinks the point is simply to 'prove' the divinity of Jesus, or his resurrection, or the saving nature of his death in themselves, thereby demonstrating fidelity to the Creeds or some other *regula fidei*. In the gospels themselves it isn't like this. All these things matter, but they matter because this is how God is becoming king. To prove the great Creeds true, and to affirm them as such, can sadly be a diversionary exercise, designed to avoid the real challenge of the first-century gospel, the challenge of God's becoming king in and through Jesus.

This challenge, of course, required imagination: not the undisciplined fantasy of which left-brain thinking often accuses right-brain thinking, but the imaginative leap from the worldviews of paganism, with their many gods who might either be far removed, as in Epicureanism, or rolled into one and close at hand, as in Stoicism – or indeed from the worldviews of ancient Judaism, with their fierce concentration on the symbols of land, nation, temple and Torah. But the leap was not made into the unknown. The imaginative leap required was made on the basis of Jesus, Jesus the crucified and risen Jewish Messiah, Jesus the one in and through whom Israel's God had at last returned in person to rescue his people and the world. And to sustain precisely that leap, the early Christians told and retold, and eventually wrote down, the story of Jesus.

The four gospels, then, to return to our starting point, are thus appropriately named 'gospel', in line both with Isaiah 40 and 52 and with the contemporary pagan usage. They themselves, in telling the story of how God became king in and through Jesus, invite their readers to the imaginative leap of saying, 'Suppose this is how God has done it? Suppose the world's way of empire is all wrong? Suppose there's a different way, and suppose that Jesus, in his life, death and resurrection, has brought it about?' And the gospels themselves, of course, contain stories at a second level, stories purportedly told by Jesus himself, which were themselves, in their day, designed to break open the worldview of their hearers and to initiate a massive imaginative leap to which Jesus gave the name 'faith'. The gospels invite their readers, in other words, to a multiple exercise, both of imagining what it might have been like to make that leap in the first century (both for Jesus' hearers and then, at a second stage, for their own readers) and, as a further stage again, of imagining what it might be like to do so today. For too long gospel study has been dominated by the attempt to make the gospels reflect, simply, the faith-world of the early church. Why, after all, the radical critics used to say, would the early Christians have been particularly interested in miscellaneous stories of what Jesus actually said or did, when all that really mattered was his saving death, making the gospels simply 'passion narratives with extended introductions'? The conservative response has been that early converts would naturally want to know more about this Jesus in whom they had come to place their faith. But this stand-off, on both sides, has usually failed to reflect the larger question: that the gospels tell the story of Jesus not out of mere historical anecdote or faith-projection, but because this is how Jesus launched the kingdom of God, which he then accomplished in his death and resurrection. Even to hold this possibility in one's head requires, in today's western church, whether radical or conservative, no less than in the non-Christian world, a huge effort of the imagination.

This imagination, like all good right-brain activity, must then be firmly and thoroughly worked through the left brain, disciplined by the rigorous historical and textual analysis for which the discipline of biblical studies has rightly become famous. But, by itself, the left brain will produce, and has often produced, a discipline full of facts but without meaning, high on analysis and low on reconstruction, good at categories and weak on the kingdom. One of the reasons I was excited to be invited to come to St Andrews is because this is already one of the very few places in the world where the imagination is taken seriously as part of the whole theological discipline. I hope and trust and pray that we will be able to work together at the challenging but richly rewarding tasks of imagining the kingdom in such a way that will simultaneously advance the academic understanding of our extraordinary primary texts and enrich the mission and theology of tomorrow's church. It is just as difficult today as it was in the first century to imagine what the kingdom of God might look like. Rigorous historical study of the gospels and the other early Christian writings has a proper role to play in fuelling, sustaining and directing that imagination, and in helping to translate it into reality.