

OpenTheo

#79 How to retell the Jesus story to a world that's forgotten it

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Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

NT Wright's opening address at Unbelievable? the Conference 2021

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Transcript

The Ask NT Wright Anything podcast Hello and welcome along to today's show. I'm Justin Briely, Premier's theology and apologetics editor and as always the show brought to you by Premier, SBCK and NT Wright Online. Bringing you the thought and theology of New Testament scholar, former Bishop of Durham, Tom Wright.

Just want to say a huge thank you to everyone who has responded so far to our compassion sponsorship appeal. You may remember that several episodes ago, Tom was in conversation with Richmond One Dara, a pastor in Uganda talking about Christianity in Africa, some of the challenges and opportunities that are represented there and about Richmond's own story as a compassion child who was brought out of poverty because of a compassion sponsor and the amazing effect that's had on his life in his ability to do the work of the kingdom. While we asked you to get behind this sponsorship campaign, we wanted to see a hundred children sponsored through the podcast, through the Ask NT Wright Anything podcast and we've seen over 70 children sponsored so far which is amazing.

Thank you so much to all those who have responded on the back of that show that Tom did with Richmond. Still opportunity to do that if you'd like to make a difference and sponsor a child through the show with this partnership with compassion, you can do that by visiting compassion.com/justin and anybody who does that from the US specifically

also gets a free copy of my book *Unbelievable Why After 10 Years of Talking With Atheists I'm Still a Christian*. Again that's compassion.com/justin and we're hoping to get a hundred children sponsored wouldn't that be brilliant to see a hundred children sponsored.

Well today and next week here on the podcast we're bringing you something different. NT Wright's opening address and Q&A from *Unbelievable The Conference* that took place in May this year and Tom was speaking on the subject how to retell the Jesus story to a world that's forgotten it. Now you can actually get all of Tom's teaching from the conference via our digital download of it and again you can find the link with today's podcast and at our show page ask NT Wright dot com.

That's also the place to go to sign up for our fortnightly newsletter. If you do that you'll also receive the link to ask a question of Tom yourself. We'll also got some fresh shows with Tom coming your way soon so do feel free to send those questions in make sure you're registered again at ask NT Wright dot com and finally one more great reason to be on our mailing list is that you'll be in the draw for one of these five signed copies of Tom's recent book *Broken Signposts How Christianity Makes Sense of the World* and we're going to draw the winners in September so get yourself signed up now.

Again it's ask NT Wright dot com the link is with today's show. Now over to Tom from *Unbelievable The Conference*. I've been asked to speak about how to tell the greatest story ever told in other words the story of course of Jesus himself.

Now at one level that sounds quite easy we know the line Jesus goes about announcing the Kingdom of God he is crucified he is raised from the dead he ascends into heaven and senses spirit on his but wait a minute we've already said both far too much and far too little. This story makes no sense in our world and it made no sense in the first century world either foolishness to the Greeks said St Paul and a scandal to the Jews it didn't fit. The problems we today have with telling this story are not despite what some think the result of any supposed modern or scientific world view Cicero and Seneca knew just as well as we do that dead people do not ordinarily get bodily raised and the going to heaven story always seemed to be making Jesus into some sort of a primitive space man would raise eyebrows in the first century where they told stories like that about emperors being divinized not many people actually believed in it but it was useful politically and so on.

But anyway what did Jesus mean by the Kingdom of God in other words if this is the greatest story ever told it is also a patchwork of puzzles I was once on a train going to Canterbury to do a lecture about Jesus in his historical context I was reading a new book with the word Jesus prominently on its cover opposite me was a young Japanese man who spoke very little English halfway through the journey he plucked up courage and said is book about Jesus yes I said it is indeed you tell me about Jesus he asked and at

that point the train stopped in an intermediate station and a man who had been sitting beside me got up to get out and he glanced around sympathetically and said have fun the young man I discovered had been in England for just one day he knew nothing whatever literally nothing about Christianity but he had seen people going into a big building and had followed them and there was music and talking and then everyone went up to the front and was given a piece of bread and a sip of wine and he had joined them and he kept hearing the word Jesus and he had no idea what it was all about where would you start I realized at once that there was a vast gap between the sort of thing I was planning to say in my lecture that evening and the sort of thing that I might say slowly and in very basic English to this young man my intended evening audience were cathedral and city and university folk I could assume a great deal my fresh proposals that I had were trying to challenge their existing interpretation of the well-known story my Japanese friend knew nothing about Jesus the gospels Christianity actually about ancient history as a whole he'd never heard of the Jews or of Israel he had never heard of crucifixion nor did he seem to have any idea about God or a God or a supreme being or a creator but for the story of Jesus to make the sense it's supposed to make ideally you should say something about all of the above the rest of the day I'm sorry to say past in a blur and the only thing I now remember of our conversation is that I tried to keep it desperately simple and I ended up drawing a picture of a cross and then I even tried and I'm not an artist to draw a picture of an empty tomb I have no idea what he made of it because I had to get out at a certain point I think I hope I have a dim memory that I tried to explain that the world was in a mess but that the God who had made the world had come in person to deal with the mess and that this person Jesus was alive and at work and was looking for new friends whose lives he could transform so that they could join in with his world healing project and as I look back I think was that already far too much it probably was but it was all I could do at the time now obviously not many of us will face that kind of challenge on a regular basis but my case to you today is that trying to tell the story of Jesus in today's western culture offers challenges which are equally daunting precisely because they're usually invisible it isn't that people in our world know nothing they know or they think they know the wrong things the story of Jesus has so often been mistold or improperly contextualized with its emphases skewed and key elements omitted that a casual mention of Jesus is likely to give off all sorts of misleading impressions a mishmash of memories from Sunday school or Christmas carols or half forgotten school assemblies and there's an extra dimension we have to factor in here when we tell the story of Jesus we are not just describing someone who lived a long time ago though we do need to speak clearly about Jesus as a solid and knowable figure of history we can't just make him up but Jesus is also alive right now present though invisible wanting us to introduce him to new friends telling the greatest story of all time isn't in other words simply of antiquarian interest this is both a scary responsibility and a sigh of relief the responsibility oh my goodness we don't want to misrepresent Jesus or to give a wrong impression but the sigh of relief because when you introduce a friend to somebody else even if you're nervous and stumble and stammer and forget some key

points that may not ultimately matter because the friend can pick it up from there and establish their own new relationship now with Jesus of course that process is always more mysterious but one way of thinking about it is this just as in many traditions including my own the church congregation on a Sunday morning stands up for the reading of the gospel story to welcome into their midst the one of whom we speak so with every attempt to tell the greatest story ever told we should at least be prayerfully aware that the Jesus we're talking about is well able to take the relationship forward from that point and gradually to sort out the muddles we may have left lying around the greatest story ever told is after all a love story but none of that absolves us from trying to get the story right and that's a lot harder than it should be western culture as a whole including western Christianity often has regularly got things upside down and inside out there are three areas very briefly where this is so first is the kingdom of god our culture has assumed that the purpose of Christianity the meaning of the story of Jesus is to enable people to go to heaven when they die but that's the teaching of Plato and his followers not of the first Christians no Jesus was going around announcing that this was the time for god to become king on earth as in heaven Jesus was heir to a long tradition in Israel's scriptures promising that one day god would come back in power to rescue and heal and transform and remake his world flooding it with his presence and his glory and Jesus was doing close up and personal all sorts of things that showed what that might mean the hungry fed the sick healed outcasts invited to a party and so on that's what the great story is all about the rescue and healing of creation starting perhaps with human beings right there you see god the creator didn't make his world as a kind of testing ground or examination room to see if any of his funny human creatures would qualify to go and live with him somewhere else creating a problem namely sin which he then had to solve no god made a world in order to come and live there himself with his human creatures the greatest story ever told is about god doing just that in person in the scriptures god promised that he would rule the world wisely restoratively through the coming king the Davidic Messiah ridgine the world of evil in order to flood it instead with his own glory and the New Testament declares that that's what happened in and with Jesus so if you're telling of the great story doesn't end up with Jesus as in some sense Israel's messiah and therefore the world's true and healing lord we're not getting it right yet this by the way has inescapable political connections and connotations as it did in Jesus day the going to heaven message often doesn't which is no doubt one reason why it's been so popular but this points to the second area in which our culture lets us down badly when we tell the greatest story ever told sooner or later we're going to talk about Jesus and God and was Jesus God incarnate and all that the question is the relationship between God and the world with the story of Jesus standing at that vital interface people in our culture who hear the word God usually assume that such a being if he exists at all is a long way away unconcerned almost by definition with human beings and with our life that is actually the ancient philosophy of epicureanism in modern dress but if you start there as most people do today with the god up there somewhere and the rest of us down here and then if you say that Jesus was in some sense God incarnate it inevitably sounds

as though Jesus was a divine being who touched our world only at a tangent or skimmed over it with his feet barely grazing the turf or then when people discover that Jesus actually was a real life flesh and blood human being they say well forget that god business Jesus was obviously a great moral teacher or an exemplary human being and so on the idea of his being divine must have been a later invention but this familiar either or ignores the fact that in Jesus Jewish worldview and it isn't about an ancient versus a modern worldview it's about that original Jewish worldview against the philosophical worldviews of the culture then and now in that Jewish worldview God and the world related to one another quite differently from the model that we have in our modern western minds because in Jesus Jewish worldview the god of Israel was very much alive puzzling yes challenging of course not to be pinned down but living and active and the Jews understood the Jerusalem temple to be the place where God's world and ours overlapped and interlocked God himself was of course vastly greater than the whole world heaven and earth included but God had promised Israel that he would come in powerful mysterious presence to dwell in the temple so when you went to the temple it wasn't as if you were in heaven you were there you were in heaven God the creator made a world which he wanted to be his eventual home and the temple was the advance signpost towards that goal and the story of Jesus the greatest story which we are struggling to tell finds its focus and climax precisely in his confrontation with the temple Jesus was speaking and acting all along as if he were the temple in person so that when he came to Jerusalem the place simply wasn't big enough for them both together we find it hard to tell his story partly because we are thinking of us going to heaven instead of thinking of God coming to live with us and partly because honestly our idea of God is too high and dry too static too philosophical in particular we have forgotten that God made humans in his own image so that if God was going to come and dwell within his world a human being was in that sense the most natural the most appropriate creature for him to become thus telling the great story truthfully and faithfully demands that we the storytellers allow the figure of whom we speak to reshape our very image of God himself and our understanding of how God relates to and acts within his world and that's enormously challenging not least for devout practicing Christians in our culture so my first problem was to do with the meaning of the kingdom of God on earth as in heaven my second is the larger question of the relation of God in the world and the third problem more briefly is that it is always necessarily difficult to tell the story of Jesus death and resurrection we tend to divide up the narrative first Jesus goes around healing and teaching then he dies on the cross to deal with our sins and then he is raised from the dead and so on as though these are quite discrete events but these different parts are inseparable they mesh closely together in mutual explanatory holes the cross was the climax of Jesus kingdom bringing work overcoming the power of evil which stood in the way of God's ultimate purposes and the resurrection wasn't just the happy ending after the horror of the cross Jesus risen body is the beginning of God's new creation establishing Jesus as the world's rightful sovereign working now by his spirit through his followers to bring true signs of God's new world to birth on earth as in heaven pointing

ahead to the time when God's ultimate intention will be completed at Jesus return now even if we grasp all that Jesus death and resurrection remain vast and majestic and disturbing I don't think we ever reach the point where so to speak we know how to do this bit and can just rattle it off the story itself has to go on shaping and challenging us even as we are struggling to tell it it will regularly reduce us thank God to prayer and humility the basics are basic this is what happened but the full meaning is inexhaustible as you would expect from the greatest story ever told so there are three challenges as we think about telling this story in today's world it's one thing as with my Japanese friend to project the story onto a totally blank canvas jolly difficult too it is if anything even harder when our heroes assume that they know how the story should work but they're actually looking at it wrong but in closing let me say something about the resonating chamber within which this story has to be told the church in dwelt by Jesus spirit is meant to be the community in which telling this story this way makes utter and compelling sense because the church is living that kingdom message that new creation message that overcoming of evil message that God in our midst message the church in whatever form it takes must therefore be a community that works and prays for God's kingdom for God's justice on earth as in heaven likewise the church must foster beauty learning to see through the lenses of art or music or dance or drama or whatever that to look the world's darkness in the face and to know that it has been overcome if the storytelling community isn't bothered about justice or beauty why should anyone believe the true story of Jesus but when Jesus followers are really following him then it makes sense to tell the story to introduce others to the one whom we are following even if like the disciples at the time we often get muddled and trip over our own feet as we try to do so but this is the real challenge how to be the people who when we tell the greatest story ever told can tell it compellingly because as you look around at the community you can see that it's making sense now of course Jesus himself remains sovereign over all our storytelling we do not thank God have to get it all right before God can work powerfully by his spirit to open people's eyes to Jesus and to call them to him in repentance and faith and discipleship but just because God is the ultimate storyteller that doesn't mean that we don't have to work hard to get it right part of the point is that God wants his people to grow up to take responsibility to become not just storytellers but story lovers shaped afresh by the story we tell celebrating and anticipating God's kingdom on earth as in heaven I hope you enjoyed today's show I really love the way that Tom summarizes the evangelistic task in that opening talk from our unbelievable conference this year and next week you'll hear the questions that came in from our audience all over the world who were watching now if you'd like the full digital download of this conference and all of Tom's sessions and teaching across the whole day you can find the link at our web page askntwrite.com and that link is there with today's show and if you sign up there for our newsletter and to ask a question yourself you'll also be entered into the prize draw for one of five signed copies of Tom's book *Broken Signposts* again that's askntwrite.com the link is with today's show see you next time

(buzzing)