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#148 NT Wright on Reimagining Mission in the Global South - Oxford Conference Session 1

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Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

NT Wright was keynote speaker at an Oxford conference on Reimagining Mission in the Global South, hosted by Bishop Joseph D'Souza of the Good Shepherd Church network in India, in partnership with Premier.

In this opening lecture from the conference Tom speaks on how the story of Jesus through scripture should shape our approach to global mission.

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Transcript

The Ask NT Wright Anything #podcast Hello and welcome to today's show where we bring you the thought and theology of biblical scholar and former Bishop of Durham, Tom Wright. I'm Justin Breiley from Premier Unbelievable, and bringing you the first of a few special shows featuring Tom as keynote speaker at an Oxford Conference Reimagining Mission in the Global South. It was hosted by Bishop Joseph D'Souza of the Good Shepherd Church Network in India in partnership with Premier, and on today's episode we're going to hear Tom's opening address.

Just before we get into today's episode, we got quite a bit of feedback to the recent shows in which we featured a guest contributor, New Testament scholar Justin Bass, particularly the episode in which he and Tom discussed US politics and the issue of transgender came up. Not everyone was happy with the way that conversation played out. It was a bit different to our usual format, but maybe we'll address that next time I sit down with Tom in a one-to-one capacity again in the new year.

Always happy to hear your constructive feedback on the show. You can email me unbelievable@premier.org.uk And don't forget you can access the full archive of past shows, ask a question yourself, by registering with us at our website. That's [premierunbelievable.com](https://www.premierunbelievable.com). You can find the link with today's show.

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So on to today's episode in this opening lecture from the Oxford Conference on Reimagining Global Mission, Tom speaks on how the story of Jesus through scripture should shape our approach to global mission. Thank you very much for your welcome and indeed for the invitation. I've been looking forward to this for a long time.

What I didn't know was going to happen, which I think Joseph has probably explained to you, is that five weeks ago, when my wife and I were on holiday in Scotland, I came down with COVID and I thought it was just a flu-y cold and then I tested and sure enough, I was positive. And then I thought, well, it'll last for a week or maybe 10 days, and then I'll be all right again. And alas, it has not been so.

And this is the only engagement since then that I've actually kept in the diary. I was determined to be here with you today. And when I'm done today, I think I will go back home and just crash out.

But I am very excited about what you're all talking about, about what we've heard

already this morning from Joseph, because it dovetails so extraordinarily with things that I've been working on as a biblical scholar for years and years and years. One of the primary insights that I had when I was doing my doctorate here in Oxford 45 years ago or so, I guess mid-70s anyway, was in reading the letter to the Galatians. We will come to Galatians this afternoon, but I was struck again this morning by what Joseph said about that condition that unless you eat with the Dalits, we're not doing this project, because that took me straight back to Galatians chapter 2, where the issue is, Jews at this table, Gentiles at that table, and people come from Jerusalem to Antioch and Peter says, "Oh, we better not be eating together.

It's not going to be a good idea." And Paul stands up to him and says, "The gospel is at stake here." Now, when I first started to glimpse this in Galatians chapter 2, and I remember vividly one Bible study that was a home group from the church that my wife and I went to in those days, and I and the rector of the church both got excited about this. This is a whole new dimension. We had thought that Galatians 2 was about how you get justified by faith so that you can go to heaven.

And suddenly here was this whole thing about, no, when God says that you are in the right because of Jesus' death on your behalf on the cross, then the Gentiles who were formally unclean, if they are members of the family of Jesus, the crucified and risen Messiah, they are not unclean anymore. Thank you very much. And unless you eat at the same table, you are denying the gospel.

I remember the rector of the church and I getting really excited about this. And one of the members of the group said, "What does this say to me in my everyday life?" And we both swung around and said, "That's not the point. This is just huge and massive." And it will affect your everyday life, but it's an extraordinary part of the whole New Testament message, which has to be honest, been lost in so much of the Western world.

And I and others who have explored those lines over the last generation of Pauline scholarship, and then particularly for me, the larger picture of biblical theology, which I want to unfold to you this morning, and then this afternoon. We have often been accused of selling the gospel short, of not being left with a proper gospel, etc, etc. And those of you who know this stuff will know that the so-called New Perspective on Paul, there are actually many New Perspectives plural on Paul.

We have come in for a lot of criticism. And sadly, some of that has been, I fear from traditional Christians who I respect in so many ways, but who are worried that if this word got out, the whole way we do church might have to change, because we have been used in the West to having basically ethnic churches plus a few outsiders who we graciously welcome in. And I've been warned about this.

I was at a seminar in Fuller Seminary in Pasadena about six or seven years ago, and an African-American woman, the theologian, said to me, "You need to realize, you British,

that when you talk about inclusivity, what we hear is that you are going to allow us all to become honorary white males." And I said, "If that's what you're hearing, I'm sorry, because that's not what I'm talking about at all. Our identity is in Christ. That's who we are.

And in Christ, because of His cross and resurrection, forgiving our sins, cleansing us from all that's gone wrong, and launching His new creation, we are the one family." That's actually the message of Galatians. Now, I didn't intend to start with all that, but it fitted so well with what Joseph said. That's where we're going.

But in order to set the framework for that, so that it isn't just one little point among others, I want to take you on a long journey this morning. You've got this handout, session one, God's Project of New Creation, a nice little topic for a Monday morning in October. Oh my goodness.

Because when I was growing up, mission meant telling people about Jesus so that they could believe in Him and so go to heaven. That was just assumed. And as I now look back over the last 50 years, and Joseph has talked about the reshaping of our thinking, I have come to realize that a great deal of what I took for granted as a young Christian was not Christianity, it was Platonism.

I recently have been trying to read Plutarch. I've intended to read Plutarch for many years. First century of philosopher, a younger contemporary of St. Paul wrote biography and philosophy.

He was a priest in the shrine at Delphi, a very learned man. He wrote a little piece on exile. And at the climax of his piece on exile, he says this, "Our souls, as human beings, are exiled from their true home, which is heaven.

And we don't really like where we are at the moment, and our souls are looking forward to being allowed to go back where they really belong, which is heaven." And when I read that, just a few years ago, I happened to be reading that bit of Plutarch. I thought, "This is ridiculous. That's what most of my friends think Christianity is." And indeed, if you go out on the street and talk to people about Christianity, and I've had this from schoolteachers who are trying to teach an RE lesson for teenagers, the only thing those teenagers know about Christianity is that there's a heaven and there's a hell and Christianity is a way of going to heaven, which actually quickly subsides into being good people go to heaven and bad people go to hell, which then comes out in the newspapers whenever there's any moral issues being debated.

It's a matter of do certain people or people who do certain things go to hell or can they still go to heaven. And the heaven hell antithesis has dominated discourse in a way which is much more true to the world of Plato and subsequent Platonism than it is to the world of the New Testament. I sometimes shock people by telling them, but it is true that

in the New Testament, the word heaven is never used for the place where God's people go after they die.

When we talk about where are people immediately after their death, I've written about this in *Surprise by Hope*, which I suspect several of you know. Certainly it's the book from which I get more letters and emails and everything than any of my other books. When I've written about this, I've pointed out that in the New Testament Paul talks about going to be with the Messiah, which is far better.

Or Jesus says today, you will be with me again. That's really the only thing we're told is that we are with Jesus until the time when God makes his new creation and raises us from the dead. Hence the slogan which a friend of mine made the title of his book, heaven is important, but it's not the end of the world.

But actually I want to say that even more stress, with more stress on it, that the word heaven is not used for the place where God's people go after they die. We are secure, we are with Christ after our death, but the real goal is the new creation, the new heavens and new earth and the resurrection, which is life affirming, creation affirming, and hence affirming of who we are right now. The danger with Platonism is it undervalues the way the world currently is.

And actually I sometimes think, thinking this as I was driving up here this morning, Platonism is basically elitist. Now there's nothing wrong with elite in the sense of studying hard, being productive, being wise and fruitful and learned, etc. There's nothing wrong with that.

But Platonism always tends to elevate people who can think things through even harder over against those who can't. Look at Plato's *Republic* where you get the different, I was going to say, casts, different categories of society with the philosopher kings, of course, at the top. Plato's a philosopher would naturally think that way.

That something could be pursued. So that a lot of my work now, both as an exegete and as a theologian, is pushing back at that residual Platonism in Western Christian culture, which I think has sapped our energies for the gospel as a whole. Now the gospel is about new creation, therefore it is about God's promise to all his people in the ultimate future.

So people say, oh, if you talk about the kingdom as this worldly, you're forgetting the supernatural dimension, not a bit of it. The problem is that the word supernatural itself has been infected with the philosophy of the enlightenment from the last two or three hundred years. So that there's a distinction between supernatural, which is upstairs and natural, which is downstairs.

That's not how the word was used in the Middle Ages, by the way. The supernatural in the Middle Ages was just the natural world with a bit of extra of what God was doing in

and through and for the natural world, rather than this split level thing. We have colluded with that split level world, which is basically the ancient philosophy of Epicureanism.

I didn't intend to get into Platonism and Epicureanism this early in the morning, but still there we are. Now the main message that I have in this first session now is that the corrective to this whole view is the biblical view of creation and new creation. The theme of new creation in Paul has often been downplayed, but it's very strongly there.

Second Corinthians 5, if anyone is in the Messiah, new creation. It is then Christokinectasis in Greek. It isn't if anyone is in Christ, he or she is a new creation.

No, that's true as well. Paul just says, if anyone is in the Messiah, new creation. And the thing which I'm really excited about now and trying to communicate to you today is that in the biblical vision of what it means to be a Christian and what it means to be a church, a church and a Christian are supposed to be a small working model of new creation.

That's a phrase I find myself coming back to again and again. God is going to do the ultimate new creation and if you are in Christ you are called in the present time to be a small working model of what that looks like. And if you are a community in Christ, a church, then the church is supposed to be the small working model so that the world can actually see a no.

So it isn't just a message which we hurl at people's heads. So the sweep from Genesis 1 to Revelation 22. Genesis 1 and 2, a good creation but a good creation which is the starting point of a project.

It's going somewhere. It's not a tableau and a good creation with a vital role for humans, humans as image bearers. Here I lean on the work of my friend and colleague in America, Richard Middleton.

Some of you will know his work I hope where he's written about the image in line with a lot of biblical scholarship at the moment where the image isn't about looking at humans and saying what is there about humans which is sort of like God. The image is the image of an angled mirror. A mirror where it reflects this way and that way.

Humans are meant to reflect God into the world and reflect the world back to God. This is what later in biblical theology is called the royal priesthood. Reflecting the sovereign wise healing rule of God into the world and reflecting the praises of the world back to God.

That's what humans are made for. Genesis 1 and 2 is not about God setting humans a moral examination which they then fail. There is a moral element and they do get it wrong but that's not the primary thing Genesis 1 and 2 is about.

So often people talk about Genesis as though well God gave them this test and they failed it so now we're all sinful so oh dear what do we do? Well yes that's one strand of the problem. We'll get back to that but the point is we are called to be image bearers reflecting God into the world and the world back to God. Now here already we see what Genesis is actually all about.

Genesis 1 is the construction of a temple. A lot of work been done on this in the last 10 or 20 years in biblical scholarship. The construction in seven stages of a heaven plus earth reality with an image in the middle of it anyone in the ancient world would know that this was the construction of a temple but the temple is the whole of creation and we humans are the living image at the heart of that which is why of course the Jews were forbidden to have an image in their temple because only living breathing human beings will do.

That's the vital role for humans and the point of Genesis 1 and 2 is then that God makes this lovely world in order that he God may come and dwell with humans in this world. It isn't about God making a world as a temporary place from which he will then take people away. He has made this world as a place where his humans will dwell and where he will come and dwell with them.

The problem of the fall is that this gets derailed and because of human sin and all that happens with it it becomes impossible, seems to be impossible, for God to come and dwell with them. The whole point then is that the end of the biblical narrative in Revelation 21 and 22 and the scholars still debate who wrote the book of Revelation but whoever did certainly was completely in tune with the story at the beginning of Genesis because the end of Revelation is not about saved souls going up to heaven. It is about God coming at last to dwell with his people.

The strap line in Revelation 21 is the dwelling of God is with humans. Not the dwelling of humans is with God. Of course that's true as well but the direction of travel as it were is not let's rescue these humans from the world but God at last doing what he always intended to do.

I once some years ago went as a guest to see a wonderful performance of Verdi's Requiem. Some of you will know the music of Giuseppe Verdi and that glorious 19th century Requiem and it was a staged performance. They made like an opera in Covent Garden and my wife and I were good friends with one of the soloists, the soprano soloist and at the crucial moment when the soprano soloist is singing Libera me Domé de Immorte Eterna, save me O Lord from eternal death.

The chorus all around her were lighting their candles and then making their way upstairs on either side of the stage and ending up up at the top and it was an extraordinary moment because the soprano soloist was trying to light her candle and she couldn't get it or less and this was actually deliberate in the production that the rehearsal the director

had given her a box of dud matches and said you must get the candle lit by the time we're through and she was striking more and more nervously trying to do it and the producer said now that's what I want you to do on the night and so she was left in the dark while everyone else was upstairs in the light which was an amazingly harrowing tear-joking moment but I sat there thinking this is wonderful theatre and appalling theology because that is not what the story is all about. The story is about the new Jerusalem coming down from heaven to earth so that the dwelling of God is with humans and with that the rescue and renewal of the whole of God's wonderful creation and the resurrection of humans and you know how the book of Revelation works a lot of it is a strong critique of the Roman Empire the great world power of the day and particularly those who had been crushed by the Empire are assured that in God's good time the reality which is already true in the gospel will become gloriously true in the whole creation and they will be rescued and the wickedness of the great pagan Empire will finally be dealt with. The dwelling of God is with humans and what are humans in that picture says it three times in Revelation chapter one chapter five chapter twenty humans are the royal priesthood.

We are not heading for a heaven where all we'll do is hang out and play harps all day. We are heading for a new creation in which we will gloriously reflect God's loving sovereignty into the world and gloriously also reflect the praises of all creation back to our Creator. That's what good liturgy and church is all about by the way and as a footnote to that I was brought up with the great hymns of people like Watts and Wesley and so on and you know that Wesley hymn which ends up changed from glory into glory till in heaven we take our place till we cast our crowns before the lost in wonder love and praise you probably know that by heart as I do.

That's from Revelation four and five. The idea of casting your crowns before the throne that's the present reality that's what's going on in the heavenly dimension right now but that isn't the end of it the end of the story is the whole new creation it's not going up to heaven forget earth and casting your crowns it's being part of God's total new creation. The point is then that the project which began in Genesis one and two the project of a heaven plus earth reality with humans as the image bearers and God coming to dwell in the midst is at last to be fulfilled.

That's what Paul says we'll come back to this this afternoon in Ephesians chapter one glorious verse Ephesians one verse I've often said that if the great Protestant Reformers had made Ephesians rather than Romans and Galatians their main text now Romans and Galatians are hugely important but if they done that the entire course of western history might have been different because Ephesians is the book which says that God's purpose was to sum up everything in heaven and on earth in the Messiah and that the church is already in the present time to be the foretaste of that. I guess what happened in the 19th century the liberal Protestantism which was the ruling paradigm in Germany didn't like that vision because that coming together of heaven and earth didn't fit with the

philosophy of the time and the idea of the church as modeling and inhabiting this coming together of heaven and earth didn't work well with the Protestant ecclesiology of liberal Protestantism in Germany. Now and the prejudice against Ephesians as a result has continued in scholarship to this day rather than seeing that that's actually the glorious visionary idea the ideal is the wrong word glorious visionary glimpse of what is already true in Christ what is true by the Spirit for all those who are in Christ as a sign to the world of what God has done is doing and will do.

So how do we find our calling within this story? One of the things we have to do see it on my sheet here is we have to dismantle some false common assumptions. This is really difficult and I know this for myself because I grew up reading the bible as a good young teenage Christian starting with Matthew's gospel of course where the phrase kingdom of heaven comes again and again and again. Jesus says do this not that so that you may inherit the kingdom of heaven and I just assumed uncomplicatedly like millions of other westerners that the phrase kingdom of heaven means a place called heaven where God is king and where we will go after our death if we belong to him.

That is not what the phrase kingdom of heaven meant or means. Kingdom of heaven is the sovereign rule of God heaven, heaven's great inhabitant on earth as in heaven. I was also taught of course to pray the Lord's prayer as many of us were from childhood from small childhood and it never occurred to me till much later that when Jesus said we were to pray thy kingdom come thy will be done on earth as in heaven it actually meant what it said or if I thought about it at all it just seemed like a sort of a temporary thing that in my bit of the world or whatever I would pray that maybe God would do something there but the main thrust was still we're going to heaven and that's the kingdom of heaven that is not what that phrase meant any first century Jew could have told you that heaven is a reverent periphrasis for God and the kingdom of heaven means God's sovereignty breaking in doing what he'd always promised we'll get to it and in a moment but it goes back via Daniel 7 to Isaiah 52 particularly and then gloriously to all those Psalms which speak of the Lord being king and when when it says the Lord is king it doesn't say therefore let heaven rejoice though it does that as well the Lord is king let the earth rejoice let the multitudes of the islands rejoice let the trees the sea the fields the sheep everything celebrate because God is king the kingdom of God is about God bringing his creational purposes to ultimate fulfillment but likewise an even more seductive the phrase eternal life has regularly been read in a platonic sense as a life in a non-spacio temporal realm something called eternity where we leave the world of space and time behind we leave the world of matter behind and we go into a different realm entirely that is deeply unbiblical the phrase eternal life zoe ionios in greek refers to the Hebrew distinction between the present age in greek ion and the age to come this goes back to the Hebrew distinction ha'olam haseir the present age ha'olam ha'vah the age to come and zoe ionios is the life of the coming age it's hard to get this into our heads hard to get it when you're preaching again and again i've had to take five minutes in a sermon and

deconstruct what i know two-thirds of the congregation will be thinking when they hear that phrase and likewise that phrase something being kept in heaven you have it in first peter you have it in collosians one you have it in second krynnthians five one or two other places but there's a salvation reserved in heaven for you or such and such and you will have treasure in heaven and it's been so easy because of the platonic vision of the west to think that means one day we'll get upstairs and it'll all be waiting for us that's not how that language works i've used the silly illustration many times but it still makes the point we had some friends to stay a few weeks ago and we were going out for walks and coming back and so on and so forth and i might say to my friend if you get back before us they had a key um you'll find there's some beer in the fridge for you does that mean he had to get into the fridge to drink the beer of course not it's kept safe in the fridge so that he can get it out of the fridge and drink it the fact that salvation is kept in heaven for you means it's safe in god's sphere in god's storehouse against the day when he will bring it out and make that new heaven plus earth reality and then that phrase citizens of heaven i've i've heard learned theologians quote Philippians three verse 20 in exactly the wrong sense paul says we are citizens of heaven hemon gah topolichima entice urinoids our citizenship our real place is in heaven and from it we await the saviour the lord the king jesus and i've heard people say there we are our citizens of heaven just like some of the people in philipi were citizens of rome so they were looking forward to going back and living in rome eventually when when they when their work in philipi was done that is not how the language of citizenship worked in the roman world the reason there was citizens of roman philipi is they were mostly ex-military folks from the civil wars the previous century or descended from those military folks and the last thing rome wanted was those people coming back to rome thank you very much rome was overcrowded already you don't want a lot of old soldiers staggering around taking people's farms and so on no their task as citizens of rome was to be agents of roman civilization in northern greece where they were stationed and and to develop that if we are citizens of heaven it's not so that we'll go back there it's so that jesus will come from heaven and complete his work on earth as in heaven so that heaven and earth would be one those are just four of the false common assumptions there are others but you see how easy it is we get seduced and this is the point that joseph has been making we get seduced into thinking that really the message is about going to heaven and all the other stuff is just kind of footnotes at the bottom of the page no not so because actually jesus message next point on your sheet was about the kingdom of god the kingdom of god on earth as in heaven when i was first teaching new testament in montreal in the early 1980s i had to do a big intro course for the students and so i started with the first two or three weeks giving them the back story of new testament scholarship to explain some of the stuff that they were going to be reading and also giving them the back story of the world of the first century jesus what was going on in palestine at the time and the hereds and the maccabees and all of that and then at a certain point we got to john the baptist now john the baptist fits into that story completely because people are waiting for the kingdom of god why are they waiting for the kingdom of god because daniel has told

them to daniel chapter seven daniel chapter nine with daniel chapter two in the background is all about a coming time when the horrible pagan empire or empires will be swept aside and crushed to pieces and god will become king and his people will celebrate the fact that they are part of this new world which god is going to bring to birth and in daniel chapter nine i wonder if you know this stuff it's really important and i was never taught this as a child i should have been in daniel chapter nine we have daniel's prayer in exile daniel prays and says i've read jeremya jeremya says the exile is supposed to last for seventy years well isn't it time we went home then and the angel comes and says to daniel basically i've got good news and bad news the good news is yes god knows about all this but the bad news is it isn't seventy years it's seventy times seven years that's like a multiple jubilee 490 years excuse me but at the end of this first century bc there were people who were saying we got the message from daniel nine and the time is up now they are waiting that's one of the reasons the kumran sect was doing what it was doing they had calculated they had figured out that it must mean that around now the whole transformation would occur the great moment when human empire would be pushed away and god would become king and what would it mean that god would become king not that all these people would go to heaven that wasn't on the agenda that israel would be rescued from pagan tyranny from all the evil that they had suffered and would become visibly and manifestly god's people at last so john the baptist fits right into that that's why people went down to the jordan and got baptized and when jesus comes along and says now the kingdom of heaven is at hand either he's changed the subject completely and is smuggling a in a platonic vision or he fits right in to that whole jewish scenario and it's blindingly obvious from the way the gospels are written all four of them that it's the latter jesus is announcing that time is fulfilled this is the moment you've all been waiting for this is the moment for god to become king and what will that look like well it will look like a young jewish prophet with a glint in his eye going around healing people celebrating god's kingdom with all the wrong sort of people confronting the wicked and the power brokers and so on with the news something else was happening and demonstrating what that would look like if you put that vision of jesus as it were halfway between jennis's one and two and revelation 21 and 22 what i think you see is jesus being the true royal priest the truly human one and jesus doing what it says in revelation god will do one of those lovely moments in revelation god will wipe away all tears from their eyes and i read the gospels and i hear jesus saying to mary and martha don't weep and to the woman whose son has died in name don't weep i see this god wiping away tears from the eyes coming to life in their midst why because matthew and john make this very clear and actually so do mark and luke in their own ways the gospels present jesus precisely as god with us this is what jennis's was aimed at and this is what revelation says has happened the dwelling of god is with humans john says it most spectacularly of course the word became flesh and dwelt in our midst and we gazed upon his glory john has begun his book chapter one verse one with the obvious echo of jennis's in the beginning was the word and now in verse 14 the word became flesh and this is not the incarnation as god reaching down to snatch us out of the world

to take us away somewhere else this is just got a kind of sigh of relief moment this is where it was all supposed to go right from the beginning and from there it moves right on to the end of revelation and in matthew after the great genealogy with which the book opens we'll come back to them matthew says that the angel says to mary and joseph you will call his name immanuel god with us and anyone who knows how the old testament works knows that that is saying at last it's happened god made this world so he could come and dwell with us in it and now here it is this is the reality at jesus is also though throughout the gospel fulfilling the predictions of jennis's 126 the image-bearing human and sam eight sam eight becomes enormously important in new testament christology what are humans that you that you take thought for them you've made them little lower than the angels to crown them with glory and honor and put all things in subjection under their feet chase out how sam eight is used in the new testament this is what we mean when we say that jesus is truly divine and truly human these are not just abstract ontological categories these are vocations the god who is the creator who comes to mend creation to forgive to heal and the human being who comes to be the messiah the king and to be the great high priest and also by the way to be the great final prophet we we need to rethink our categories at this point and as a result and this is the beginning of the mission of the church one of the first things jesus does is call followers follow me and i will make you to go fishing for people and what are they doing telling people how to be saved so they can go to heaven no they are agents emissaries of the kingdom go out and heal and teach and explain to people that god's becoming king right here and now and this is what it looks like it's dangerous it's scary it's not sending in the tanks and sweeping out all opposition i've often said this about the sermon on the mount if you say to people god is becoming king they say well look out of the window read the newspaper it doesn't look as if god is becoming king and they have in their minds i think often a vision of god becoming king which would be god blasting out all opposition god simply wiping evil off the face of the earth so that there wouldn't be any bad things happening in the world anymore and then you read the sermon on the mount and you see that's not how god does it it wasn't the way genesis was meant to work god is a power sharing god he wants to work with and through human beings that's how the world was made and in the sermon on the mount we see what this means when god comes to heal the world he doesn't send in the tanks he sends in the meek the humble the pure and hard people the hungry for justice people the peacemakers the people who are ready to suffer for the kingdom of god and by the time the power brokers have woken up to what's going on the meek and the hungry for justice people and the mourners and so on have built schools yes schools and hospitals and are teaching people and are looking after children and people who nobody thought were important before and people suddenly realize something is going on here we didn't know what it was and as i look back over two thousand years of church history of course the church has made terrible mistakes and has got many things horribly wrong as no doubt we do ourselves in our own generation future years will look back at us and say they didn't realize they were doing ab and c and please god show us even a little bit of that and help

us to repent but the point is the kingdom hasn't stopped it's still going it's still growing because there are still people with that kingdom of god that beatitude vision for what it means to be god's missionaries emissaries in his world for his kingdom right here and now having seen that vision we are then in a position i say here the cross as god's victory we to understand the meaning of the cross of course there's been huge amounts written about this theologies of the cross my own book the day the revolution began is a partial attempt to say something that has to be said there is much more of course you could never exhaust the full meaning of that the obvious narrative focus of all four gospels is to lead the eye up to jesus as the crucified messiah that's where it's all going the problem with the normal platonic reading is that it generates the question of well jesus comes to take us to heaven why can't we get to heaven well because we're sinful so the cross deals with our sin he is punished on our behalf or whatever the trouble then is if people have grown up with that if they hear anything different they say oh you're abandoning the meaning of the cross not so not so please read the book carefully and watch my lips as the politicians say um the the point of the point of the cross as if one could summarize it like that is that it is god's victory over the dark powers which are basically anti-creation the dark powers which lure humans away from their vocation to be the royal priesthood the dark powers which corrupt deface distort and destroy god's creation in general god's lovely image-bearing humans in particular how is that done it is done victory comes through substitution it isn't either or theologians in the last generation have often played these off against each other christmas victor versus substitution reattonement no in the bible they work exactly together in Paul and in the gospels jesus says now is the victory coming this is the moment when the ruler of this age is cast out and then that's in john 12 and then as the story unfolds we see jesus taking the place of barabbas taking the place of sinners the the two brigands crucified next to him in luke's gospel one of them says this man has done nothing amiss we are getting what we deserve luke is rubbing our nose in it jesus is the substitute but he is the substitute through whom god's victory over the anti-creation powers takes place which is why jesus is raised from the dead resurrection indicates now at last new creation is launched and then of course by the spirit jesus followers are given the energy and the direction to be agents of and models of as i said that new creation so as a result of all of this we see new creation emerging in the book of acts not just simply the church doesn't as was one commentary on acts many years ago called the church marches in well it's very paradoxical doesn't look as if they're marching particularly they get muddled they go the wrong direction they have disputes they have quarrels they have upsetting times they have persecution they have martyrdom but quite soon the early church comes to realize that the victory which was won through the cross is to be implemented through the cross paul says it first peter says it revelation says it that the suffering of the people of god as they engage in the mission of god is itself not simply something unpleasant to be born bravely though it is that as well it is strangely part of the way in which the power of evil continues to be exhausted before the cross so the cross and the mission are as it were mutually defining all the way through both the cross

as the one off ultimate victory never to be repeated and then as the shaping the pattern through which god's people now live in the world Jesus thus becomes the fulcrum between creation and new creation the whole messages of course about Jesus come back to this again and again when i wrote my commentary on Galatians as coming to the end i think how do how do i sum it all up the only way to sum up the message is to talk about Jesus himself so i i've envisaged this first session as being here's genesis over here here's revelation over there how do we get from the one to the other the answer is of course through Jesus but unless you understand what happened in Jesus in the light of the whole Old Testament you will slide away from the genuine biblical vision for years i used to be puzzled here is the Bible three quarters of it is that Old Testament stuff which seems to be all about the land and about this world and about the family and so on and then here's the new testament bit this little bit at the end which is all about how we get saved why is the Bible like that and of course that's the wrong way of looking at it entirely if you go that route you will either go into Gnosticism where ultimately this world really doesn't matter and it's a rather evil place so let's get out of it as quickly as we can or you will go into triumphalism okay we take of this worldly vision we are the agents of the kingdom so we'll go and take it over by storm the the Christian emperors tried to do that sometimes and there's been many political movements since which have tried to impose a Christian vision on the world that's not how it's supposed to be think of mark 10 when James and John come to Jesus and say we'd like to sit at your right and left please Jesus says listen the rulers of this age is thinking of everybody from Caesar and Herod and whoever they bully and boss people around they lord it over their subjects we're not going to do it like that the one who would be great among you must be your servant the one who would be first must be the slave of all because the son of man didn't come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many to see what happens there in mark 10:45 you get the theology of the cross inside the re-evaluation of human power structures and vice versa you get the re-evaluation of human power in the light of the cross we in the west have separated those out oh that's just Jesus odd comments about the political power games of his day and here we have the theology of the cross which tells you how our sins are dealt with so we can go to heaven no those two belong absolutely together as they do inseparably in the gospels but when Paul says the Messiah died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures what exactly does that mean because unless we get this right we won't understand that whole sweep from Genesis to revelation and hence we won't understand who we are in the middle of it the way the story works and i'm sure you know this but it's good to lay it out the way the story works is that what goes wrong with the human race and with the world thank you so much Genesis 3 through 11 ending with the tower of Babel that whole sequence is an entire unit the way it's now set in Genesis what goes wrong begins to be put right with the call of Abraham the call of Abraham is one of the most seminal moments in the entire biblical story when we see almost with a touch of humor when God wants to reclaim the world when God wants to reclaim human beings he begins with a childless nomad that's a wonderful sign of grace God is going to promise Abraham a family and a

land but he hasn't got either at the moment it looks impossible and it goes on looking impossible for some while but in Genesis 15 when God makes the covenant with Abraham he emphasizes no look up at the stars that's what your family will be like Paul draws on that in Romans 4 and Galatians 3 to say this is what is now fulfilled in Christ and by the Spirit but of course Abraham Isaac and Jacob are themselves deeply problematic characters all those children's Bibles which have them up in lights as nice heroic figures to be imitated well you have to be a bit selective about how you read those stories in order like Joseph and his brothers and so on they're they're the archetypal dysfunctional family but they are the people who are bearing the promises of God but they go down to Egypt where they're enslaved so that when God then rescues them as he said in Genesis 15 he would the people of God now know themselves to be rescued redeemed slaves that's defining the Exodus defines the people from there then on but where is all that going where is the story well remember the story is the story which began with Genesis 1 and 2 where God makes a good creation and wants to come and dwell there himself how is that story going to get back on track when again when I was young reading the Bible for the first time as a young Christian in my early teens you start off with Genesis Genesis is such a page turner great stories and the first 20 chapters of Exodus continues it's a great story and then suddenly after you get the Ten Commandments it all seems to run out into the sand and you get regulations about not boiling a kid in its mother's milk and all sorts of bits and pieces and then towards the end of the book great long extensive descriptions of the tabernacle which is to be made and to a teenage Christian this was just I have no idea what's happened to the nice story I thought I was reading but actually that's because I was a typical westerner who had never been taught that the point of the whole story was that God wanted to come and dwell in the midst of his people and so he rescues his people from slavery and gives them Torah to prepare them and shape them for the moment when he will come dangerously and live in their midst and the tabernacle construction is the construction of a new creation a small working model of new creation where God is going to come and dwell which is why by the way the book of Leviticus has to follow immediately after because if God's going to come and dwell with you you need some pretty stringent health and safety regulations otherwise bad things are going to happen and they do the story continues in all sorts of twists and turns for which we don't have time but when you move on forward from there oh sorry the point about sacrifice this is huge by colleague David Moffatt in St Andrews is an expert on Hebrews and has gone back into the first century Jewish views of sacrifice and so on in ways that most of us hadn't done and the point that emerges is this that the sacrificial system is not about animals being killed because they are bearing the sins of the people there's only one animal which has sins confessed over its head that's the scapegoat and that's the one animal that doesn't get killed in the story the point about sacrifice is that the release and the manipulation of the blood cleanses the tabernacle and cleanses the people so that God can come and dwell in their midst that's how sacrifice works and the language of sacrifice in the New Testament works the same way but as the story comes forward we discover that God's

promise to Abraham of this land and this family actually has a larger reach because in Psalm 2 God promises to the Messiah that I will make the nations your inheritance the uttermost parts of the world your possession and we realize what western Protestantism has usually failed to realize that the promise of the land was an advanced symbol for God's rightful claim on the whole creation this runs all the way to Romans 8 where the inheritance is not going to heaven the inheritance is the renewed restored creation the whole world is now God's holy land and that goes all the way back to Psalm 2 and so we find the monarchy and the monarchy then seen as the ideal kingship and of course from David onwards well from Saul onwards the kings are signally failed to live up to their high calling but the Psalms and Isaiah still remind them of what that calling is and we see in those wonderful messianic Psalms like 72 or in the wonderful isionic passages like Isaiah 11 which is so important for later on in the story we'll get to this afternoon we see this vision that the whole earth is to be full of God's glory Solomon builds the temple which is like a grown-up version of the tabernacle a bit dangerous to have a fixed thing rather than a tent but that's another story but Solomon builds the temple and what happened in Exodus 40 the glory of God coming to dwell in it and to fill it happens in the temple it fills the temple so that the priests can't even stand before it and Psalm 72 then says such a crucial moment that when the Messiah comes the great king he will do justice for the poor and the oppressed he will look after the orphan and the widow he will see that justice is done in the world so that the whole earth will be full of God's glory that's the last line in that Psalm the king builds the temple so that God's presence can dwell there the king does justice for the poor and oppressed so that God's glory may dwell in all the world has the New Testament given up on that vision of course not it celebrates its fulfillment that's how the story works and if you forget those bits of the Old Testament you can easily turn the message of the New Testament has been done often enough into a message about pure spirituality in which well yeah it's too bad about the orphans and the widows but maybe somebody will look after them sooner or later no this stuff is absolutely central in that Old Testament vision but of course what then happens is that with the rebellion of the kings of the priests of false prophets and so on things go from bad to worse and the people get taken into exile and one of the worst things about exile is they have no idea where God has gone Ezekiel has this dramatic picture of the divine glory leaving the temple doing a kind of vertical take-off with the whirling wheels and so on and heading off somewhere else later rabbis theorize about whether God actually went off to be in Babylon with the exiles well maybe he did maybe he didn't but there was no sort of fixed word about that but then in the so-called post-exilic period I say so called because as Daniel's that Daniel 9 makes clear the exile in the real sense extended all the way through to the time of Jesus they were still enslaved to pagan powers which is like being in exile in your own land as Nehemiah says but the word comes God will come back and some of the greatest prophecies about God's coming back are precisely the prophecies which are quoted in the New Testament about Jesus think about the beginning of Mark's gospel where Mark quotes from Malachi and Isaiah the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple I will send my messenger

before you who will prepare the way and then the voice of one crying in the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord welcome to Isaiah 40 to 55 that great promise that Yahweh himself will come back invisible glory reaches its climax in chapters 52, 3, 4 and 5 we think of chapter 53 rightly as the song of the servant the suffering servant who suffers on behalf of the people that's right but it's preceded immediately by 52 verses 7 and following which is the glorious passage about the watchmen lifting up their voices and shouting for joy because in plain sight they see Yahweh returning to Zion and the word goes out Malachalo Hekah our God is king here is God coming back to be king and we're on tiptoe with expectation Isaiah 52 verse 12 what's this going to look like and the prophet says behold my servant he will startle many nations that which they had not imagined they will now understand who has believed our report to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed in other words who would have thought that he was the arm of the Lord this is incarnational theology rushing now towards the cross but with the message that this is what it looks like when God comes back to be king and now do you see what's happened in this great story of the Old Testament we began with Genesis 1 and 2 God making a world where he wants to come and live with his people it all seems to go horribly wrong despite the tabernacle and the temple despite all the great things that have happened in the giving of the law and so on but now that longing has intensified through the dark experience of being apparently abandoned by God during the exile so that the coming of God to his creation and the return of Yahweh to his people get together and become the same moment and that is the story the gospels are telling from the start to the finish which is why because most of that sadly is not well known in western Christianity at least that is why people read the gospels in little chunks in little bits as a little bit of help and advice about this or that without realizing that this is this massive huge story about the servant king who embodies the return of Yahweh to Zion Luke chapter 19 has Jesus telling the story about the king who goes away and comes back people have thought that that was about Jesus himself going away and coming back in his second coming it isn't it's about God having left Israel for this time now at last coming back and what does it look like when God comes back it looks like a young prophet riding down the Mount of Olives in tears warning about what's going to happen because you did not know the day of your visitation that's a regular leukon theme Episcopsis visitation which is about God himself visiting his people God coming back to be with his people and as the prophet said Malachi 3 who may abide the day of his coming who shall stand when he appears that is the story that's what's going on so we see this great sequence of creation tabernacle temple Jesus that's how it works this is God in the midst but because of human sin because of Israel's rebellion God now coming in the person of Jesus to take the full force of all of that onto himself to die under its weight so that the new covenant and new creation might be launched.

Isaiah 52 and 3 lead inexorably into Isaiah 54. I was thinking about this yesterday my wife and I were because I wasn't going out yesterday we were listening to a church service on the radio and to my delight Isaiah 54 was the Old Testament reading this is

the new covenant the immediate result of the work of the servant is the renewal of the covenant and the result of the renewal of the covenant Isaiah 54 is the renewal of creation in Isaiah 55. The instead of the briar shall come up the metal instead of the thorn shall come up the beautiful shrubs it will be to the Lord a sign which shall not be cut off as the rain and the snow come down and water the earth and don't return but make the earth fruitful so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth it will not return to me void it will accomplish my purpose.

What did John have in mind when he said in the beginning was the word and the word became flesh and dwelt among us he had Isaiah in there he had Exodus 40 in there he had Genesis 1 in there he had Jesus in there and through that that in this is what it means when we say the Messiah died for us and rose again in accordance with the scriptures it is this great narrative which is the narrative about God putting the world right doing so through Jesus and entrusting this putting right mission by his spirit to his followers and that's what we're going to be talking about God willing this afternoon. She was paused and be still I've talked my hind leg off for an hour and be good just have a moment of silence then I'll say a prayer and then we'll go to lunch. Gracious Father I give you praise because your will is extraordinary your purposes are amazing your love in creation and new creation is boundless I give you praise for that great story a story of your people give you praise above all for Jesus for sending him to be with us for sending him to overcome evil to take our place and to launch your new creation.

Father open the eyes of our hearts and our imaginations and our minds that we may be excited by this one more time and may be energized by your spirit through this great story to see more clearly how to serve you in your church and your world we pray in Jesus name Amen. I hope you enjoyed that opening lecture from this year's Oxford Conference on Reimagining Global Mission. Tom was the keynote speaker there it was hosted by the Good Shepherd Church Network India in partnership with Premier and if you want to watch the video from the conference there's a link for that with today's show.

Now we'll have more from this special day conference just before the new year but next time on the show we're bringing you Tom's responses to questions about whether we can trust the Christmas story and the gospels in general so that's next time on the show as we get ready for Christmas. For now just make sure you subscribe to the newsletter, extra resources and to ask a question yourself at premierunbelievable.com and we'll see you next time.