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#150 NT Wright on the multi-ethnic mission of the church - Oxford Conference Session 2

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Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

In this second lecture from the Reimagining Global Mission conference in Oxford, Tom speaks on the multi-ethnic, multicultural, polychrome mission of the church.

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.

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Transcript

The Ask NT Wright Anything podcast Hello and welcome back to the show that brings you the thought and theology of NT Wright. I'm Justin Brierley, Head of Theology and Apologetics for Premier Unbelievable. And today we're bringing you another session from the Oxford Conference on 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, NT Wright was the keynote speaker. Just before we get into today's show, this happens to be the 150th episode of the podcast, quite a milestone as we reach the end of 2022. Believe it or not, we've had over 6.5 million downloads of the

show since we began.

Why do we do this? Why do we put it on? Because I truly believe Tom's thought and theology is good for the church and good for Christians who want to share their faith in relevant ways. But it does cost us to put on conferences to produce podcasts, to create videos, to write articles, to host websites, to pay staff, you know. But it's important, it's all about actually reaching people through all of these means.

So if you would like to help us do that in 2023, can I ask you again to consider making a gift to our end of year appeal? The link to do so is with today's show. If you're in the US, it'll take you to a link where you can do that tax efficiently. From anywhere else in the world, you'll get the right link by clicking on that.

I'd really value your help. Thank you so much again. The link is with today's podcast.

For now, on to today's show. And this is the second lecture from the Reimagining Global Mission Conference in Oxford. It's Tom speaking on the multi-ethnic, multicultural, polychrome mission of the church.

I started the first session with some remarks about the way Platonism has infected our culture. I just want to put three or four little things on the table before I launch into what you've got on the handout here about ways in which I think we've messed up in our culture which have resulted in the situation which Joseph and others were describing. Particularly, I realized a little while ago, and I realized when I was reflecting on the whole Black Lives Matter phenomenon and working with some friends at Wycliffe Hall where I'm part-time about that, ever since the Reformation, ever since the Protestant Reformation, something has happened which nobody really realized was going on, namely the churches, the Western churches, Western Protestant churches, divided on ethnic lines because they wanted to have the Bible and the Liturgy in their own language.

Instead of having Bible and Liturgy in Latin with some priest mumbling it and then explaining to you what he thought it really meant afterwards, no English people wanted English Bible and Liturgy. So my great hero William Tyndale translates the Bible into English, fine. People are doing the same all over Europe.

Nobody saw what was coming which was that by the end of the 16th century in say London, there would be a French-speaking church, a Portuguese-speaking church, a Polish church, etc., as well as lots of English churches, and nobody thought that mattered. And then we exported that to other parts of the world. And now in America, and America is probably the other country in the world I know best because I travel there quite a lot and live there once twice.

You have all kinds of churches, many of which are quite specifically ethnic churches, and

over time those different ethnicities have developed their own theologies and then they often tell each other off forgetting the theology wrong when in fact it's because, well, they weren't living together, they weren't working together, they weren't addressing the issues together. And this is because the reformers inherited from the Middle Ages a vision of Christianity which was that it was all about getting to heaven. So as long as you can get souls into heaven then, well, when you worship here on earth you just go to whichever church makes sense for you and that will be alright, won't it? Missing out what from Galatians, which I think is the earliest writing in the New Testament, right through in the early church is absolutely foundational, revelation, a great multitude from every nation and kingdom and tribe and tongue, all praising God together.

That's not a vision for the final end, that's a vision which is to be anticipated in the present. And how you do this is very interesting because you then have subcultures within the different churches where I like this kind of singing and they like that kind of hymn or praise song or whatever. So we go to different churches and we do it differently.

Well, sorry, that's just not good enough and I say this to myself, I love certain kinds of church music, I get very bored with other certain kinds of church music. How do we work at that? So my point is really we didn't see that coming, the Protestant reformers never said, hey, there's bits of scripture which are going to be really awkward if we now divide on ethnic and linguistic lines. But we did, that's one thing, another thing quite different and yet probably ultimately related.

And some of you probably know much more about this than I do because I'm not an expert here at all, is the invention of whiteness. You know about this, the invention of whiteness? I once looked up the word white in the old Oxford English dictionary, the big multivolume one which takes you right the way back to the 16th, 17th century, whatever. And the idea that people with my skin colour or that of various of you are called white is absolutely ridiculous.

You know, this is, that's white. The only time you see people looking like that or when they're very sick or actually dead, people we call white are not actually, so white in Western Europeans call themselves white and the answer was they were playing off a binary. Because they went to other parts of the world, or they're black people there, and by contrast the binary means we must be white.

It's absolutely ridiculous. And then the really insidious thing, of course, was that black and white become infected with moral implications or at least hierarchical implications. Which then plays into the next point, which is about the way in which evolutionism, I don't mean evolution, biological evolution is a scientific reality, no problem with that, but evolutionism which comes out of the Epicureanism of the 18th century, I've documented this in my book *History and Eschatology* by the way, which people sometimes say which is your favourite of all the books you've written, well that one which came out two or

three years ago is really a favourite and a lot of what I do is in there.

The evolutionism was taking the scientific footnotes as it were to support a social and cultural movement which said well just as different species of monkey or bird or tortoise or whatever have evolved over time. So within the human race there have been different evolutions, so now we have superior kinds of humans and less or more inferior types of humans. This was going on in the mid-19th century with Huxley and others and it was clearly in the service of the white westerners who were making up the theory as a way of instantiating empire, etc.

We are the ones who know how to do things, etc. And as I look back at that history which I don't claim in your responsibility for it, I'm not going to apologise for it, the cult of everyone apologising for everything I think has gone a bit too far. But to say if there's any vestiges of that around, for goodness sake lets eradicate it, part of the irony is that in America the people who get most cross about Charles Darwin and evolution and all that are absolutely died in the wool for the superiority of at the moment white evangelical Protestantism etc.

That's really really worrying, there's all sorts of cultural theological things going on there. Usually ignoring what the Bible says which is that God made from one every nation of humans to dwell on the face of the earth, that's Paul speaking in Athens in at 17. If only that was sort of a running head above all these discussions, so many things might have been different.

Last introductory remark, these reflections I shared some of this is Joseph yesterday, when the Black Lives Matter thing exploded a couple of years ago and we had, we tried to address this in work before despite the pandemic and so on because we had students from Africa and other parts of the world there who really felt quite keenly the implicit racism which still sloshes around in some bits of western not least British culture and people were saying but you can't go the Black Lives Matter route because they're communists, they're anarchists, they're atheists, so if you're a Christian you have to reject that to which my responses, excuse me, if we the church had failed in the manifestly biblical task of celebrating one new humanity, neither June or Greek slave nor female nor female, all one in Christ. We'd failed in that, is it any wonder of people with other agendas, see a vacuum there and try and plug it? You know Jesus said the Kingdom of God is breaking in and the men of violence are trying to get in on the act, something is happening and they wanted a part of it. Well the church wasn't doing, hasn't done a lot of important things which we'll be talking about this afternoon and so no surprises if other people with very different motives try and do it instead, that doesn't mean that the goal is wrong, it just means that the church was missing out on its vocation.

So those are my kind of introductory remarks and putting them on the table and saying

I'm not an expert in those ideas, I've merely observed over the last few years that a lot of that stuff needs to be factored in to our thinking. So when we look at the New Testament church and somewhere I've got the handout which I gave you there, Acts, beginning briefly with Acts, Acts is a picture of the people who are struggling to discover what it means to be heaven and earth people. Think of how Acts opens, Acts opens with Jesus ascending.

So often people think that means Jesus died and went to heaven, oh no sorry that's entirely the wrong way of reading that. The ascension means that there is now a human being at the helm of the universe, heaven is the CEO's office, heaven is the place where stuff gets run from, Jesus is now the sovereign of the universe. Psalm 110, one of the early churches most favorite text, the Lord said to my Lord sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool.

Paul picks that up in 1 Corinthians 15 as a way of saying Jesus is already reigning, we his servants by his spirit have our tasks within that until he finally finishes that and defeats all enemies including death itself. That paragraph 1 Corinthians 15, 20 to 28 is really really significant on this. But so the point is then there is now a join between heaven and earth.

There is a bit of earth namely Jesus resurrection body which is firmly in heaven and if you think that's odd or illogical or unphilosophical think again. Years ago I used to have regular public debates with my dear friend now, late departed friend Marcus Borg, an American who would broadly describe himself as a liberal Christian I guess. And when it came to this point about resurrection and ascension I would say roughly what I've just said and Marcus would say in public, "Tom I just can't imagine that." And I would say, "Mark you need to work on your imagination." And some of us were just talking about the use of the arts in educating the imagination, opening the eyes of one dimensional secular thought to the possibility that there might be other ways of construing reality and that the idea of their being, a bodily human being in heaven is not illogical.

It's what the whole thing was made for. Of course heaven and earth belong together. They are the twin halves of God's good creation and only if you're a Platonist of some sort would you think otherwise.

And then Acts 2, if there is now a piece of earth in heaven namely Jesus resurrection body, Acts 2 Pentecost means that the breath of heaven is now active on earth. Acts 1 and 2 therefore frame the whole book as this is what it looks like when heaven comes to earth. And it looks like proclamation, it looks like people getting averted, it looks like all sorts of things.

It also looks like persecution and martyrdom and muddle and mistakes and people getting across one another. Paul and Barabbas having a huge row etc. It doesn't mean that everything just flows smoothly from there.

But they are aware that they are fulfilling the scriptures which speak of Israel's Messiah as the world's Lord. And the reason for mission is that there is now a new kyrios. The world has a new Lord and it's Jesus.

That's why in Acts 17 Paul and his companions are accused of saying there is another king namely Jesus. That's a seditious talk in the world in the Jesus language. But of course if the king is Jesus he doesn't do kingship the way that Caesar did.

He does kingship the way that the four gospels tell us where he is crowned as king of the Jews with the crown of thorns etc. And so they are living under the sovereignty of the crucified and risen Messiah and making that sovereignty a reality on earth as in heaven. And if you have a new world which is a heaven and earth reality, dangerous as it was in the Old Testament, scary stuff, we shouldn't be surprised that as you work through Acts almost all the controversial moments are about temples.

Whether it's in Athens or in Ephesus or in Jerusalem itself or in Thessalonica or other places. They've got their gods already. Paul is accused in Athens of bringing strange new divinities into town.

Jesus and anastasis, they didn't understand that anastasis meant resurrection. And Paul describes in his speech in Athens a new heaven and earth reality in which Jesus is the Lord who is going to put everything right, who is going to judge the world. And as a result they are living as a new sort of people.

One of my favorite moments, some of you may know I wrote a little book, I don't think I've got it on that list you've got there. God and the pandemic, a couple of years ago when the pandemic started people kept asking me to do podcasts and so on about you. This isn't my field.

Why should I have anything to say? But eventually after doing this a few times I said to the publishers, should I try and write this up and I'll go on they said so fine. It's been bestseller the last two years, very nice, thank you. But I was getting stick from people in America particularly because I had said that the first thing to do is to lament and then to hold on in prayer to the extraordinary situation we were facing.

Allah, Romans 8, not knowing what we ought to pray for. And I was getting stick from people who were saying, "Tom Wright doesn't read the Bible anymore, it's clear from the book of Amos that if something's gone wrong like this it's because somebody has sinned and were being punished and they would regularly name the two or three sins which they had been preaching against anyway and the pandemic was a nice excuse to go for that." I said, "Hang on, hang on, hang on. There's a famine across the whole known world which Agabus says is going to happen at the end of Acts chapter 11.

What does the church in Antioch do? Do they go around saying it's because Caesar has

been ruling wickedly or it's because those people in Jerusalem allow Jesus to be crucified. They don't do any of that, they don't play the blame game. They say, "Who's going to be most at risk? What can we do to help and who shall we send?" Isn't that great? And, as Joseph said before, the church in Antioch was a rich multicultural church.

Antioch was a melting pot, it was on the trade routes. People came in from all over. Substantial Jewish community, a large thriving non-Jewish community and people of all sorts were in that church.

And when Paul and Barnabas go to Jerusalem with the money that they've decided to collect, to take to the Jerusalem church because they're likely to be suffering for all sorts of reasons, they take Titus with them who is an uncircumcised Greek and we see in Galatians 2, 1 to 10 that there was a moment of tension there. But no, Titus is a totally bona fide member of this church. This is a multilingual, multicultural, this is a let's worship God together as one church.

And it was an extraordinary moment because never before in the history of the world, as far as I know, has one group, particularly a multi-ethnic group, regarded itself as so much part of the same family as another group several hundred miles away with a different ethnic makeup because they were all Jews in Jerusalem, regarded themselves as a single family. The closest you get is of course the worldwide Jewish family where people did regard themselves as part of this worldwide people. But now this multi-ethnic, multicultural community in Antioch recognizes an obligation to the people in Jerusalem.

And that actually I think is the beginning of Paul's project of doing the collection, going around his churches raising money for Jerusalem. It's a sign that they were all one family and so it goes. Anyway, move on from that to Paul.

Paul is the theoretician of all of this. And again and again, I grew up with debates about justification. One of the reasons that I became a Pauline scholar was that I got fascinated by the debates between Calvinists and Lutherans say on justification, the different ways they were reading Galatians and Romans.

And how does Galatians fit with Romans? And does Paul say the same thing about the law? And so how does he use those texts from the Old Testament and so on and so on. And I remember speaking about this at a conference and somebody saying, how do justification and justice go together? And I remember thinking, this is a long time ago now, remember thinking, that's a great question which I have never thought of before, but I ought to have a better answer to it than I currently have. What I would now say to come to the chase goes like this.

Read the Old Testament. God has promised he will put the whole world right. Isaiah 11, the willful dweller with the lamb and the leopard with the kid, etc.

Psalms 96 and 98. God will judge the world and that doesn't mean condemn the world. It means he will sort the mess out.

The heavens rejoice, the earth will be glad, the sea will roar and all that fills it because Yahweh is coming to judge the world. He's coming to put everything right at last. Hallelujah.

And we'll do that. In the present time, God puts men, women and children right with himself so that they may be part of his putting right project for the world. That is justice and justification, absolutely as one.

If we are justified by faith, we are put right with God in order to be both a symbol and a means of God's ongoing putting right project for the world. Because if Jesus is already Lord and if the Spirit is already active, if Jesus is already raised from the dead, then we don't have to wait for the last day to see genuine advanced signs of God's new creation in the world here and now. And that is the foundation for all Christian work for justice, peace, beauty in the world.

That's where the entire agenda I would say for the arts comes in. These are genuine advanced signs of God's coming put right world, God's coming beautiful world. And part of that putting right in the present and the first letter Paul wrote is the radical inclusion of people who were formerly unclean Gentiles.

I mentioned before I come back to it now Galatians 2 absolutely vital. Paul says to Peter who has wanted to separate Jewish Christians from Gentile Christians in their, precisely in their tables, in their eating together or not. He says yes, we are Jews and not Gentiles sinners, Hamartoloi, sinners in other words Gentiles idolaters therefore they're unclean, therefore we Jews can't eat with them because that would make us unclean.

But then Paul says what's happened in the gospel means that Gentiles who are part of the Messiah's family are no longer unclean. This is why the gospel message of forgiveness again dovetails exactly with the gospel message that all who are in the Messiah, whether Jew or Greek male or female, slave or free, are all part of the single family. People have tried to split those up.

One scholar who I get on really quite well with him but when he heard me and others saying this kind of thing he said oh you're just making the gospel about table manners. I think it's about salvation. I said no that's not the point.

The reason why the Gentiles are to be included is if they're in Christ they are no longer sinners, they are no longer idolaters, they are no longer unclean. So what business of you, a Jew who yourself are actually a sinner saved by grace through faith just as much as they are, of what business have you got to exclude them? That is the argument of Galatians 2. See the detail in my commentary on Galatians which I was writing at the

same time as I was doing that little book on the pandemic. So the cross which is the centre of Paul's gospel is of course about personal salvation.

Paul says the Son of God loved me and gave himself for me. It's one of the most wonderful poignant statements in all of Pauline literature. I come back to it again and again.

People often ask me after I've done a Pauline lecture course or whatever. What's the heart of it all for you? And I say Galatians 2.20, the Son of God loved me and gave himself for me. You can't get more central than that.

But that comes at the end of and as the climax of an argument about the inclusion of people who some had wanted to exclude on the grounds that their ethnicity made them unclean. The immediate and visible results of the message of personal salvation through the cross is the radical inclusion of all the messiah's people on equal terms. And this doesn't create an inward looking self-congratulatory holy huddle because the church from the beginning is an outward facing community.

It's radically inclusive, not in the in the Lucy sense of well nothing really matters so let's all just get together and have a party. It's very firmly anchored in Jesus but precisely because it's the Jesus who did what he did in the gospels, who shared his bread with sinners and so on and so on. The church as this new community is always looking outward to the world and doing things in the world which speak powerfully of God's new creation project.

I come back to it but Ephesians 2.10 often quoted by Grace you have saved through faith, not of yourselves it's the gift of God. We are God's workmanship, the word is "poema", we are God's poem, I love that, created in Messiah Jesus for good works which God prepared for us to walk in. Because the Protestant Reformers were worried about people doing good works to earn their salvation in other words keeping the moral law we forgot that the phrase doing good works in the first century wasn't about a moral law of course the moral law matters that's not the issue.

Doing good works is what happens when people in a society in a city or village are able with such resources as they have to do things which will be for the benefit of the whole community whether it's founding orphanages or schools or hospitals or teaching people to read or whatever it is. The church from the beginning, we mentioned hospitals and so on before, the church from the beginning has been doing what Jesus was doing which was teaching, healing and teaching and educating and healing and producing communities of love and hope. So I move from that to Ephesians 1 to 3 as I said, let me provide for you, I assume you all know Ephesians 1, 2 and 3 quite well and maybe you've even got a Bible with you if you don't have it in your head but see if you can hang in there.

Had I been more situous in preparing my hand out, I might have given you a whole handout on this or had it on an overhead projector but I'm afraid my health the last week or two has not allowed me to do that. But Ephesians 1 begins with that great shout of praise verses 3 to 14, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, blessed us in the Messiah with every spiritual blessing etc etc etc." This is about God's creational purpose. I sometimes say to students if you want to know your way through Ephesians 1, 2 and 3 think of verse 10, Ephesians 1, 10 God's purpose is to sum up all things in heaven and on earth in Christ.

Ephesians 2, 10 we are God's poem created in Messiah Jesus for good works, outward facing work of the redeemed church. Ephesians 3, 10 that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might be made known to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places. My friends Caesar would love to have been able to create communities of different ethnic groups the way it was happening and he couldn't do it.

Basically you're all Roman citizens or some of you so you're just going to be Romans and well there's some of you this some of you that whatever but it was always uneasy it never gelled it never glued together and the Romans of course always remained superior they never abandoned that that dream of superiority. The church was doing and being something which was assigned to the principalities and powers spiritual and earthly both the rich mixture. Assigned that the real God the God of creation is at work and that Jesus the crucified and risen Messiah is the Lord of the world that's Ephesians 1, 10, 2, 10, 3, 10 but going a little more detail into after 1, 10 the coming together of heaven and earth that's God's ultimate purpose.

So verses 11 to 14 that Jews and Gentiles alike are called to be assigned to the world of God's glory. This is the inheritance which I said before is the inheritance is God's whole creation which is to be renewed and restored. The inheritance is not going to heaven that will be irrelevant that would be giving up Jerusalem for Athens giving up the Old Testament for Plato.

No the inheritance as in Romans 8 is the new creation. So what you then have is new creation in advance through the Holy Spirit Ephesians 1 verses 13 and 14 the Holy Spirit generates a people of praise a people whose primary purpose is to praise God. Remember the angled mirror in order to be the people through whom God's justice flows out into the world we must be people who sum up the praises of all creation and present those praises before God.

One of the reasons I love being an Anglican is that in the prayer book day by day in morning prayer you have a choice of two canticles the tedium, Laodamas we praise the O God all the earth worships the we are being the angled mirror summing up the praises of creation or the one that I like even more the benedictio all he works of the Lord bless you the Lord praise him and magnify him forever. Oh you far and heat bless you the Lord

oh he wins of God oh he mountains and hills so you green things upon the earth he wails and all that move in the waters you beasts and cattle praise the Lord we are making articulate the praise which arises to God anyway from the green fields from the animals from the fish etc and also from all the other human beings that's what we are called to do. You see it in Revelation 4 where the beasts in Revelation 4 simply say holy holy holy is the Lord Almighty they simply praise God and then the human beings say you are worthy to receive praise because you created all things the human vocation is to add the word because to the inarticulate praise of the rest of creation isn't that wonderful that's who we are called to be and we can only really be doing that if we are doing it together across all the boundaries which human sin and folly and misunderstanding have created between us so we are to be a people of praise verses 13 and 14 and then Paul's prayer Ephesians 1 verses 15 to 23 is that if Jesus is now the Lord of the world as I said before as in 1 Corinthians 15 as in so many other passages then the Spirit filled church are the people in and through whom that lordship becomes an actual and visible reality let me just flick across to it I should be doing it to my own translation but I've got an NRSV here for the sake of argument that God's incredible power in us who believe verse 19 which is the same power that God used when he raised Jesus the Messiah from the dead and set him at his right hand in heavenly places verse 22 he has put all things under his feet that's Psalm 110 and has made him the head over all things for the church which is his body the fullness of him who fills all in all this notion of fullness which is very much an Ephesian theme comes in Romans again as well as we'll see this looks all the way back to those promises in the scriptures the Hebrew scriptures from Isaiah 11 from Habakkuk 2 from Numbers 14 from Psalm 72 etc that the earth shall be full of the knowledge and glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea I've said it often to students how do the waters cover the sea the waters are the sea there is something about God's purpose for creation where God intends to flood creation with his own presence and love and glory and knowledge just like he filled the tabernacle and then the temple with his own glorious visible presence so God intends that at the last 1 Corinthians 15 28 God will be all in all there is something amazing about creation God makes a world that is other than himself which is a weird thing for a good God to do by the way in order that in the end he will fill it with its own love and glory and presence while still not only allowing it but encouraging it to be itself to be gloriously what it really is and he says it to every one of us as well be gloriously who you really are that that's why God's people are so glorious he's different from one another gifted with different skills and possibilities and so on but it all comes back then to the fact that for the Christian and for the church we are to be filled with the spirit in the present as the sign and foretaste of what God is going to do in and for the whole creation this then moves into chapter two where chapter two one to ten famous passage reminding the church that whether Jew or Gentile we are all saved by grace through faith it's absolutely basic and as I said in verse 10 saved in order that we will be people who buy what we do as well as what we are reveal to the watching world that Jesus is Lord the good works which God prepared beforehand see I'm not an early church historian I really stop at around 200 AD in fact I don't get much beyond 150

really I basically live in the first century that's what you know when I was teaching here my students used to mock me because if I said before the war or after the war I wasn't talking about 39 to 45 I was talking about the war between the Jews and the Romans from 66 to 70 and just that's where I habitually live but anyway as you move forward into the second and third centuries the Roman world was puzzled by these strange people who called themselves Christians because they were deeply subversive not least because they seemed to be throwing caution to the wind and were meeting in enclaves where you'd find slaves and free people men and women and chakora people from quite different ethnicities meeting together as and treating each other as family calling each other brother and sister supporting one another financially and so on the Romans were quite rightly alarmed at this subversive activity and the Romans were always very well aware that when more than four or five people got together in a room and shut the door bad things might be happening they might be plotting against the state and so the church got a bad reputation but what the church then did was to be outward looking to be looking after the poor to be providing medicine and healing and doctor services not only for their own people but for anyone who needed it and to be providing education to teach people to read lots people couldn't read in the ancient world because of course if you believe in the Jesus who is according to the scriptures one of the main things that I think the teachers in the early church did was they taught people to read so that they could understand the scriptures and understand the whole sweep of it all and the heart of it one of the things I especially like in the third century the persecuting Romans didn't really know much about the church but they knew that the church had these funny people called bishops and the main thing they knew about bishops was that bishops were always banging on about the plight of the poor would that today bishops were known in public for being those pesky people who were always banging on about the plight of the poor you know that this is how the church lived they lived as Jesus outward facing people even if they were being persecuted they went on doing the Jesus stuff that was core mission as far as they were concerned and so then Ephesians chapter 2 verses 11 to 22 all nations are reconciled the great divide from the Jewish point of view between the Jew and the Gentile that was now set aside and as a result end of Ephesians chapter 2 you are fellow citizens with the saints members of the household of God this is Paul addressing Gentiles built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone in whom the whole structure is joined together and what does it become think of that theology from Genesis 1 through to Exodus 40 through to 1 Kings 8 and all the temple Psalms Ephesians 2 it grows into a holy temple in the Lord Western Protestantism has been so worried about temple stuff it sounds to Jewish or to Catholic or whatever no it is precisely the Jewish vision that the temple is the coming together of heaven and earth so that God made well there and that promise of God coming to dwell is fulfilled in Jesus and then it's fulfilled in the spirit of Jesus this is the richly trinitarian New Testament theology which speaks about the holy temple in the Lord for an ex-pharacy to talk about this community of Jews and Gentiles being the temple that is massive that is huge no wonder when Paul came back to Jerusalem after his travels they

thought he was perverting or corrupting the temple because people had got this heard garbled versions of what he'd been saying maybe the temple in Jerusalem was not the ultimate place after all no Paul would say God has made a new temple and it is those strange little communities scattered around in places like Colossian Thessalonica and Corinth and wherever wherever two or three are gathered in his name he is there in the midst by his spirit and that becomes a holy temple and you are built into that for verse 22 a dwelling place for God that is the agenda for mission the agenda for the church which then says this demonstrates to the world that there is a new way to be human you know our secular world has tried to invent something called multiculturalism in the last years and people worry about it quite rightly because throws up all sorts of problems which we weren't expecting and don't know how to handle but the church should have been the pilot project for this all along and okay we may be coming late to the party now but let's get back in there and be the people that we are called to be and the result then in chapter three verses one to thirteen focus as I said on verse ten that when God now does this and Paul is emphasizing in Ephesians three that this was God's purpose all along secret plan which is now revealed on of which Paul is now a servant a minister then the result is that the through the church and the NRSV says the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known that the word in the Greek is a lovely word polo poikilos if I were to buy my wife a large bunch of flowers and many different colors the Greek word for the many different colors thing might be polo poikilos and many colored that the whole point of the church is that it's multi-colored that that's what that word means that through the church the multi-colored wisdom of God in all its rich variety might be made known to the principalities and powers telling them that their time is up that Jesus is Lord and that they aren't that's how it's meant to work and therefore chapter three verses 14 to 21 the triune version of the God with us promise goes all the way back to Genesis God wanting to dwell with the human his human creatures goes all the way on to Revelation 21 the dwelling of God is with humans and here it is earthed in Ephesians chapter three verses 14 to 21 Paul's prayer I am praying that he will grant you to be strengthened in your inner being with power through his spirit that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith the dwelling of Christ in the heart which is something that pirates and evangelicals have always cherished as absolutely central and rightly so that's true but we often have missed out where that is really going this is part of the whole point of God dwelling with his people so that you may have the power to comprehend with all the saints the breadth and length and height and depth and to know the love of the Messiah which passes knowledge here it is again so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God just as the whole earth shall be filled with the knowledge and glory of God so we are to be small working models of new creation that is the challenge for Christian spirituality and it's not a private thing it's not a me cultivating my spiritual path or whatever because it's something we do together something we can only do together of course it becomes deeply personal you can't slide along and hope that because everyone else is doing it you don't have to worry it's got to be real for you but it is real for you as part of the family and therefore his final blessing is to him who by

the power at work within us that power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations amen and the rest of the letter explains in significant and rather challenging detail what that looks like now in terms of ministry chapter four in terms of ethics chapters four and five particularly the coming together of husband and wife in marriage you see how that works chapter one the coming together of heaven and earth chapter two the coming together of Jew and Gentile chapter five the coming together of husband and wife as in Genesis one the whole thing is about God's differentiated creation coming together in Christ and then if you're going to be people like that expect spiritual warfare if Eugene's chapter six that's how the whole letter works now I'm hurrying on because I see on my notes that I'm supposed to talk to you about Romans now when I used to lecture on Romans in this university I would it's an eight week term I would lecture three times a week so there'll be 24 lectures and I would come out after every lecture thinking ah it was too short we really should have had two or three on that one so I just want to say I just want to say a couple of very brief things about Romans any of us who've had any dealings with the traditional particularly American evangelical world know that there is something called the Romans road which goes like this were all sinners God sent Jesus if you believe in him you'll go to heaven fine well you can read Romans one two three four like that if you try hard enough it's much better that somebody believes that than that they become I don't know one of the various alternative religions which are out there in the world at the moment much rather have people at least focus on Jesus as the the focal point of salvation but Romans isn't about that story when people tell the story that way they get to Romans 8 and they kind of stutter around verses 18 to 28 because that's all about God's renewal of the whole creation which doesn't play in that traditional paradigm at all we have to learn to reread Romans I've tried to push in that direction in various of my works and in particular in Romans 8 what we have back to this theme here about God restoring God's given dignity to all human beings Romans 8 draws heavily on Psalm 8 Psalm 8 which is about what it means to be genuinely human and Paul says we suffer with the Messiah that we may also be glorified with him and we have taken that idea of glorification to mean going to heaven Paul never uses the word heaven in that whole passage and indeed throughout Romans he never mentions the going to heaven story that we have all been taught from our youth rather glorification is becoming genuinely human and in that becoming genuinely human taking responsibility under God for God's world I said God is a power sharing God God wants to work in his world through human beings that was the plan from the beginning I think a Christological plan from the beginning but in Romans 8 we see that the suffering and prayer of God's people in the present is part of the crucial means by which God does what he will do Romans 8:28 which you all probably learnt by heart I certainly did the old translation said we know that all things work together for good to those who love God no the word Paul uses is *sonariki* which is work with we know that in all things God works for good with those who love him what is this loving God bit it's what he's just been talking about whereby the spirit we are taken to a place

of darkness a place of prayer where we don't know what to pray for but the spirit groans within us with inarticulate groanings and Paul says the one who knows the hearts knows what the spirit is thinking because the spirit is interceding for God's people according to God's will that's who he's referring to when he talks about those who love God the prayer of unknowing at the heart of the pain of the world is the crucial moment in the human vocation which is the point at which we are anticipating already the glory which is to be revealed but then i hurry on because after Romans 9 to 11 which i've written about at length in various places we get to those last chapters of Romans and you know how it is people are exhausted at the end of Romans they've already done one two eight they've already done nine to eleven uh twelve to sixteen oh that's all about ethics that's just about the church trying to behave itself and so we skip over that no go to Romans 15 verses seven to thirteen it's become my new favorite bit of Romans this last year or two because in Romans 15 Paul is summing it all up what's the point of justification what's the point of all this gospel stuff well welcome one another therefore welcome on another think back to that little video we saw unless you're prepared to eat at the dalit table we're not going to work with you welcome one another therefore just as the Messiah welcomed you for the glory of God and so Paul is addressing the house churches in Rome which are it seems suspicious of one another Rome was a large city and there would be a house church here that probably still kept kosher and were deeply suspicious of the house church over there that were prepared to eat anything that came their way and a house church over there might insist on keeping the Sabbaths and house church over there would say no that was for a time but uh Jesus himself taught us that we are now living in God's new world we're not anticipating it Paul says look learn to put aside the things that are now not relevant and welcome one another as the Messiah welcomed you and so then the point is that God has fulfilled his purposes for Israel verse 8 so that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy verse 9 and then he has a string of quotations Paul only does the three or four times in his writings quoting successively from the law and the prophets and the writings and here actually he has two Psalms as well as a bit from Deuteronomy and then climatically Isaiah and it's the Isaiah verse which really does it for me verse 12 he quotes from Isaiah chapter 11 verse 10 the root of Jesse rises to rule the nations and in him the nations will hope now Isaiah 11 is that great classic messianic passage bringing with it all the other messianic themes in Isaiah not least the servant in the middle part of Isaiah but what is Isaiah 11 all about it is about the rule of the Messiah because of which the wolf will dwell with the lamb and the leopard will lie down with the kid the cow and the bear feeding together and the lion eating straw like the ox and in the first chunk of Isaiah often those wild animals and tame animals as well serve as metaphors for the wild nations of the world that are warring and scrapping with each other and I think here Paul like some other Jewish writers of the time is wanting us to read Isaiah 11 1 to 10 in both ways yes there will be a new creation in which the wolf and lamb will lie down together and which the lion will suddenly become vegetarian that's fine but I think he also means because what he's talking about here is the coming together of different ethnic groups within the one

praising community I think he is also wanting us to hear Isaiah saying that when the root of Jesse the Davidic Messiah is ruling the world then of course the nations will come together and praise God together and what does that look like well I've quoted several times now Isaiah chapter 11 verse 9 then the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea what does Paul say may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit because of the Spirit the multi-ethnic multi-colored outward-facing cheerfully worshiping community-serving church is to be the place which anticipates in the present God's plan to fill the whole creation with his love and glory and presence so that what was true dangerously in the tabernacle in Exodus 40 what was true celebrated really in the temple in 1 Kings 8 but which then all went horribly wrong in the exile when the temple was destroyed and God seemed to have abandoned it this is what it means that God wanted all along to come and dwell in and with his people the church is to be the small working model of new creation and if it's the working model it means new creation is something which flows out not something which we cling to for ourselves as well it's us so we'll forget about the rest of the world the whole point of creation is that it's outward facing outward looking and when the church is being its true self it is worshiping as a polychrome polylingual whatever community and is working the work of Jesus in the world the work of the gospel so I've got on the sheet one other text which I'm just going to mention and then draw this together which is John 20 I got to this point in my preparation and I rebuked myself because I'd hardly touch John at all how can you do a biblical theology and leave John out well you can't but just as the word became flesh and dwelt in our midst John 1:14 so the gift of the spirit throughout the farewell discourses that's chapters 13 to 17 the gift of the spirit is this mysterious promise that he will be with you he will be in you it's the same thing only now available for all it's a deeply trinitarian vision of course but then after Jesus resurrection you know in John 7 John commenting about Jesus words at the Feast of Tabernacles Jesus says if anyone is thirsty come to me and drink John says he was talking about the spirit which was not yet because Jesus was not yet glorified until Jesus has dealt with sin and evil on the cross the Holy Spirit cannot be poured out into the hearts of men and women but now that the cross has happened now that the new creation has been launched on the first day of the week in the evening Jesus breathes on his disciples and says receive the Holy Spirit as the Father sent me so I send you for me that as so has been absolutely crucial in reflecting on the mission of the church because as I've studied Jesus in his historical context which has been the passion of half of my working life to get deeper and deeper into the meaning of the individual sayings and the controversies and the events and the healings and so on the more I've done that the more it might look as though Jesus is becoming remote he becomes a figure of first century history doing all sorts of strange things what's that got to do with us and the answer is by the spirit we are called to do and be in and for the world what Jesus himself had done and been in and for his people Israel in his brief ministry before his crucifixion resurrection so I Paul says in Romans 15 the Messiah became a servant to the circumcised to prove that prove true the promises

to the patriarchs so that then the Gentiles could glorify God for his mercy that's the challenge so to be rooted in the gospels which stand there as I've said between Genesis and Revelation as this is where it all got worked out so to be rooted there so to be the people of praise that by the spirit we can then be and do for the world what Jesus was for his people and of course that will come at an enormous cost of course it will mean misunderstanding as it did for Jesus Jesus own family thought he was out of his mind that will happen to some of us some of the time people that we know and love will say yeah if you're getting a bit extreme you know surely it can't really mean what you just said etc etc and sometimes they might be right as well this is possible to be overzealous in the wrong direction very easy but something is going on there which is more than just a little formula for how people can say a prayer and so be assured that they're going to heaven something is going on which is about the word being made flesh and that I think ultimately gives us the answer to those problems I mentioned at the beginning of this talk the problem of the western culture in which we've invented this thing called whiteness which just props up our own uh a vaunted supposed superiority and of course like all great idols falls flat on its face but the problems of an evolutionism which thought that the the so-called white western races were somehow automatically superior to everybody else and those have generated the problems of these divided churches where you do your thing down at that end of the street and we'll do our thing at this end of the street we may wave to each other as we pass but there won't be much else going on is it any wonder that Caesar takes no notice of the church when the church is really the church then there will be trouble there will be difficulty there will be challenges but all sorts of things will happen and door will open through which the gospel can go and do what is meant to do in God's world my friends this is what I thought I'd come to talk to you about today let's just again pause and pray and then we're going into a Q&A session thank you father for the amazing vision which you give us again and again of all that is there in the gospels and epistles and all that is there in Israel's scriptures showing us your power your glory your love your faithfulness we pray that in our day we may be faithful to this commission that we can be for your world what Jesus himself was for Israel and that by the power of the Holy Spirit we may abound in hope and in praise and in worship so fill us gracious Lord with your wisdom your presence your love and your power in Jesus name our men hope you enjoyed that talk from Tom at this year's reimagining global mission conference in Oxford thank you for being with us today next time for the first year of 2023 will be in you the Q&A that took place at this conference between Bishop Joseph DeSouza and Tom today's show as I mentioned was the 150th episode of this podcast quite a milestone to reach that at the end of 2022 and believe it or not we've had over six and a half million downloads of the show since we began we do it because we believe that Tom's thought and theology is good for the church is good for Christians it helps them to ground their faith and share it more confidently with others as well but it does cost us to create this podcast and all the other resources from Premier Unbelievable if you'd like to help us continue doing that in 2023 can I ask you to consider making a year-end gift it's our end-of-year appeal and there's a link with today's show

where you can give thank you so much if you're able to partner with us in that way it means a great deal to us for now happy new year and see you next time

[buzzing]