



**AN ECUMENICAL RESPONSE  
TO CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM**



**AN ECUMENICAL RESPONSE TO CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM**  
**EDITED BY MIN SHERMARA HOYTE**  
**CHURCHES TOGETHER IN ENGLAND**

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# Contributors

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## REV DR HELEN PAYNTER

Rev Dr Helen Paynter is the founding director of the Centre for the Study of Bible and Violence. Formerly a nephrologist, she was called into Baptist ministry and has pastored two churches in Bristol. She now teaches Old Testament and trains Baptist ministers at Bristol Baptist College. Helen holds a PhD in Old Testament studies from the University of Bristol and is a leading voice on biblical interpretation, particularly in relation to violence and the misuse of scripture. She is an author, speaker, and preacher both nationally and internationally.



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Rt Rev Dr Anderson Jeremiah is the Bishop of Edmonton and a globally recognised Anglican theologian. Born and raised in Vellore, South India, he was ordained in the Church of South India before moving to the UK for doctoral research. He has served in the Scottish Episcopal Church and as Lecturer in World Christianity at Lancaster University. Anderson is a member of the Church of England's General Synod and contributes to the Faith and Order Commission and Ministry Council. His work explores World Christianity, justice, and mission, shaped by his lived experience as a Dalit Christian. He is deeply committed to racial and social justice as central to Christian discipleship.



## REV DR CALLAN SLIPPER

Rev Dr Callan Slipper is the current Chair of Churches Together in England, is a theologian and ecumenical leader who currently chairs the Society for Ecumenical Studies. He has dedicated decades to the ecumenical movement, including serving as National Ecumenical Officer for the Church of England. Ordained in 1994, he lives in London as part of the Focolare Movement, seeking to embody its spirituality of unity. Callan is a member of the Focolare's international study centre, the Abba School, and the author of *Five Steps to Living Christian Unity and Enriched by the Other*.



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## CHINE MCDONALD

Chine McDonald is Director of Theos, the religion and society think tank, and a writer and broadcaster. She is a leading voice on race, faith, leadership, and social change, and is a regular media commentator across national platforms including the BBC, Times Radio, and major print publications such as the *Financial Times* and *The Guardian*. Chine is the author of *God Is Not a White Man*, which was runner-up for the 2023 Michael Ramsey Prize. She is an experienced speaker and panel host, contributing to national conversations on ethics, justice, and public theology.



## DORAL HAYES

Doral Hayes is the Principal Officer for Ecumenical Development and Relations at Churches Together in England, supporting county and local expressions of unity and working closely with National Ecumenical Officers across member churches. She holds an MA in Contemporary Christian Theology and is completing a Doctorate in Practical Theology at Roehampton University, focusing on what the churches can learn from the lived experience of interchurch families. Doral previously served as Ecumenical Facilitator for Churches Together in Hertfordshire and as Executive Development Officer for the Association of Interchurch Families. A licensed lay minister in the Church of England, she regularly preaches and leads worship in her local parish.



## RICHARD BRADBURY

Richard Bradbury is the Company Secretary for Churches Together in England and a member of the CTE Pentecostal and Charismatic Forum. He serves as an international missionary, national leader at Ground Level Network and locally at Beverley Community Church. Richard has a long-standing commitment to church unity, discipleship, and local church leadership. Richard brings significant experience in governance, ecumenical engagement, and fostering collaboration across different church traditions, alongside a passion for seeing churches work together in mission and witness.



## MIN SHERMARA HOYTE

Minister Shermara Hoyte is the Principal Officer at Churches Together in England for Pentecostal, Charismatic and Multicultural Relations. She also has responsibility for racial justice and young adult ecumenical engagement.



A dedicated minister and international speaker, Shermara is committed to fostering holistic and flourishing lives. She has an MA in Christian Leadership and Theology. Her leadership was notably highlighted when she read before a global audience in September 2022 at the funeral of the late HM Queen Elizabeth II. She is a regular broadcast on BBC Radio, Talk TV, The God Channel, TBN, UCB Radio and Premier Radio.

She is also a writer, contributing to works such as *Lived Mission in 21st Century Britain*, *Coming Home: Christian Perspectives on Housing, Black, Christian and Single*, and Anglicans and Pentecostals in Dialogue.

# Foreward:

## AN ECUMENICAL WITNESS FOR THIS MOMENT

### MIKE ROYAL

**In this foreword, I want to tell the story of how we arrived at this moment, and why Churches Together in England (CTE) has chosen to host and publish this resource for church leaders, our national Member Churches, Churches Together groups, and the charities and networks that work alongside them.**

This guide, *Kingdom over Nation*, is exactly what the title suggests. At CTE, churches are committed to the flourishing of God's Kingdom through the church in our nation, and by the conviction that this must always trump any form of national identity politics that might be used, in some quarters, to divide and 'other' people.

This resource has not emerged suddenly or in reaction to a single event. Rather, it grows out of a sustained period of reflection and response across the ecumenical landscape.

Over the past two years, the Presidents of Churches Together in England, who together represent the breadth of church traditions in England, have responded publicly to a number of significant national events.

On 6 August 2024, the Presidents issued a statement responding to the violent disorder that followed the Southport attack, in which three young children tragically lost their lives. The statement acknowledged "the anger felt by many at these senseless killings" as well as "the deep and troubling anxiety about immigration".

At the same time, it named with clarity what was unfolding on our streets:

"Regrettably, we have witnessed violence, racist attacks and intimidation on our streets. Mosques have been attacked, hotels housing people seeking asylum set on fire, and individuals set upon simply because of the colour of their skin. Racism has no place on our streets or in society and should not be stirred up in communities or online."

A year later, thousands gathered in London for the Unite the Kingdom rally. I remember that day well, as I was travelling through Waterloo Station on my way to an anniversary service for one of our Member Churches. The atmosphere felt tense and, at times, intimidating.

Yet it was also encouraging to see Londoners from many different ethnic backgrounds simply going about their daily lives, refusing to allow fear to intimidate them.

For many Christians, however, a particular concern emerged: the visible use of Christian symbols and language within the demonstrations.

On 23 September 2025, the Presidents of Churches Together in England issued a further statement expressing "deep concern about the symbols and words of the Christian faith being co-opted to support messages that breed hostility towards others".

The statement was clear and unequivocal:

***"The Cross and the Gospel of Christ must never be co-opted to support messages that breed hostility towards others."***

Since then, many Christians, who are committed to the peaceful coexistence of communities and to strong interfaith relationships, have sought constructive ways to respond. Church ministers engaged in dialogue with those attending the Unite the Kingdom Christmas Carol Service in December 2025. The Church of England also launched a public campaign featuring a nativity scene at a bus stop accompanied by the message: "Outsiders welcome. Whatever your story, Christmas starts with Christ", shared under the hashtag #JoyForAll.

Within this wider context, Churches Together in England has been asked by a number of representatives from our Member Churches to host theological and pastoral resources to help church leaders navigate conversations around Christian Nationalism.

We hope these resources will help churches to hold honest, informed and pastoral conversations that strengthen unity within the body of Christ and nurture peace within our communities.

We are deeply grateful to all who have contributed their wisdom, scholarship and pastoral insight to this resource.

May it serve churches, Churches Together groups, ministries, charities and our national Member Churches across England as we seek to bear faithful witness to the Kingdom of God in these challenging times.

Blessings.

# Introduction

## WHY THIS GUIDE, WHY NOW?

**SHERMARA HOYTE**

***Kingdom over Nation* is a resource shaped by voices from across the ecumenical landscape, including Pentecostal, Catholic, Anglican, Charismatic, and Free Church traditions, as well as theological think tanks. Contributors have come together to reflect on the rise of nationalism and Christian nationalism, drawing on local, national and international perspectives, and offering theological reflection that is both grounded and pastorally attentive.**

*Kingdom over Nation* is not designed to tell you how to think. Instead, it is a resource to help you think and to engage in careful theological reflection, shared discernment, and deeper listening to one another and to God.

### CONTEXT AND FOCUS

National identity increasingly shapes political and cultural life, and churches and the people in them are not immune to these influences. In many contexts, the distinction between a healthy sense of national belonging and forms of nationalism that sit uneasily with the Gospel has become unclear. This has created uncertainty for leaders and congregations alike, particularly when

engaging questions of justice, migration, identity and public witness.

*Kingdom over Nation* creates space to return to Scripture and theology in order to reflect on these questions with clarity and care. It seeks to help the church respond faithfully, resisting both silence and polarisation, and rooting its public life in the Kingdom of God rather than in ideology.

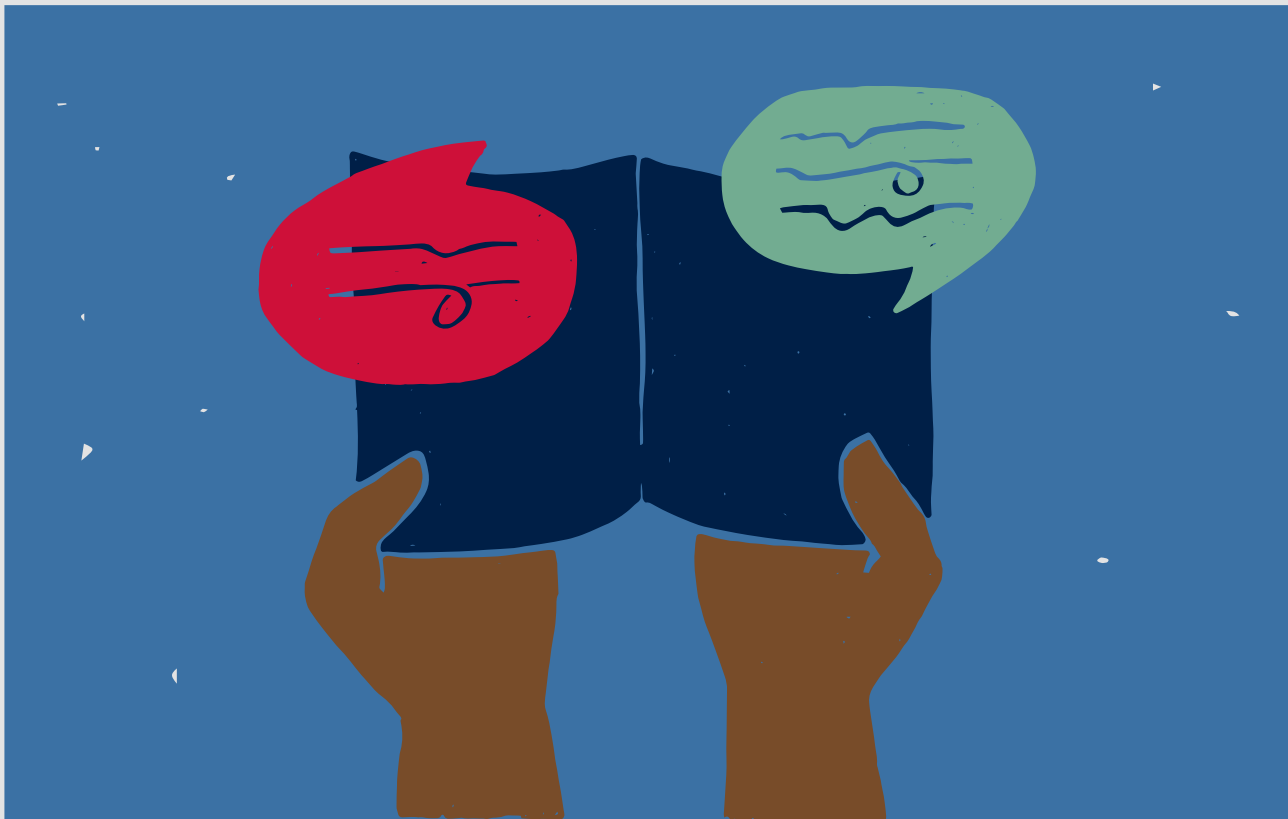
The church's primary identity is found in Christ and not in national or political allegiance.

This work is shaped by Jesus' words in John 18:36:

***“My Kingdom is not of this world.”***

### THEOLOGICAL ORIENTATION

The Gospel calls believers beyond tribalism and exclusion, and into a way of life marked by reconciliation, hospitality and faithfulness. Drawing on biblical themes of exile, covenant and Kingdom citizenship, this resource offers a theological framework for engaging questions of power, belonging and discipleship in the public square.



## WHO THIS RESOURCE IS FOR

This resource has been developed for churches and individual Christians seeking to think carefully about faith, identity and belonging in a changing public context, including:

- National, regional and local church leaders and ecumenical officers
- Christian leaders who occupy secular spaces
- Theological educators, students and Bible study facilitators
- Christians seeking to reflect more deeply on faith, public life and social identity
- Ecumenical, intercultural and interdenominational networks

## HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

This guide contains eight Bible study sessions on questions of faith, identity, belonging and nationhood in light of the Kingdom of God.

### There is no single way to use this resource.

You may choose to work through it as an eight-week series, exploring one session each week. Alternatively, you might spend longer on particular studies, taking time to reflect

more deeply over several weeks. You are encouraged to use the material in whatever way best suits your context.

Each Bible study follows a clear structure to support your engagement. Most include:

- an introduction
- a Bible passage or a theme rooted in Scripture
- a reflection
- discussion questions
- a prayer

You will encounter a range of voices and traditions from across the church. These different ecumenical perspectives on Scripture, prayer, and theology are included deliberately, reflecting the richness of the wider Christian family. At times, you may find perspectives that stretch or challenge you. This is part of the invitation: to listen deeply, reflect honestly, and grow in understanding.

We've included the full Bible passages with each study so that you don't need to have a Bible to hand.

As you read, you may notice that some contributions speak directly about nationalism, while others explore it more indirectly through themes, practices, or assumptions. This is intentional. Nationalism can shape identity and belief in both visible and subtle ways, and this resource reflects that complexity.

# Facilitation in group settings

## DORAL HAYES

**The reflections in this guide explore themes that can evoke strong opinions and personal experiences. For this reason, careful facilitation is important when using these materials in group settings.**

Facilitating a calm, helpful and reflective conversation about Christian Nationalism, or any sensitive topic, requires intention, empathy and structure. It is important to remember that the goal of these sessions is not necessarily agreement, but understanding. Creating the right environment helps people feel safe enough to share honestly while remaining respectful of differing opinions.

### Helpful approaches include:

- If possible, host the conversation in pairs. This allows for two perspectives on the group dynamics. If one person becomes tense or upset, the other facilitator can step in and give them time to breathe.
- Set clear expectations early. Explain that the purpose is respectful dialogue, not winning an argument. Encourage listening as much as speaking.
- Create a set of “group rules”. Create these brief rules together and ask everyone in the group to agree to abide by them. Include confidentiality in these rules so people feel safe to speak honestly and openly.
- Use neutral language. Avoid emotionally loaded words that can make others defensive. Frame questions in a curious and open way.
- Encourage active listening. Ask participants to summarise what someone else said before responding. This shows understanding and slows down reactive responses.
- Acknowledge emotions. Political topics often involve identity and values. Recognising and naming people’s feelings, without judging them, helps people feel heard.
- Ask open-ended questions. Questions such as “What experiences shaped your view?” Invite reflection rather than confrontation.
- Model calm behaviour. The facilitator should remain composed, patient and fair, especially if tensions rise. Be prepared to take a moment of silence or a “prayer pause” if discussion becomes heated.
- Be prepared to name harm when necessary. While these conversations aim to foster understanding, there may be moments where certain views or statements must be recognised as harmful, dangerous to others, or incompatible with the Gospel. Facilitators should not avoid naming this when needed. At the same time, how this is done matters. The way concerns are addressed should remain calm, respectful and clear. Your how can undermine your what, so it is important to challenge harmful ideas without humiliating or dismissing those speaking.
- Redirect when needed. If discussion becomes personal or hostile, gently bring the focus back to ideas rather than individuals.
- Allow breaks and pauses. Movement or silence can give participants time to think rather than reacting quickly.

A calm conversation on a sensitive subject is built through trust, patience and genuine curiosity. When people feel respected and listened to, they are far more likely to reflect on their own views and engage constructively with others. This allows people to learn and develop both in their understanding and in their faith.

# Understanding The Moment

## WHAT IS CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM AND SHOULD WE BE CONCERNED?

HELEN PAYNTER



**Like every other label or term used in this contested area, the definition of Christian Nationalism is disputed. For example, some people use it simply to refer to Christians who are proud of their country, nothing wrong with that!**

But in our day, the term is being increasingly used to refer to a conflation of Christian identity and national identity, a sort of merging of the religious and the political. To adapt Andrew Whitehead and Samuel Perry's definition for the British context:

'Christian Nationalism is a cultural framework, a collection of myths, traditions, symbols, narratives, and value systems that idealises and advocates a fusion of Christianity with [national] civic life... The 'Christianity' of Christian Nationalism represents something more than religion... It is as ethnic and political as it is religious.'

Does this sound familiar? Well, you might have been watching a similar phenomenon growing on the other side of the Atlantic and, indeed, in a number of other countries. The January 6th insurrection in the USA in 2021 was a highly political event broadly clothed in Christian imagery, symbolism, language and even public prayer. That's a version of Christian Nationalism in action.

So, what's going on within our own shores, and should we be worried? Because I'm interested in the use of Christian Scripture by political movements, I've been watching the trends on the right-hand-side of the political spectrum for a few years. Let me take you through a few key moments.

**2014-2015**

The group ‘Britain First’ runs a number of operations, which it refers to as ‘crusades’. These include the ‘invasion’ of mosques in Bradford and Keighley with Bibles and leaflets, and the parading through Muslim-majority areas of major British cities with large white crosses, chanting ‘Muslims Go Home’, and ‘It’s our country, not your country. It’s a Christian country’.

**RAMADAN 2024**

Bristol Cathedral opens its doors for local Muslims and non-Muslims to share a ‘Grand Iftar’. No act of worship is conducted. An ordained priest decries this on Twitter as being indicative that we are living in ‘the The Islamic Caliphate of Great Britain’. Responses on the thread include explicit calls for Crusade.

**JULY 2024**

Tommy Robinson holds a rally in London. Christian clerics support the rally and talk from the platform. One gives a speech saying, “We are not at war with just the Muslim”, and “Today when I look out across this square, I don’t pray for revival in the land. Because today... in Trafalgar Square, I can see in thousands of faces that revival has already begun.”

**SEPTEMBER 2025**

The *Unite the Kingdom* rally in London draws around 150,000 people from around the country, attending with a wide variety of motives and intentions, many of them reasonable. However, on the platform are a number of prominent Christians, including one who said “This is a religious war. It’s Jesus Christ versus Satan... We’ve got to get everything out that does not know or receive Jesus Christ. Ban any type of public expression in our Christian nations from other religions.”



What we see here is a rapid growth of this movement from a small, niche group to a popular (and populist) movement. We also see the progression from what might be called a 'Far Right' phenomenon (following Cas Mudde's definition of 'Far Right' as a movement which offers a threat to liberal democracy) to explicit Christian Nationalism by the summer of 2024.

So, should we be worried? I would say yes to concern, but no to panic.

Yes, we should be concerned that the Christian message, of God's scandalous grace being poured out through the weakness and folly of the Cross, is being co-opted to promote something which is at times exclusionary, hateful and even violent. We should also be concerned because many Muslims, immigrants, and people of colour in our country are feeling scared and intimidated right now.

The threat to democracy is a concern, too. There are people in our political spaces at present who would seek to undermine important democratic freedoms (such as freedom of religious expression and the independence of the press). And we should be concerned about the long-standing faultlines which these movements are both exposing and exploiting, the structural deprivation in many rural and inner-city communities, the deep sense of disenfranchisement experienced by many in the working class and underclass. Bluntly, many working-class people have felt patronised by both church and government for far too long.

***But there is no need for panic.  
Because, we have a better story.***

The Christian story told by many of these movements is 'thin', it relies on slogans, and visual symbols detached from their deeper meaning. But we have a rich, 'thick' and deep story, the ancient Gospel which saved the apostle Paul, Aquinas, Augustine, Luther, Wesley, and us. We don't need to reinvent it, we don't need to politicise it, and we don't need to be fearful that Christianity is under threat. The Spirit is as living and active today as ever.

***And we should be encouraged by the fact that local churches up and down the land are already getting on with the quiet but vital work of loving our neighbours, preaching the Gospel, working to reconcile those in conflict, feeding the hungry, and supporting the vulnerable. This is small, but it matters. The Kingdom of God grows like yeast.***

But this moment presents a challenge, too. We don't need to buy into the false dichotomy that we Christians must either seize power or else be consigned forever to privatise our faith. There is an important third way, the way of the prophetic church.

The prophetic church has no need to be 'in the room where it happens', although individual believers must and will follow the call of God to be salt and light in the public arena, including local and national government. But the church does not need privilege to fulfil its calling to speak boldly and clearly for the cause of the vulnerable, hold the powerful to high standards of truthfulness, and promote the cause of justice for all.

In 1930 an American pastor called Harry Fosdick wrote a hymn entitled *God of Grace and God of Glory*. We could do worse than pick up his refrain in our own day:

Grant us wisdom, grant us courage  
For the facing of this hour.

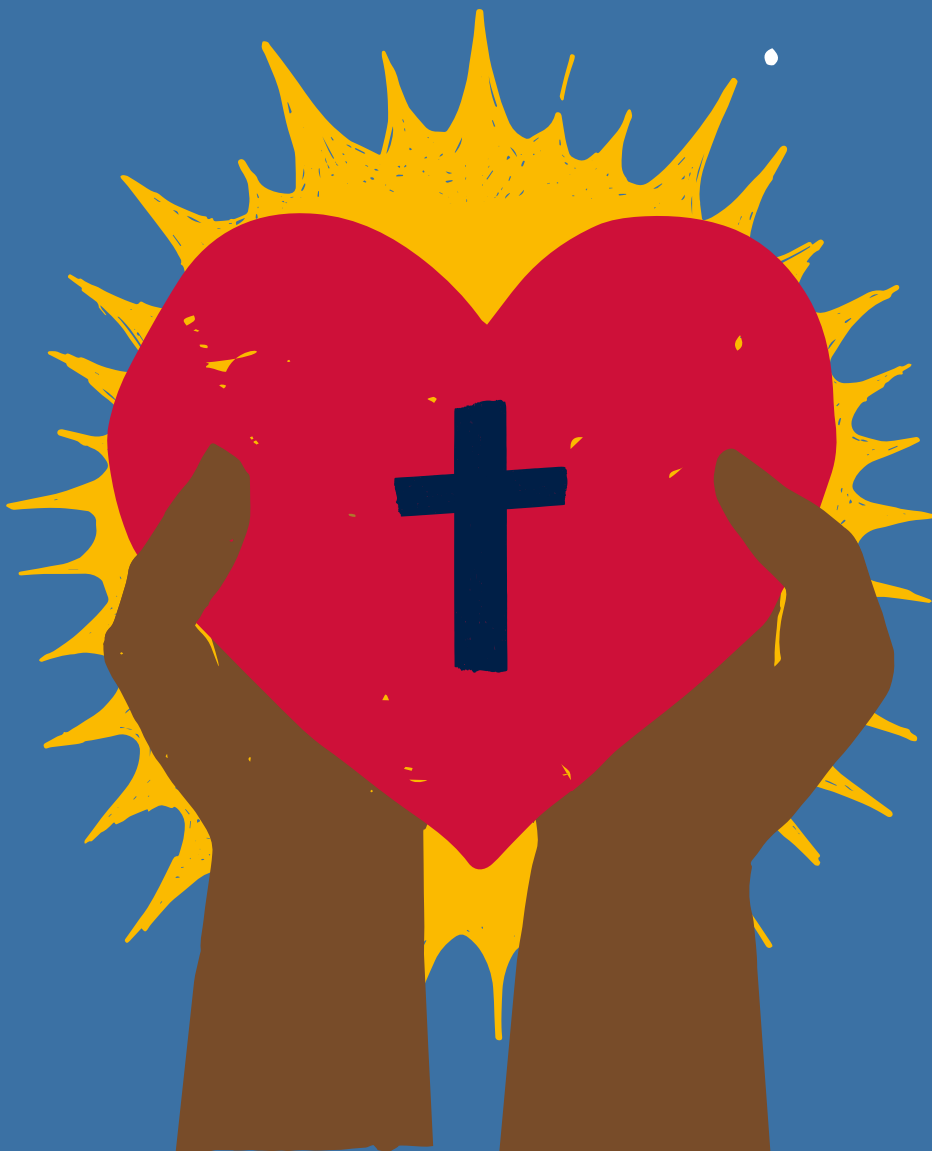


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# When flags become altars:

DISCERNING THE FINE LINE  
BETWEEN FAITH AND NATION

ANDERSON JEREMIAH



## INTRODUCTION

Across the world today, questions of nationhood, identity and belonging are becoming increasingly prominent. For many people, national identity can be a source of pride, cultural heritage and shared responsibility for the common good. Scripture itself recognises the existence of nations and peoples, and the diversity of cultures within God's creation.

Yet there is a danger when love of nation begins to compete with loyalty to the Kingdom of God. When national symbols, political power or cultural identity become objects of ultimate allegiance, they can quietly take the place that belongs to God alone.

At that moment, something subtle but serious happens: flags can begin to function like altars. What was once a symbol of shared civic identity risks becoming something sacred, unquestionable and defended at all costs.

This study invites us to reflect on the warning found in Hebrews and to ask whether our hearts remain open to the voice of God when it challenges our assumptions about nation, identity and neighbour.

### BIBLE PASSAGE

Hebrews 4:7

Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.

## REFLECTION

When the author of Hebrews wrote to the early church, they were addressing a community under immense pressure to conform – to trade the radical, boundary-crossing peace of Christ for the safety of old, exclusionary identities. Today, we face a similar temptation. We are witnessing the rise of a 'hardened heart' not just in individuals, but in a movement that seeks to fuse the Cross with the sword: Christian Nationalism.

### The anatomy of a hardened heart

We often mistake a 'hardened heart' for simple unkindness. But in the biblical tradition it is a structural refusal to see the 'other' as a neighbour. Christian Nationalism is the ultimate hardening of the heart. It is a theology of walls rather than open tables.

When they were unable to see the promised land on the horizon, the Israelites in the desert looked back at Egypt with nostalgia. They preferred the 'predictable cruelty' of slavery they understood over the 'uncertain freedom' of a God who loves the foreigner and the stranger.

Christian Nationalism is that same nostalgia. It is a pining for a mythical past where the church held worldly power, even if that power was built on the exclusion or dehumanisation of others.

### The hustle of empire vs the rest of God

Earlier in the passage the Greek word *katapausin* is used to speak of God's rest (v3). This is the antithesis of the 'hustle of empire'. Empire demands that we define ourselves by our status, our borders and our dominance. Christian Nationalism tells us that our primary identity is found in a flag or a frontier.

But God's rest is shalom. It is a state where identity is not weaponised. In the *katapausin* there is no 'us vs them', because the machinery of systemic exclusion has been dismantled. When we trade the Gospel of peace for a gospel of national supremacy, we are refusing to enter God's rest. We are choosing the 'hustle' of political dominance over the 'rest' of Christ's justice.

### The fantasy of religious nationalism

Today we see the 'fantasy of religious nationalism' fanning the flames of hatred. We see scripture weaponised to justify the desolation of the innocent and the marginalisation of the vulnerable. This is not the 'living word'; this is an idol.

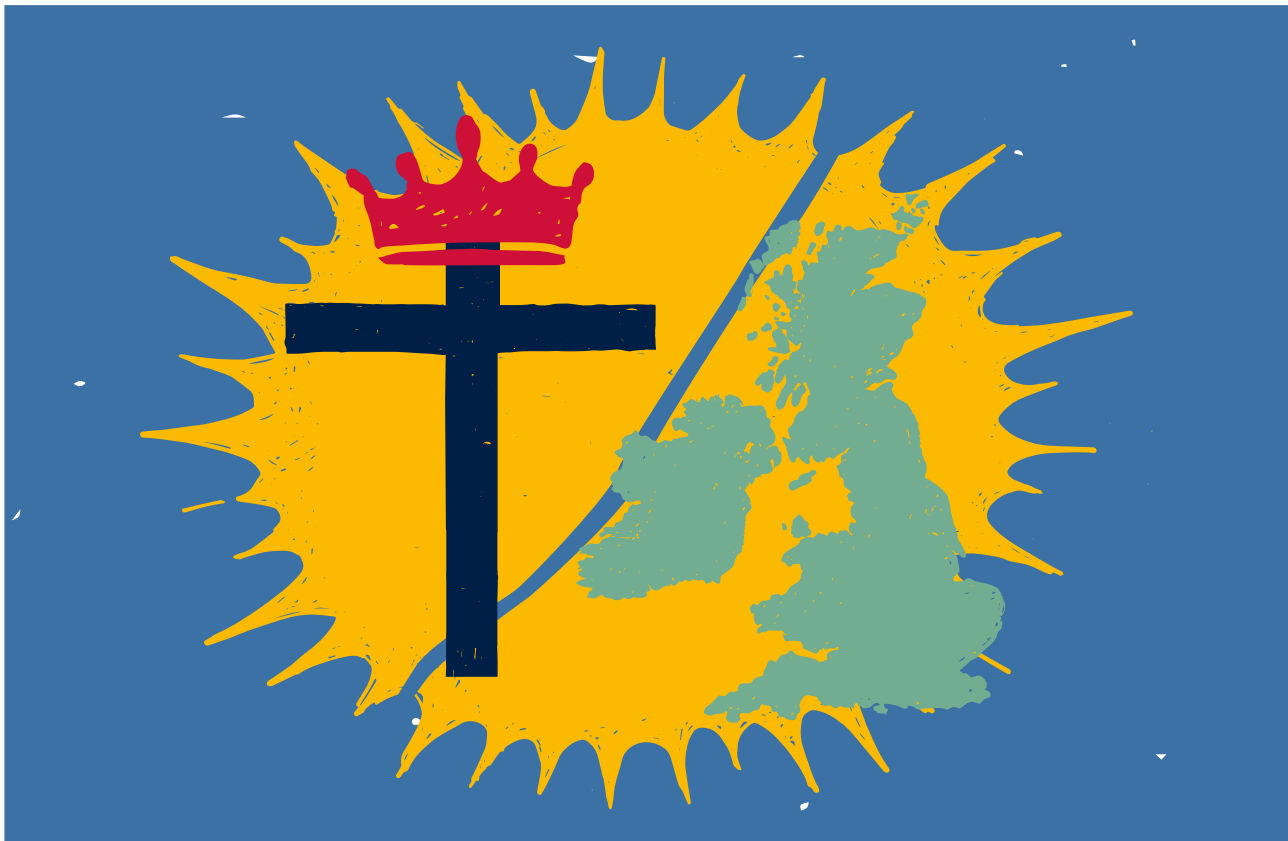
When we hear the 'voice of God' today, it does not sound like a battle cry. It sounds like the 'voice of the disinherited'. It is the voice of the refugee seeking safety from the bombs falling from the sky. It is the voice of the marginalised within our own pews who have been told they do not belong because they do not fit a specific national or ethnic description.

To hear the voice of the disinherited is to hear the voice of Christ. If we harden our hearts to the immigrant, the poor and the 'other' in the name of protecting a 'Christian nation', we have effectively silenced the very Christ we claim to follow.

### A call to radical listening

We are 'partners of Christ' only if we refuse to return to the old, familiar systems of tribalism. True faith is the audacious belief that God's Kingdom is larger than any border and more inclusive than any earthly citizenship.

We must sharpen our ears to a different frequency. We must listen to the screams from the rubble and the whispers from the shadows. Our commitment to Christ requires us to reject the status quo of 'fantasy nationalism' and instead pursue a beloved community where the friction of inequality is finally removed.



***‘Our commitment to Christ requires us to reject the status quo of ‘fantasy nationalism’ and instead pursue a beloved community where the friction of inequality is finally removed.’***

Today, if you hear his voice, calling from the margins, calling from the disinherited, calling you away from the idols of power, do not harden your hearts.

### **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

- Christian Nationalism can be described as a “theology of walls rather than tables”. In Hebrews 4:7 the warning against a hardened heart is linked to the Israelites’ refusal to trust God in the wilderness. How might prioritising national identity lead to a hardening of the heart toward our neighbours?
- The reflection compares contemporary religious nationalism to the Israelites longing for Egypt, preferring ‘predictable cruelty’ over the uncertain freedom of God’s Kingdom. How can we discern the difference between a genuine desire for God’s righteousness and a nostalgic desire for systemic dominance?
- The reflection suggests that the voice of God often sounds like the voice of the disinherited rather than a national battle cry. What practical steps could our churches take to listen more closely to those on the margins?
- How does this study help us understand the difference between loving our country and placing ultimate loyalty in the Kingdom of God? In what ways might Christians need to examine whether their deepest allegiance is to Christ’s Kingdom or to the identity, power or interests of a nation?

### **PRAYER**

**God of every nation and every people,  
You call us into a Kingdom that is wider than borders and deeper than any earthly allegiance.**

**Guard our hearts from the temptation to place nation, power or identity above your call.**

**Give us the courage to listen to your voice, especially when it speaks from the margins.**

**Teach us to love our neighbours across every boundary and to live as faithful citizens of your Kingdom.**

**Through Jesus Christ our Lord.**

**Amen.**

# 2. God's Kingdom, not ours:

RETHINKING NATIONHOOD  
IN THE STORY OF GOD

CALLAN SLIPPER



## INTRODUCTION

This study invites us to reflect on from where our deepest sense of belonging comes. Many people naturally think about identity in terms of nation, culture, or background. Yet the New Testament points us to something larger. The passage below from Colossians helps us explore how Christians understand belonging through Christ and the Kingdom of God, and how this shapes the way we think about nationhood.

This passage from Colossians 1:15–24 opens to our gaze the mystery of Christ, who exists before time began, in his divine-human relationship with the cosmos and with sinful humanity.

### BIBLE PASSAGE

#### Colossians 1:15–24

He [Christ] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his Cross.

And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him— provided that you continue securely established and steadfast in the faith, without shifting from the hope promised by the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven. I, Paul, became a servant of this gospel.

I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church.

## REFLECTION

This poetic and beautiful passage is of enormous spiritual depth, but it also has enormous social and political implications. It is contemplation that leads to action, spurring us to rethink nationhood.

A key point is the concept of *pleroma*, the 'fullness' referred to in verse 19. It is unfortunate that most English translations interpolate 'of God', words absent in the Greek. This limits the *pleroma* to the 'fullness of God'. Adding 'of God' is not without merit, however; later the epistle affirms that 'the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily' in Christ (Col. 2:9). The same thought is implicit when the passage states that Jesus Christ is the *eikon* ('image') of the invisible God (Col. 1:15).

The problem is that limiting *pleroma* to the identity of Christ as divine misses the richness of the role of Christ in the cosmos. He is also the fullness in or by whom 'all things hold together' (v. 17). Christ is the lynchpin of the whole of reality: uncreated and created.

Shockingly perhaps, this fullness truly has no limits. It reaches even those at enmity with God, 'who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds' (v. 21). In the scandal of the Cross, God reconciles 'to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven' (v. 20). The same logic of holding things together, reconciling what is disparate, diverse, or different, is at work in the logic of salvation. In the crucified Christ everything, divine and creaturely and that which is opposed to both, is present in a transformative manner that reconciles humans among themselves and makes them 'holy and blameless and irreproachable' (v. 22) before God.

The exceptional beauty of this vision makes a claim upon us. This includes, but is not restricted by, the need to live up to the new human condition brought about by the Cross. This ethical imperative is achieved primarily by human persons remaining 'established and steadfast in the faith' (v. 23), and certainly not by any human merit, including belonging to any nation, whatever the splendour of its religious or cultural heritage (that is, in New Testament terms, whether Jewish or Greek). The transformation is God's gift.

What is more, it is not only given to the individual, vital as this is, but its nature is essentially communitarian, reaching out as the *pleroma* to reconcile the whole of the cosmos. For Christ is 'the head of the body, the church',



‘the beginning, the firstborn from the dead’ (v. 18). This is the current condition of Christians. The risen and glorified Lord is present and at work in them as members of his body, the church. Christ has become their point of belonging, the one who defines their customs and lifestyle: he is their nation.

Each member of the body of Christ is called, in a unique and specific way, to serve the Gospel as it goes out to all creation, living in conformity with Christ crucified. Each member of the body of Christ, furthermore, lives in the Christian community where the risen and glorified Lord dwells and works among and through them in the world.

This is history’s endpoint breaking into the here and now. God’s action from Abraham, through Moses, via the Kings and prophets leads to this climax: Jesus, in whom the *pleroma* is pleased to dwell, where all things come together and the dark tides of history are transformed. The followers of Christ, bearing a new collective identity in Christ to the world, are called to experience and to serve this transformation. It cannot be confined to any earthly nation. As Philippians declares, ‘our citizenship is in heaven’ (Phil 3:20).

This new nationhood, in the *pleroma* of Christ, is the Christian gift, a gift both received and offered. As the Second Century *Letter to Diognetus* says, while Christians ‘are distinguished from other human beings neither by country, nor language, nor customs observed’ yet ‘What the soul is in the body, that are Christians in the world.’ They form a heavenly commonwealth nourishing earthly nations via their mission of service expressed, above all, through the proclamation of the Gospel in word and deed. To the extent that the light of the Gospel is incarnated in human history through God at work in Christian love, the Christian ‘nationality’ renews the nations.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What difference does Christ as the *pleroma*, the fullness that draws and holds all things together, make to our understanding of Christian action in the world politically, socially, and environmentally?
- If our true nationhood is defined by our heavenly citizenship, how does that affect our relationship and our work within the earthly nations where we are called to dwell?
- What difference does such an application of the Cross in the here and now make to our lives personally, within the Christian community, and in our service of our sisters and brothers in the world?

## PRAYER

Lord Jesus Christ,

We praise you for the wonder of knowing you as the One who holds all things together

For your breathtaking love which through the Cross has drawn us to you and into the fullness you are.

By your Holy Spirit, may we learn how to love all your marvellous creation and especially how to appreciate each of our sisters and brothers.

May we build a world worthy of your infinite love, to the glory of God the Father.

Amen.

# 3.

## The unseen battle:

POWERS, PRINCIPALITIES,  
AND THE PULL OF IDEOLOGY,  
A CATHOLIC PERSPECTIVE

GEMMA SIMMONDS



## INTRODUCTION

In the introductory title of his *Spiritual Exercises* St. Ignatius of Loyola writes that the exercises

‘Have as their purpose the conquest of self and the regulation of one’s life in such a way that no decision is made under the influence of any inordinate attachment’. (Sp. Exx. 21)

The Exercises unfold as a series of meditations on the Scriptures, facilitating a personal encounter between the person praying and Jesus, an encounter as transformative as were the original encounters we read about in the Gospels. There are also several set-piece meditations or scenarios that the one praying is encouraged to imagine prayerfully as part of the process of being freed from ‘inordinate attachments’ through God’s liberating grace.

Perhaps the most important and dramatic of these is the *Meditation on the Two Standards* (Sp. Exx. 136–148). As a former soldier, Ignatius before his conversion had dreamed of a life of daring conquest. He had fought in battle, so it came naturally to imagine personal and collective sin in terms of the choice whether to fight under the battle standard of Christ or of Satan.

He presents an apocalyptic vision of the spiritual forces of the ‘powers and principalities’ of this world and the means they use to draw people into conflicts motivated by inordinate attachments or compulsive drives and appetites. Satan goads his demons on to lay snares for people, binding them in chains by inducing them to covet riches, empty honours and ego-driven self-aggrandisement.

Contrary to this, Christ’s tactics are to attract his followers to imitate him in poverty both spiritual and physical and in suffering insults and contempt as he did. This will lead them to the humility of the Suffering Servant, ‘despised and rejected’, whose yoke leads to freedom rather than slavery and whose burden is light (cf. Is. 53:3; Mt. 11:30).

### BIBLE PASSAGE

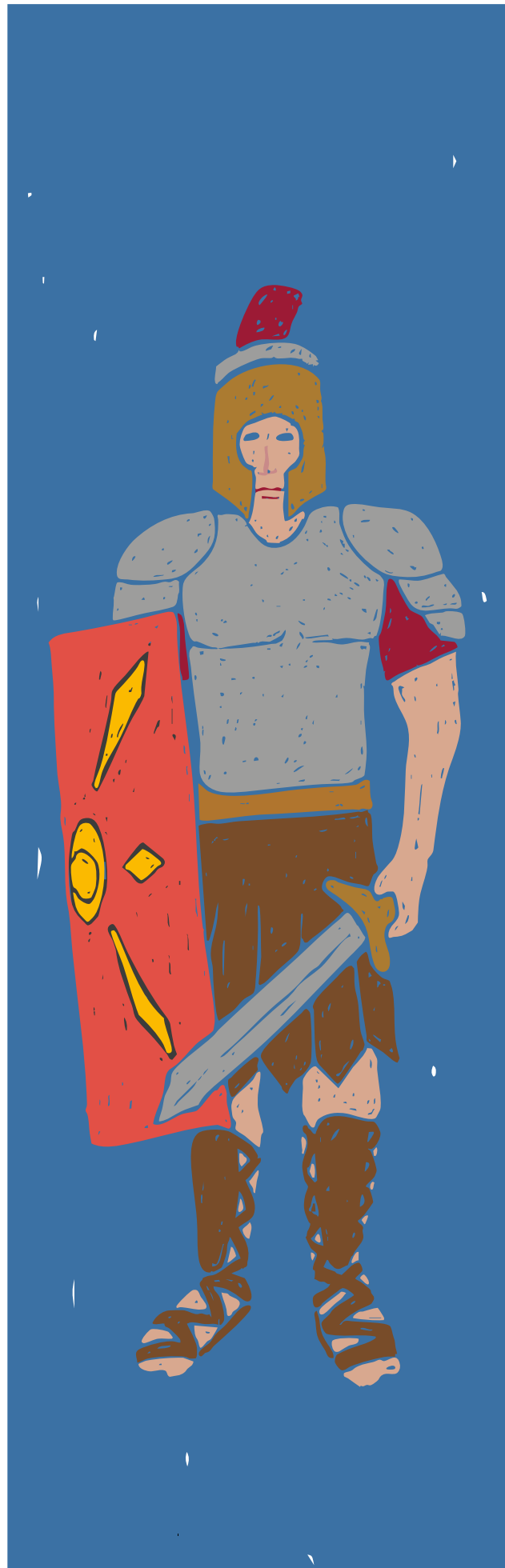
**Ephesians 6:11**

Put on the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.

## REFLECTION

The military imagery reminds us of the spiritual forces that lie behind the conflicts of our present day.

They operate within addictive or compulsive obsession with prestige, personal or corporate wealth and unbridled power for which individuals, corporations and



entire countries become willing to fight to the death. They foster aggression by sowing division, fear and blind prejudice so that we no longer view others as fellow human beings to be respected and cherished but as obstacles to our security and prosperity.

The Scriptures remind us that the responses of nationalism, racism and sectarian violence that result from these obsessions are not merely political or ideological reactions that can be dealt with by conquest or changes in policy. At root is a deeply spiritual issue that calls believers to respond with prayer, discernment, and prophetic courage.

Aggression towards migrants or those judged as 'other' in a morally deviant or ethnically dangerous sense may have its roots in social, economic or political marginalisation. Europe in the 1930s taught the world bitter lessons in how being sidelined within society can lead to resentments that prove an apt breeding ground for ideologies fostering exclusion and of bogus superiority.

The author of Ephesians lists the armour and weapons of Christ as truth, righteousness, readiness to proclaim the Gospel of peace, faith, the 'helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God'.

In a time of constant fake news which stokes fear, hostility towards others and belief in self-proclaimed saviours, these are vital weapons for fighting the good fight both within us and within wider society.

We don't proclaim the Gospel of peace so much by what we say as by how we are who we are. Prayer is not a substitute for critical thinking and for making the constant effort to be well-informed but meditating on God's word and making it our own shows us whatever is compulsive within us and within society as a whole.

It reveals whatever causes us to crave consumption over generosity, prestige over self-awareness and power over service of others. When we encounter Jesus in prayer, we see ourselves and the society we have built as in a mirror of truth.

It is such an encounter that made an honest man out of Matthew, a trusting man out of Thomas, gave inner freedom to Mary Magdalene and the Samaritan woman and humility to the Roman centurion. For us and for the burning issues of our times, this is where transformation begins.

***We don't proclaim the Gospel of peace so much by what we say as by how we are who we are.***

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What do you understand by inordinate attachments as described here, both within yourself and within society today?
- How might imaginative contemplation of the scriptures help to bring about a transformative encounter with Jesus?
- How might prayer, discernment, and prophetic courage help us as individuals or churches to proclaim the Gospel to today's world?
- This resource invites Christians to reflect on the theme Kingdom over Nation. How might recognising the spiritual forces behind fear, division and ideology help Christians resist forms of nationalism or identity that compete with our loyalty to Christ and his Kingdom?

## PRAYER

Lord Jesus, you came among us as the suffering servant,

Willing to give your life for the salvation of the world.

Help us to stand firm against all that is false

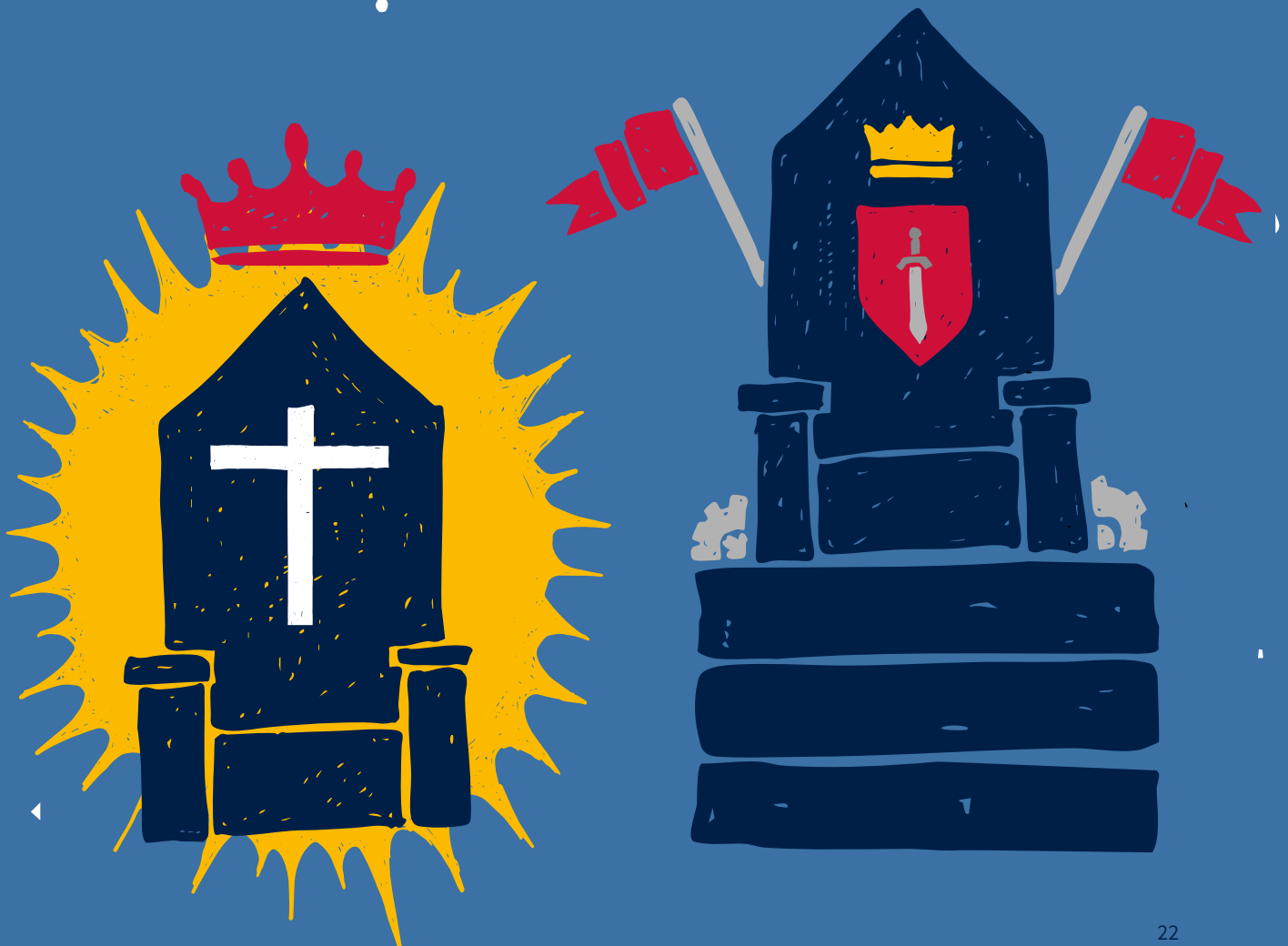
As instruments of peace and reconciliation in your name.

Amen.



# 4. Beastly Powers, Empires and the Kingdom That Endures

HELEN PAYNTER



## INTRODUCTION

Many of us love the book of Daniel or, at least, parts of it! But we may stop reading after the first few chapters because things get a bit weird, and we don't know what to do with it. Daniel 7 is one of the most important chapters in the Old Testament, and one of the least well-known. But Jesus refers to it continually, and it offers some highly pertinent challenges to current national (and international) events. Let's dig in...

### BIBLE PASSAGE

#### Daniel 7

In the first year of King Belshazzar of Babylon, Daniel had a dream and visions of his head as he lay in bed. Then he wrote down the dream: I, Daniel, saw in my vision by night the four winds of heaven stirring up the great sea, and four great beasts came up out of the sea, different from one another. The first was like a lion and had eagles' wings. Then, as I watched, its wings were plucked off, and it was lifted up from the ground and made to stand on two feet like a human being; and a human mind was given to it. Another beast appeared, a second one, that looked like a bear. It was raised up on one side, had three tusks in its mouth among its teeth and was told, 'Arise, devour many bodies!' After this, as I watched, another appeared, like a leopard. The beast had four wings of a bird on its back and four heads; and dominion was given to it. After this I saw in the visions by night a fourth beast, terrifying and dreadful and exceedingly strong. It had great iron teeth and was devouring, breaking in pieces, and stamping what was left with its feet. It was different from all the beasts that preceded it, and it had ten horns. I was considering the horns, when another horn appeared, a little one coming up among them; to make room for it, three of the earlier horns were plucked up by the roots. There were eyes like human eyes in this horn, and a mouth speaking arrogantly.

As I watched,  
 thrones were set in place,  
 and an Ancient One took his throne;  
 his clothing was white as snow,  
 and the hair of his head like pure wool;  
 his throne was fiery flames,  
 and its wheels were burning fire.  
 A stream of fire issued  
 and flowed out from his presence.  
 A thousand thousand served him,  
 and ten thousand times ten thousand stood attending him.  
 The court sat in judgement,  
 and the books were opened.

I watched then because of the noise of the arrogant words that the horn was speaking. And as I watched, the beast was put to death, and its body destroyed and given over to be burned with fire. As for the rest of the beasts, their dominion was taken away, but their lives were prolonged for a season and a time. As I watched in the night visions,

I saw one like a human being  
 coming with the clouds of heaven.  
 And he came to the Ancient One  
 and was presented before him.  
 To him was given dominion  
 and glory and kingship,  
 that all peoples, nations, and languages  
 should serve him.  
 His dominion is an everlasting dominion  
 that shall not pass away,  
 and his kingship is one  
 that shall never be destroyed.

As for me, Daniel, my spirit was troubled within me, and the visions of my head terrified me. I approached one of the attendants to ask him the truth concerning all this. So he said that he would disclose to me the interpretation of the matter: 'As for these four great beasts, four kings shall arise out of the earth. But the holy ones of the Most High shall receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom for ever—for ever and ever.'

Then I desired to know the truth concerning the fourth beast, which was different from all the rest, exceedingly terrifying, with its teeth of iron and claws of bronze, and which devoured and broke in pieces, and stamped what was left with its feet; and concerning the ten horns that were on its head, and concerning the other horn that came up, and to make room for which three of them fell out—the horn that had eyes and a mouth that spoke arrogantly, and that seemed greater than the others. As I looked, this horn made war with the holy ones and was prevailing over them, until the Ancient One came; then judgement was given for the holy ones of the Most High, and the time arrived when the holy ones gained possession of the kingdom.

This is what he said:

'As for the fourth beast,  
there shall be a fourth kingdom on earth  
that shall be different from all the other kingdoms;  
it shall devour the whole earth,  
and trample it down, and break it to pieces.  
As for the ten horns,  
out of this kingdom ten kings shall arise,  
and another shall arise after them.  
This one shall be different from the former ones,  
and shall put down three kings.  
He shall speak words against the Most High,  
shall wear out the holy ones of the Most High,  
and shall attempt to change the sacred seasons and the law;  
and they shall be given into his power  
for a time, two times, and half a time.  
Then the court shall sit in judgement,  
and his dominion shall be taken away,  
to be consumed and totally destroyed.  
The kingship and dominion  
and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven  
shall be given to the people of the holy ones of the Most High;  
their kingdom shall be an everlasting kingdom,  
and all dominions shall serve and obey them.'

Here the account ends. As for me, Daniel, my thoughts greatly terrified me, and my face turned pale; but I kept the matter in my mind.

## REFLECTION

The Jew whose name was Daniel occupies an interesting and quite ambiguous position, serving as he does in the royal court of not one, but two, expansionist and oppressive empires. It is worth reading the whole book with this in mind. To what extent does he successfully resist co-option to the brutal and idolatrous masters that he serves? Chapters 1, 5 and 6 are high moments, but his mysterious absence in chapter 3, and his failure to protest when King Nebuchadnezzar appears to offer him worship in 2:46, are more troubling.

But chapter 7 reflects nothing of that ambiguous relationship with power. In fact, it contains a bold, subversive message which might have got him thrown back to the lions.

Daniel's vision in verses 1–8 feels mysterious, perhaps. But it is explained further in verses 15–28. Each of these beasts represents a 'king', that is, the ruler of a great empire. Scholars debate which ones are in view, probably Babylon, Persia, Greece and Rome, but the precise details need not detain us. In fact, we can group the beasts together, because they stand to teach us something about all great leaders throughout history.

Notice how they are described, in this florid literary genre. In fact, you might like to look up some images of how artists have attempted to represent them. None of them looks like any beast that we would recognise. They are like

Frankenstein's monster, a sort of hideous mish-mash of ill-matched teeth and claws and wings. Much worse, though, they have pretensions to be human. One gets propped up on its back legs like a man (v.4); another is described as having 'dominion' (v.6), which is a role that properly belongs to humanity (see Gen 1:28).

And these beasts act in monstrous ways. They tear and crush and destroy (vv.7, 23); they boast (vv.8, 20); and they utter blasphemy (v.25).

But then, suddenly, the scene switches. If this were a drama, the background music would be completely different. Because now, 'thrones were set in place, and the Ancient of Days took his throne'. Here is a great vision of God enthroned in majesty and enacting judgment; the one whose reign brings about the end of the beasts (vv.10-11; 26-27). But, wait... thrones plural...? How can this be?

Daniel continues to watch (v.7): "There before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence." (Daniel 7:13)

The phrase 'son of man', in this setting, is simply an idiom for human. (It's no coincidence that Jesus refers to himself in this way, again and again, but that's because he is pointing back to this chapter to show his listeners who he is.)

So, what Daniel is seeing is the unprecedented vision of a human in heaven. And, what's more, to this human 'was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshipped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his Kingdom is one that will never be destroyed' (v.14). Dominion, there's that word again.

This chapter is not a 'game of two halves', a weird half and a glorious half. It's a beautifully balanced piece of writing, pointing to the Human who shares a throne with the Ancient of Days, the true Human whom all people will worship. But it does this by showcasing and exposing the blasphemous pretensions of all the bestial empires that the world has ever known.

They are, in the imagery Daniel is using, less than fully human. Their hideous appearance attests to the hideous character of their reign. The dominion they exercise is violent and oppressive. Their claim to authority is arrogant. They are usurpers because only the One True Human can authentically and faithfully hold and administer the dominion which is the Father's gift and charge to humanity.

This is not the Bible's only teaching about human power. It needs to be held alongside Romans 13, for example, where Paul teaches that human authorities are set in place by God to restrain evil and punish wrongdoing.

***'No leader, political party, or ideology can save us. Only the Son of Man can do that.'***

But we should not read Paul's words as an uncritical endorsement of all human systems of government, or of all human leaders.

Daniel here teaches us to look at all human power with scepticism. All human systems will drift towards making claims that are beyond their remit. All human exercise of power will become bestial if it is not held in check and held to account. All confidence in human systems of power will become idolatrous if it is not held in the light of Daniel's great expose.

Ultimately, the claim of no political system should be ultimate for us. God will bring them all to an end. And no leader, political party, or ideology can save us. Only the Son of Man can do that.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Where do we see the blasphemous claim of ultimate power at work in the governments of the world today? Where do we hear the quieter whispers that lead in the same direction?
- Do we experience the temptation to put too much confidence in political systems, leaders or ideologies? How can we resist these temptations, and help those in our congregations, etc, to do the same?
- What is the character of the Son of Man's Kingdom? How does it grow? (You may like to refer to Jesus's parables of the Kingdom to enrich your discussion here.)

## PRAYER

**Almighty God, to whom all praise and worship is due,**

**We confess our troubling tendency to put too much trust in our fellow humans.**

**We confess, too, the times when we have not reflected the grace and justice of your Kingdom, in the power that we have exercised.**

**Teach us to live well and wisely among the complex and competing power claims of our day.**

**May our lives and our words point to the servant King, whose Kingdom grows like yeast.**

**Amen.**



## INTRODUCTION

The earliest Christian communities were marked by something radical and unsettling for their time: diversity. They were not gathered around shared ethnicity, class, or national identity, but around faith in Jesus Christ. In the Ephesians 2 passage, Paul names this beautiful truth directly, Christ “has made the two groups one” and created “one new humanity.” This passage speaks powerfully into our present moment, when questions of nationhood, belonging, and identity feel increasingly fraught, both in wider society and within the church.

In these deeply unsettling times globally and nationally, how do we hold a sense of belonging to our nation alongside our deeper citizenship in the Kingdom of God – a Kingdom that does not erase difference, but reconciles it.

***‘In these deeply unsettling times globally and nationally, how do we hold a sense of belonging to our nation alongside our deeper citizenship in the Kingdom of God?’***

### BIBLE PASSAGE

**Ephesians 2:14–18**

For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, so that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the Cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father.

## REFLECTION

### **Kingdom Nationhood and the *Imago Dei***

We are living in a time of deep polarisation. Our culture feels increasingly fragmented, shaped by suspicion and fear around difference, diversity, and belonging. Public discourse has hardened, and national identity is often framed in defensive terms: who belongs, who does not, who is a threat, and who holds power?

Movements and marches associated with figures such as Stephen Yaxley Lennon expose how easily nationalism can slide into grievance, exclusion, and hostility, drawing sharp lines around who is considered truly part of the nation. Recent years have seen an increasing anti-immigrant rhetoric, and the Overton Window (the term for the range of political ideas the public finds acceptable at a given time) on what is allowed to be said about those considered ‘other’ has shifted. And yet the uncomfortable truth may be that these messages are resonating because some have felt left out, whether those concerns are legitimate or not.

These cultural pressures do not stop at the church door. Christian communities are not immune to the wider suspicion around diversity, inclusion, and belonging. For some, these ideas are viewed as political distractions or cultural compromises, rather than deeply biblical concerns. And yet Scripture consistently calls us to imagine belonging differently, and so often counter-culturally, not as something preserved through exclusion, but as something formed through reconciliation. The Christian story invites us not to build walls to keep those who belong in, but to break down the walls of hostility that it is so easy to build.

Paul’s words speak directly into this cultural and political moment. Writing to a divided community, he does not downplay the depth of hostility between Jews and Gentiles. These divisions were ethnic, religious, cultural, and political. But Paul insists that Christ has not simply improved relations between two opposing sides; he has done something far more radical. In his own body, Christ has broken down ‘the dividing wall of hostility’ and created ‘one new humanity’. This is not unity through sameness, nor peace through domination, but reconciliation forged through self-giving love.

***‘The Christian story invites us not to build walls to keep those who belong in, but to break down the walls of hostility that it is so easy to build.’***



## Beyond Nationhood

This vision should unsettle any Christianity that seeks safety in homogeneity or confuses national identity with faithfulness to God. God loves England, but God is certainly not an Englishman. There is real beauty in loving the place we come from – its stories, landscapes, languages, and communities. As someone who straddles two identities, Nigerian and British, I know what it is to arrive in Nigeria and it feels like home, and fly into Britain and it feels like home. Nationhood can offer a sense of rootedness and shared responsibility. But when nation becomes ultimate, when it begins to define human worth or demand unquestioned loyalty, it drifts into idolatry. The Gospel refuses to allow any earthly identity to outrank our shared belonging in Christ.

***‘The Gospel refuses to allow any earthly identity to outrank our shared belonging in Christ.’***

Genesis 1 grounds this refusal at the very beginning of the biblical story. Humankind is created in the image of God. Before borders, passports, or flags, there was the *imago Dei*. Whatever differences we are encouraged to exaggerate today, whether our race, culture, class, or nationality, Scripture reminds us that we are fundamentally connected. Every person bears the image of a creative, relational, and wonderfully diverse God.

## QUESTIONS

- Does the truth that Christ has broken down the dividing wall of hostility ring true when you search your own heart, or look at your own church?
- How have images or assumptions about God shaped your understanding of belonging and worth?
- What practical steps might help your church more fully reflect the truth that all people are made in the image of God?
- How can you be ambassador of peace in your context?

## PRAYER

Creator God, who made each of us in your image.

We are sorry for the times when we have excluded others and elevated those like us.

Search our hearts and help us commit ourselves to seeing the dividing walls of hostility in our churches and in our communities broken down.

Help us to forge radical spaces of belonging despite difference.

Help us to reflect to our broken world the hope and belonging that is found in you alone.

In Jesus’s name. Amen.

# 6.

# Faithful in the neighbourhood:

## LIVING THE KINGDOM LOCALLY

DORAL HAYES



## INTRODUCTION

The instruction to ‘go and do likewise’ (Luke 10:37) lingers long after the story of the Good Samaritan ends. It is a simple yet deeply challenging response to the question, who is my neighbour?

This story helps us reflect on what it means to live faithfully to Christ’s call to love our neighbour. It reminds us that social divisions are not new, and that today’s challenges around nationalism and identity echo long-standing fractures in society.

The Samaritan was a foreigner, and there was deep prejudice between Jewish and Samaritan communities. Yet his act of mercy shows that God’s love is not defined by class, race, religion or ethnicity, but by how we treat one another. Jesus uses this story to challenge both personal prejudice and the actions of religious communities.

This passage continues to speak into our local contexts today. It calls us to embody mercy and justice, to reflect on where our identity truly lies, and to consider how we, as individuals and churches, extend the love of God to those around us.



## BIBLE PASSAGE

### Luke 10:25-37

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. ‘Teacher,’ he said, ‘what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ He said to him, ‘What is written in the law? What do you read there?’ He answered, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself.’ And he said to him, ‘You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.’

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbour?’ Jesus replied, ‘A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, “Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.” Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?’ He said, ‘The one who showed him mercy.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Go and do likewise.’

## REFLECTION

In this story, Jesus refuses to let mercy remain an abstract virtue or a comfortable sentiment. Instead, mercy is given flesh and movement in the person of the Good Samaritan. They walk the dangerous road, stop when it would be easier not to, risk involvement, and expend time, energy, and resources for the sake of another. Mercy, in this story, is never passive. It is active, costly, and deeply relational.

This challenges many contemporary assumptions. Mercy is often confused with inaction: with being nice and avoiding conflict or quietly letting injustice pass. At times mercy is even framed as the opposite of justice. Yet the Good Samaritan exposes that false dichotomy as mercy and justice walk hand in hand. True mercy notices suffering, refuses to look away, and acts decisively to restore dignity and life. It requires getting our hands dirty, stepping into discomfort, and crossing the boundaries that society has carefully drawn.

But Jesus' words 'Go and do likewise' are not only a call to compassion; they are also an invitation to step into the complex realities of identity as they are lived on the ground. In a world saturated with global conversations about identity — national, cultural, racial, theological, political, and personal—Jesus' command presses us to move beyond abstraction and into relationship. Where identity is not merely debated online, in the media or defined in policy documents; it is encountered face to face, in our neighbourhoods, friendships, and congregations.

The uncomfortable truth is that most of us can recognise ourselves somewhere in this story, not only in the Samaritan but if we are honest also in the priest or the Levite who pass by on the other side. There are moments when busyness, fear, exhaustion, prejudice, or our own unhealed pain dull our awareness of the wounded lying in our path. We justify our silence and our haste, yet the Gospel does not allow us to do this lightly. It calls us to repentance not as self-condemnation, but as a renewed attentiveness to those on the fringes of community, those we have missed and those we might yet encounter.

This resonates deeply with how identity is experienced locally today. In our communities and churches, questions of identity are rarely neat or theoretical. They surface in conversations about belonging, inclusion, theology, worship style, culture, and power. They appear in families and friendships strained by difference, in congregations negotiating change, and in communities wrestling with fear or misunderstanding. Jesus' command refuses disengagement and we are called to have opinions about identity, but to show mercy within them.

Mercy does not mean avoiding truth or conflict. The Good Samaritan does not deny the reality of the wounded man's condition; he responds to it. Similarly, engaging with identity faithfully requires honesty, courage, and attentiveness. It asks us to listen deeply to lived experience, particularly where people have been wounded by exclusion, injustice or misunderstanding. It also asks us to recognise our own identities—not only where we feel marginal, but where we hold privilege, power, or have blind spots.

Christian disunity reflects the wider fractures of society. We are often so accustomed to division that it no longer shocks us, even as it undermines our witness. Yet Jesus' prayer 'that they may all be one' links unity directly to Christian witness and credibility: "so that the world may believe" (John 17:21).

On the ground, this unity is seen not as uniformity but relationship—learning to live alongside each other with our differences. Local churches and Churches Together groups bear witness to this not through winning arguments but in shared prayer, worship, and service.

***'When Christians from different traditions come together with humility, they discover that identity and difference need not be a barrier to relationship but a gift to be received.'***

Ecumenical encounter offers a hopeful model for navigating identity locally. When Christians from different traditions come together with humility, they discover that identity and difference need not be a barrier to relationship but a gift to be received. Encountering diverse expressions of faith reveals a God who cannot be contained by any single identity or tradition. Such encounters deepen faith rather than dilute it.

On the ground, this work happens slowly: in conversations over coffee, in shared acts of service, in congregations choosing relationship over isolation. It requires time, trust, and a willingness to be unsettled. Yet this is precisely what 'go and do likewise' demands. As we navigate the global conversation about identity, Jesus calls us to embody mercy locally — to stop, to listen, to forgive and be forgiven, to cross boundaries, and to care. In doing so, we bear witness to a unity rooted not in sameness, but in love, and to a God who meets us each of us on the road between difference and belonging.

## QUESTIONS

- Who do you identify with in the story of the Good Samaritan?
- Who are those on the outside in your local context?
- What are you doing as Churches Together to connect with and show mercy to all in your community and what are the next steps for you to 'go and do likewise'?

## PRAYER

Loving God, thank you for our neighbours.

Help us to care for them as we care for ourselves and see you in the eyes of both stranger and friend.

Give us courage to follow the example of the Good Samaritan, stepping out of our comfort zones to show compassion for others. Especially those who are different and hold different views from us.

Help us to be Christians who witness to unity for the sake of the world you love.

In the name of your Son, Jesus Christ we pray.

Amen.

# 7.

# From Babel to Pentecost:

## GOD'S BLUEPRINT FOR A RECONCILED PEOPLE

RICHARD BRADBURY



## INTRODUCTION

In this study, I want to explore the notion that the Day of Pentecost was, in a very real way, a reversal of the Tower of Babel. The Babel incident resulted in a scattering of the nations through diverse languages. Pentecost signalled the launch of the church (a united body of people from all nations) accompanied with the distribution of languages for the purpose of praising and worshipping.

### BIBLE PASSAGES

#### Genesis 11:1-9

Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. And they said to one another, 'Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly.' And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. Then they said, 'Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.' The Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built. And the Lord said, 'Look, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another's speech.' So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. Therefore it was called Babel, because there the Lord confused the language of all the earth; and from there the Lord scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.

#### Acts 2:1-12

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, 'Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power.' All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, 'What does this mean?'

## REFLECTION

The Tower of Babel story follows directly after the story of origins and the flood narrative and is an explanation of why the various people groups spread out into their own areas, separated by language. This story is important in the context and also theologically.

These pretensions are mercilessly sent up in this story. So far from its top reaching to heaven, it was so low that God could hardly see it but had to come down to find out what humanity was trying to do (11:5, c.f. Isa. 40:22). The name Babel in the Hebrew tongue really means 'confusion' and sounds like 'folly.' According to one Sumerian story everyone would one day speak Sumerian, but Genesis says that God deliberately made people speak different languages so that they could not work together on godless projects that aimed to enter heaven. The derelict ziggurat in Babylon and the multiplicity of languages witness to God's judgement on human sin.

Here the attack on Babylon is open and blatant. It is not the greatest civilisation, nor is it the closest to God; rather its buildings are a reminder that the human race cannot reach heaven on its own but stands under divine judgement. That judgement resulted in a scattering of peoples across the earth. This relates directly to the table of nations in the previous chapter which records the seventy nations known to the Hebrews and shapes in many ways their relationship with these nations as recorded through the remainder of the Old Testament.

The key element of this story is separation as opposed to homogeneity. The human race was no longer united for a common purpose but rather divided so that each nation could be dealt with individually by God. Out of this comes the unique relationship between YHWH and the descendants of Abraham. In this, we see a nation chosen by God and covenanted with God in order to be a 'light to the nations' (Isaiah 42:6).

Unfortunately, Israel comes to believe that God's blessing of them was exclusive. By New Testament times, their hope was that God would restore them as a nation to relive the glory days of the Kingdom established by David and Solomon.

During his ministry, Jesus made it clear that his message of salvation was not just for the Jews, but was to go beyond the borders of the nation. In John's Gospel, Jesus said, 'I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd' (John 10:16). Thus, Jesus established that part of his purpose in coming was not to promulgate the exclusive relationship of God with Israel. Rather, it was to create a new nation, including Israel, based on faith in his completed work – a nation that would be made up of people from all nations in the world. That is why he concluded his ministry according to Matthew with the word, 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations...' (Matthew 28:19).

This brings us to the Day of Pentecost passage from Acts. From a Pentecostal perspective, this is the day when the church (Jesus' new nation) received empowerment to carry out the Great Commission. It was when the Spirit of God came upon the church for witness and when the *pneumatikon* (Spiritual gifts) were released to assist with this witness.

***'Suddenly, the diversity of languages originally intended to scatter humanity became a sign that God was welcoming people from all nations into this new nation.'***

A key element of this outpouring was the *glossolalia* (different languages given supernaturally to those in the Upper Room) through which the individual believers were able to give praise to God. When the people gathered in Jerusalem heard them praising God in their own languages, 'they were amazed and astonished' (Acts 2:7). Suddenly, the diversity of languages originally intended to scatter humanity became a sign that God was welcoming people from all nations into this new nation.

Diverse languages ceased to be a sign of judgement and became a sign of the blessing and anointing of believers.

Through the Cross, resurrection and ascension, the 'promise of the Father' (Acts 1:4; Acts 2:33) was released on the church and the judgement on humanity that came at Babel was undone. Now we welcome people from all nations into this new nation wherever they come from in the world.

## QUESTIONS

- If Babel represents God's judgement on human attempts to reach heaven apart from God, how does Pentecost reshape our understanding of human unity— does it reverse Babel entirely, or redeem diversity without erasing it?
- In what ways might the church today still fall into a 'Babel mindset,' seeking power, security, or divine access through human structures rather than dependence on the Spirit?
- How does the idea of God forming a 'new nation' in Christ challenge modern notions of religious exclusivity, nationalism, or cultural superiority within Christian communities?

## PRAYER

Faithful and sovereign God,

We acknowledge that apart from You, our striving leads only to pride, confusion, and separation.

We thank You that Your judgement is never the final word. Through Abraham, You chose a people not for exclusion, but to be a blessing. Through Jesus Christ, You revealed a Kingdom not built by power or politics, but by the Cross, the resurrection, and obedient faith.

Make us a people shaped not by fear or pride, but by faith in Christ and obedience to His commission.

May we live as citizens of Your new nation, a light to the nations, until all creation joins in Your praise.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

# 8.

## By their fruit you will recognise them:

### DISCERNMENT IN A TIME OF COMPETING VOICES

SHERMARA HOYTE



## INTRODUCTION

We live in a time of many competing and compelling voices. Political leaders speak about the future of nations and public figures invoke faith in debates about identity and belonging. Social media has given platform and accelerated the targeted reach of these voices. AI, its more decorated and advanced cousin, continues to play a key role in amplifying confident claims that can sound persuasive, even spiritual, and has the power to use disinformation as a strategy of political and moral warfare.

For Christians, this raises an important question: how do we recognise what is true? This challenge is not new. The early church also grappled with voices that appeared trustworthy but ultimately led people away from the life Jesus was calling them to live.

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus offers a clear test that still applies today. Rather than judging and accepting 'truth' by confident words or outward appearances, he tells his followers to look at 'the fruit'. Discernment therefore becomes an essential part of Christian discipleship as it calls believers to look beyond rhetoric, grandiose displays and examine the character, behaviour and outcomes that grow from a message or movement.

### BIBLE PASSAGE

#### Matthew 7:15-23

Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will know them by their fruits.

'Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord", will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only one who does the will of my Father in heaven. On that day many will say to me, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?" Then I will declare to them, "I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers.'

## REFLECTION

In this passage, Jesus gives a direct and urgent warning to his followers about deception. He speaks of false prophets, not as obvious enemies of faith, but as those who appear persuasive, respectable and aligned with the people and message of God. They come in sheep's clothing. They look safe. They sound familiar. They may even speak the language of faith. Yet beneath the surface their motives, values and fruit reveal something very different.

The image would have been clear to Jesus' hearers. Sheep represented the flock of God whilst wolves represented hidden danger, forces that exploit, divide and devour from within. Christ's warning reminds us that danger does not always arrive as openly hostile to Christianity and that sometimes it comes clothed in Christian words, sacred imagery and appeals to moral order.

This is why Jesus commands discernment.

Jesus also does not say, 'You will know them by their slogans.'

He then gives a principle that is as necessary now as it was then: 'You will know them by their fruits'. Trees are not known by claims, appearance or branding, but by what they consistently produce and in time, fruit reveals nature. Jesus therefore teaches his followers to examine outcomes, character and consequence rather than being seduced by image or rhetoric.

This is especially important in public life, where we increasingly see political leaders and public figures quote scripture, stand in churches, speak of God, defend 'Christian values', or present themselves as guardians of a Christian nation. Yet none of these things, in themselves, prove faithfulness to Christ. The danger is not limited to politicians alone. Christian leaders can also fall into this trap when closeness to political power begins to replace prophetic distance, and when witness is exchanged for access, influence and a seat at the table rather than faithfulness to the way of the Cross.

***'the church must ask difficult but necessary questions.'***

So, the church must ask difficult but necessary questions.

- Does this leader produce justice, or merely self-interest?
- Does this movement deepen compassion, or stir hostility?
- Does this rhetoric tell the truth, or trade in fear and scapegoating?
- Does it honour the dignity of all people, or divide neighbour from neighbour?
- Does it reflect the humility of Christ, or the pride of power?

These questions are vital in an age where forms of Christian Nationalism seek to merge faith with political identity. But the Kingdom of God is not the property of any nation. Christ is not the mascot of any political movement. The Gospel cannot be reduced to border, tribe, race or party. Whenever Christianity is used to sanctify domination, exclusion or supremacy, believers must discern carefully. Whenever Jesus is invoked to justify contempt for outsiders, or the worship of power, something false is at work.

Jesus intensifies this warning when he says that not everyone who calls him “Lord” will enter the Kingdom of heaven. Some will speak his name publicly and even perform impressive deeds, yet remain unknown to him. This means public displays of religion, visible power and confident declarations are not reliable signs of genuine allegiance to Christ. The true test is fruit.

***The apostle Paul describes the fruit of the Spirit as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22–23).***

Where these qualities are absent, the church must pay attention. Where cruelty is normalised, dishonesty excused, arrogance celebrated and division is rewarded, Christians should not be deceived by religious packaging.

Church leaders have an important responsibility. Teaching scripture includes helping believers grow in wisdom and discernment so they can recognise deception and remain rooted in the character of Christ.

So, Jesus’ words in Matthew 7 come to us with fresh urgency. In a world of competing voices and politicised religion, believers must not be mesmerised by symbolism or seduced by language.

Look deeper. Test the spirit. Examine the fruit because not everything wrapped in Christianity belongs to Christ.



## QUESTIONS

- In Matthew 7 Jesus warns that false prophets may appear in “sheep’s clothing”. What kinds of deception might Christians need to be alert to today?
- Jesus teaches that truth can be recognised by its fruit. What kinds of fruit should Christians expect to see in leaders, movements or messages that truly reflect the Kingdom of God?
- Sometimes political commentators or public figures speak in the name of Christianity. How can Christians discern when faith language reflects the character of Christ and when it is being used for other purposes?

## PRAYER

Lord, help your church to value the gift of discernment.

Help your church not to weaponise discernment, but to embrace this gift to guard, protect and resist the infiltration of every harmful narrative.

We know that the wheat and the tares must grow together, and that we must faithfully navigate the reality that corruption and pollution can arise among us.

We pray that your church will not retreat from public life but be a beacon of hope in a world of division and enmity.

Amen

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