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In recent years theologians have started to look at how the world views of people who live in, and under, empires have affected how the Bible has been interpreted. The Bible was formed, written, and edited in imperial ages - the mighty empires of Assyria, Babylon, Greece, and Rome were the background to all the stories, teaching, poetry, hopes, and despair of the Biblical writers. When the Psalmist sat down and wept by the Rivers of Babylon the Jewish people were formed anew in the crucible of imperial oppression; when Jesus was nailed to the Cross he was executed in the way the Romans dealt with those it held in utter contempt. Biblical writers struggled with the advantages and disadvantages of Empire - good roads and communications meant the Gospel could be spread whilst unimaginable oppression was cruel and anti-Christ.

We still live in empires, but our empires now are harder to see - just as, it is believed, goldfish don't perceive the water in which they live. We have world powers who seek to rule as ruthlessly as their imperial forebears, we have economic systems at least as cruel as the ancient institution of slavery and most Daily Devotion readers live in lands which once ruled much of the globe.

The Biblical writers' experience and critique of Empire has much to teach us now. A series of reflections published by the Daily Devotions project in 2019 is offered now as a small group resource. The reflections were written by two URC ministers, the Rev'd Peter Cruchley, Director of the World Council of Churches' Commission for Mission and Evangelism, and the Rev'd Gethin Rhys, Policy Officer for Cytun - Churches Together in Wales. We hope these studies will help us reflect on the interaction between the ancient Biblical witness in the context of Empire and our own contemporary situation.

*Andy Braunston
Minister for Digital Worship, June 2023*

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Session 1 Babylon is Fallen

Babylon is Fallen

unknown writer from Civil War era. You can hear it sung here

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KW0b1e9e23s>

Hail the year
so long expected.
Hail the day
of full release.
Zion's walls are now erected,
and her watchmen publish peace.
Through our Shiloh's
wide dominion,
hear the trumpet loudly roar:
Babylon is fallen to rise no more.

2 All her merchants
stand in wonder,
'what is this that comes to pass':
murm'ring like the distant thunder,
and crying, "Oh alas, alas."
Swell the sound,
ye kings and nobles,
priest and the people,
rich and poor:
Babylon is fallen to rise no more.

3 Blow the trumpet in Mount Zion,
Christ is come a second time;
ruling with a rod of iron
all who now as foes combine.
Babel's garments we've rejected,
and our fellowship is o'er:
Babylon is fallen to rise no more.

Standing up to the 'all powerful' presence of Empire





Then I saw another angel flying in mid-heaven, with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on the earth — to every nation and tribe and language and people. He said in a loud voice, 'Fear God and give him glory, for the hour of his judgement has come; and worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water.' Then another angel, a second, followed, saying, 'Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great! She has made all nations drink of the wine of the wrath of her fornication.'

Revelation 14: 6 - 8



Babylon has fallen! The author of Revelation makes this claim twice. And yet the writer lived in the midst of the unrivalled pomp and power of Empire and its persecution of any and all who resisted her. Yet within years of this prophetic pronouncement Rome, (Babylon), had indeed fallen. Empire was humbled by the resistant spirit of movements within its colonised lands, movements like the one stirred up by Jesus of Nazareth. Maybe we think Empire has passed and we live in a democratic era. But, the dominating powers of today, present in all dimensions of systems of politics, society, economics and Church, exercise power over us unjustly, like Empire.

So, we hear the text in an era of a different form of Empire announce the good news to a hurting world that Empire has fallen! How can we say Babylon is fallen? We do so because in the face of dominant powers we believe in the ultimate power of God, who is counter-creating in our midst a new heaven and earth, who in the company of peasant girls is working to bring the powerful down from their thrones, (Luke 1: 52)

	<p>We have the witness of the Biblical text to remind and inspire us that Empire has fallen. The claims, powers and blandishments of Empire are empty and bring not blessing but curse. We cannot approach the text other than to realise Empire is behind the text, in the text and in front of the text. The dynamic of God's people in the midst of Empire shapes the drama of both testaments and our interpretations of the text.</p> <p>How can we say Babylon is fallen? By being part of what subverts it, and reveals its shame and charade.</p>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the empires that rule our world today? • What is good and bad about those empires? • Peter says we can subvert empires and reveal their shame and charade. Can you think of ways we might do this?
	<p>Rise up Jesus. Rise up in power to inspire and lead us. Reveal in our midst the world you are creating. May your 'last will be first' Spirit move us to do and believe your word: "Your Kingdom come, O Lord, Your will be done" Amen</p>

Standing up to Empire and the authority of men



After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, ‘He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.’ This is my message for you.” So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them and said, “Greetings!” And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.” While they were going, some of the guard went into the city and told the chief priests everything that had happened. After the priests had assembled with the elders, they devised a plan to give a large sum of money to the soldiers, telling them, “You must say, ‘His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.’ If this comes to the governor’s ears, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble.” So they took the money and did as they were directed. And this story is still told among the Jews to this day.



Matthew 28:1-15

The discovery of the empty tomb by Mary Magdalene and Mary reminds us, that from the early Christian beginnings, the Church is a movement of the disinherited. This text places women as the only witnesses to the empty tomb of Jesus. They made history by becoming the first apostles whose proclamation of good news humiliates and threatens the male authority of religious and political Empire; Caiaphas and Pilate were both implicated in this extrajudicial murder of Jesus.



The earth shook that morning. It shook because women stepped forth as witnesses, as the first apostles to announce God rises up and breaks the power of Empire. The women's testimony challenged male authority, privilege, and status quo. Matthew records the Chief Priests bribing the guards to create strife and hostile rumours around Jesus' death and resurrection. This is done to reinstate their legitimacy to power and undermine the women's testimonies – an effort to discredit and cast doubt against the women. The male disciples are also quick to provide their own witness to confirm what, otherwise, from the women alone would be unbelievable.

But of course the women should be first, this is a further stressing of Jesus's counter-cultural and subversive teachings and ministry. The community he sought to build through his disciples was meant to be the first fruit of this, thus it is called to be a community of all genders, races and classes. Yet, in this passage, we find that it is the women who followed in his ways. They were rebelling against patriarchy. They were proclaiming that women can have power, access and control. They were flipping the script of what women ought to be – submissive, silent and insignificant. And with them in this

	<p>rebellion is Jesus, instigating this new order through the first witnesses he chose.</p>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peter sees the discovery of the empty tomb by two women, who then were the first witnesses of the resurrection as being deeply subversive. Do you agree or disagree – why? • In the URC we are so used to women’s ministry we forget how radical it is (when we think of the world wide Church) and how radical we were in ordaining women long before most other churches did. In what other ways are we radical?
	<p>Rise up Jesus. Rise up in power to inspire and lead us. Reveal in our midst the world you are creating. May your ‘last will be first’ Spirit move us to do and believe your word: “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant” Amen</p>

**Standing up to Empire's claim
that humanity is the centre of the Universe**



‘Do you know when the mountain goats give birth? Do you observe the calving of the deer?

Can you number the months that they fulfil, and do you know the time when they give birth, when they crouch to give birth to their offspring, and are delivered of their young?



‘Is the wild ox willing to serve you? Will it spend the night at your crib? Can you tie it in the furrow with ropes, or will it harrow the valleys after you? Will you depend on it because its strength is great, and will you hand over your labour to it? Do you have faith in it that it will return, and bring your grain to your threshing-floor?


Is it by your wisdom that the hawk soars, and spreads its wings towards the south? Is it at your command that the eagle mounts up and makes its nest on high? It lives on the rock and makes its home in the fastness of the rocky crag. From there it spies the prey; its eyes see it from far away. Its young ones suck up blood; and where the slain are, there it is.

verses from Job 39



“There is no indigenous territory where there aren't minerals. Gold, tin and magnesium are in these lands, especially in the Amazon, the richest area in the world. I'm not getting into this nonsense of defending land for Indians. [indigenous reserves] are an obstacle to agri-business. You can't reduce indigenous land by even a square meter in Brazil”

	<p>So said Jair Bolsonaro, former President of Brasil, in Campo Grande News, April 22, 2015</p> <p>This is the attitude at the heart of Empire when it comes to creation. Creation is a resource to be endlessly exploited. The impact of humanity on our environment has been latterly catastrophic and coincides with industrialisation and the emergence especially of consumerist hyper-capitalist economies. Humanity thinks it is at the centre and top of Creation, that it's resources and life are destined and designated only to service humankind's needs and desires. We live as if we are outside Creation, observing it, othering it, limiting its own agency and unique given-ness.</p> <p>The argument between Job and God hinges in part on the self-reverence of Job, not only because his suffering has made him self-centred, so has his gender, privilege and mind set. As a wealthy, educated land owning male, he had become accustomed to being at the comfortable pinnacle of his society and community.</p> <p>The Bible describes a state of mutuality between the Creator and the Creation, and the joy Creation takes in the Creator, (Ps. 9:1-4; 66:1; 96:11-13; 98:4; 100:1; 150:6). Do you think Creation takes joy in you? Is it glad when you awake and go about your life? Is it relieved when you go to sleep? Will it miss you when you are gone?</p>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is creation joyful about you? What will it miss about you when you're gone? • much of what we need to change is on the imperial level – systems of trade, production and transport rather more than on our own less exulted levels but what changes can we make to save the earth?

	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How would you feel if the changes we need to make mean that those of us in the west need to have less in order for a better distribution of resources?
	<p>Thank you, for revealing, through Jesus your son, that we, like him, are your beloved children, with whom you are well pleased, whatever. Give us, as any father might, or any mother too, such an experience of your love that we will at last believe that we are so loved, as we live our lives being part of your awesome creation. Amen.</p>

Session 2 We Sing A Love That Sets All People Free



We Sing A Love That Sets All People Free

June Tillman. Tune Woodlands "Tell Out My Soul"

We sing a love
that sets all people free,
that blows like wind,
that burns like scorching flame,
enfolds the earth,
springs up like water clear:
come, living love,
live in our hearts today.

2 We sing a love
that seeks another's good,
that longs to serve
and not to count the cost,
a love that, yielding,
finds itself made new:
come, caring love,
live in our hearts today.

3 We sing a love,
unflinching, unafraid
to be itself,
despite another's wrath,
a love that stands
alone and undismayed:
come, strengthening love,
live in our hearts today.

4 We sing a love
that, wandering, will not rest
until it finds its way,
its home, its source,
through joy and sadness
pressing on refreshed:
come, pilgrim love,
live in our hearts today.

5 We sing the Holy Spirit, full of love,
who seeks out scars of ancient bitterness,
brings to our wounds the healing grace of Christ:
come, radiant love, live in our hearts today.

Subverting Empire's claims to say wealth should be rewarded



'For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, "Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents." His master said to him, "Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master." And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, "Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents." His master said to him, "Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master." Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, "Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours." But his master replied, "You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what

was my own with interest. So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”



Matthew 25: 14 – 30

The economy of Empire privileges capital over the needs of people. Current economic wisdom is austerity: cutting taxes, benefits and regulation will result in profit. In such a system account only needs to be made to the shareholder, all of whom are equally invested in a model which believes only in capital profit.

This is a parable about the profit incentive and the prioritising of capital. It is a disturbing parable about Capitalism in our times, which has resulted in the most astonishing wealth inequalities, an economy in which the poor are forcibly exploited and discarded. Resist the temptation to read the text in an Imperial way, in which God must be the master. The Master is one of the Robber Barons of an economic system which places 50% of the world's wealth in the hands of 1% of the world's population. Read Jesus as the servant who was of no use to this Master, the one who exposes the master's ethics who gathers where he does not sow, (sounds like thievery to me). Matthew places this text on the eve of Holy Week, when Jesus will indeed be found to useless to Empire and will be thrown out of the city and wail while he is crucified.

Jesus, our rather useless servant, does not cooperate with the economic system dictated to him. He is not afraid to speak truth to power. The rather useless servant is not



	<p>useful to the Master unlike his more compliant colleagues who are well socialised to this meritocratic system of achievement and profit. It is clear that Jesus was not useful to Pilate or to Caiaphas, both systems would have worked with him if he had worked with them. But Jesus's contrary attitudes to economy, wealth, tax, and power and to worship, discipleship, God and power could not be co-opted to an Imperial model until it was domesticated by a more compliant Church.</p>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What does it feel like to read the parable with Jesus as the man discarded by the master? • Peter holds that the Church tweaked its doctrine and approach to be more compliant to an imperial world – why might it have done this? • Do you think the Church now challenges or supports the economic systems we have?
	<p>Rise up Jesus. Rise up in power to inspire and lead us. Reveal in our midst the world you are creating. May your 'last will be first' Spirit move us to do and believe your word: "No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth" Amen.</p>

Standing up to the racism of Empire

Ruth said, 'Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die — there will I be buried. May the Lord do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!'



When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her. So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem. When they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them; and the women said, 'Is this Naomi?' She said to them, 'Call me no longer Naomi, call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me. I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty; why call me Naomi when the Lord has dealt harshly with me, and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?'

So Naomi returned together with Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, who came back with her from the country of Moab. They came to Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest.

Ruth 1: 16 – 22



Migrants have become easy targets for politicians and the media; the manipulation of tension and suspicion is a smoke screen to prevent the racism of privileged people and systems being unmasked.

"Africa will have ten times as many young people as Europe. If Europe doesn't do anything, they are going to





kick in our door.” Viktor Orban Hungarian Prime Minister—March 15, 2018,

Let’s not forget, the Syrian who comes to us has still his Syria, the Afghan who comes to us has still his Afghanistan [...] But if we lose our Germany, then we have no more home!” Björn Höcke, head of the far-right party Alternative for Germany (AFD)

“Vile discourses of explicit hate and ideologies of racial supremacy have moved from the fringe to the mainstream. Racial, ethnic and religious bigotry fuels human rights violations, including extreme violence against minorities, and against refugees, migrants, stateless persons, and internally displaced, including people of African descent, with a particularly acute effect on women, and sexual and gender diverse populations. This bigotry is unashamed,” said a statement issued by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in March 2018.

The migrations at the heart of the Book of Ruth hinge on the same injustices and tragedies as today. Naomi and her family leave Bethlehem because of famine and leave Israel for Moab as climate refugees. They then return as economic migrants after the deaths of Naomi’s husband and sons. Ruth has to risk prostituting herself for her mother in law. They risk all for their families and become a test of the generosity and justice of their neighbours - like all migrants. But Ruth’s arrival as a migrant into Bethlehem becomes a vital link for the coming of Jesus, not just as his great-great-great grandmother, but because it gives him an ironic claim on a home town which

	<p>the 'heavenly migrant' then escapes because of political violence.</p>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How has migration been used as a weapon in our contemporary politics? • What benefits might migration bring? • Some years ago an asylum charity in Manchester produced a Christmas card with the Holy Family depicted as asylum seekers – how might such an idea change some attitudes?
	<p>Rise up Jesus. Rise up in power to inspire and lead us. Reveal in our midst the world you are creating. May your 'last will be first' Spirit move us to do and believe your word: "many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the heirs of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness" Amen.</p>

Standing up to Empire's claims to say what love looks like

When David had finished speaking to Saul, the soul of Jonathan was bound to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul. Saul took him that day and would not let him return to his father's house. Then Jonathan made a covenant with David, because he loved him as his own soul. Jonathan stripped himself of the robe that he was wearing, and gave it to David, and his armour, and even his sword and his bow and his belt. David went out and was successful wherever Saul sent him; as a result, Saul set him over the army. And all the people, even the servants of Saul, approved.

...



Then Saul's anger was kindled against Jonathan. He said to him, 'You son of a perverse, rebellious woman! Do I not know that you have chosen the son of Jesse to your own shame, and to the shame of your mother's nakedness? For as long as the son of Jesse lives upon the earth, neither you nor your kingdom shall be established. Now send and bring him to me, for he shall surely die.' Then Jonathan answered his father Saul, 'Why should he be put to death? What has he done?' But Saul threw his spear at him to strike him; so Jonathan knew that it was the decision of his father to put David to death. Jonathan rose from the table in fierce anger and ate no food on the second day of the month, for he was grieved for David, and because his father had disgraced him.

In the morning Jonathan went out into the field to the appointment with David, and with him was a little boy. He said to the boy, 'Run and find the arrows that I shoot.' As the boy ran, he shot an arrow beyond him. When the boy came to the place where Jonathan's arrow had fallen, Jonathan called after the boy and said, 'Is the arrow not beyond you?'

Jonathan called after the boy, 'Hurry, be quick, do not linger.' So Jonathan's boy gathered up the arrows and came to his master. But the boy knew nothing; only Jonathan and David knew the arrangement. Jonathan gave his weapons to the boy and said to him, 'Go and carry them to the city.' As soon as the boy had gone, David rose from beside the stone heap and prostrated himself with his face to the ground. He bowed three times, and they kissed each other, and wept with each other; David wept the more. Then Jonathan said to David, 'Go in peace, since both of us have sworn in the name of the Lord, saying, "The Lord shall be between me and you, and between my descendants and your descendants, for ever."' He got up and left; and Jonathan went into the city.

...

Saul and Jonathan, beloved and lovely! In life and in death they were not divided; they were swifter than eagles, they were stronger than lions. O daughters of Israel, weep over Saul, who clothed you with crimson, in luxury, who put ornaments of gold on your apparel. How the mighty have fallen in the midst of the battle! Jonathan lies slain upon your high places. I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan; greatly beloved were you to me; your love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women. How the mighty have fallen, and the weapons of war perished!

1 Sam 18: 1 – 5, 20: 30 – 42, 2 Sam 1: 23 – 27

Empire makes its claims not only on 'land' but also on 'being'. It occupies the personal as well as the public space, and demonises minorities it sees as 'abnormal' or subversive of its power and norms. It also co-opts the majority to its values and attitudes. The Church has become deeply complicit in occupying bodies and souls. There can be nothing more Imperial than denying the realities,




complexities and relationships of other: My theology says you cannot be gay so you must not be gay etc. These supposed faith affirmations tie up with and feed into repressive and violent policies, like those in Tanzania and elsewhere around the world.

Religious powers are organising against LGBTQ people and their human rights. Sacred texts are marshalled to terrorise and to justify oppression while other texts are silenced. This is to use the text in Imperial ways, because we do not own the text or its many meanings. It is easy to dehumanise our opponents in the midst of this issue in churches at the moment, yet this will always result in sin and separation, and especially the sin and separation of homophobia.

The way of Jesus is subversive and counter-imperial, and so is queer. David and Jonathan's love is queer because it is homoerotic and subversive. It is queer because those like Saul, Jonathan's father and Israel's king, saw this relationship as a threat and wanted David dead. Saul was the very embodiment of Imperial and patriarchal power and intolerance, so any reading of this text has to be in opposition to this. Thus, Jonathan and David, in their love for each other, embody the counter loving alternative to the repression, control and order of Empire and Patriarchy. This counter love is queer, and it deeply and powerfully resembles God's counter love, which is queerest of all.



- Peter uses the term “queer” to mean “disruptive”, “not the normal or expected” and, in this way Jonathan and David's love was certainly queer! Saul became very jealous – maybe he thought David was inveigling his way into the royal family (he ended up king after all) and maybe he wondered if David was a safe person for

	<p>Jonathan, the crown prince, to love – David, after all had a murky love life. Why do religious traditions seek to control and regulate love and physical expression of that love?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uganda has recently (2023) passed a law which includes a provision for the execution of lgbt people; politicians there have been funded by right wing religious extremists in America; both the Anglican and Catholic church there, and in other African countries, have approved these repressive measures. Why should lgbt people be Christian given how the Church so often treats them?
	<p>Rise up Jesus. Rise up in power to inspire and lead us. Reveal in our midst the world you are creating. May your 'last will be first' Spirit move us to do and believe your word: "Let he, who is without sin, cast the first stone." Amen.</p>

Session 3 O God of Earth and Altar

O God of Earth and Altar

G K Chesterton Tune: King's Lynn – it's in Rejoice and Sing but can be heard here:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wFG-CqYXyOo>

O God of earth and altar,
bow down and hear our cry,
our earthly rulers falter,
our people drift and die;
the walls of gold entomb us,
the swords of scorn divide,
take not thy thunder from us,
but take away our pride.

2 From all that terror teaches,
from lies of tongue and pen,
from all the easy speeches
that comfort cruel men,
from sale and profanation
of honour and the sword,
from sleep and from damnation,
deliver us, good Lord!

3 Tie in a living tether the prince and priest and thrall,
bind all our lives together, smite us and save us all;
in ire and exultation aflame with faith, and free,
lift up a living nation, a single sword to thee.

Reminding Empire of Suffering



Praise the Lord!
Praise the Lord, O my soul!
I will praise the Lord as long as I live;
I will sing praises to my God all my life long.
Do not put your trust in princes,
in mortals, in whom there is no help.
When their breath departs, they return to the earth;
on that very day their plans perish.
Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob,
whose hope is in the Lord their God,
who made heaven and earth,
the sea, and all that is in them;

who keeps faith for ever;
who executes justice for the oppressed;
who gives food to the hungry.
The Lord sets the prisoners free;
the Lord opens the eyes of the blind.
The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down;
the Lord loves the righteous.
The Lord watches over the strangers;
he upholds the orphan and the widow,
but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.
The Lord will reign for ever,
your God, O Zion, for all generations.
Praise the Lord!



Psalm 146



Gethin writes: my Old Testament tutor in Birmingham University, John Eaton, believed that many of the Psalms were written for liturgical use in the Temple in Jerusalem. These were services where the King of Israel would be present, most especially a kind of annual rededication ceremony.

This interpretation of the Psalms has not found universal favour, but it is interesting to read this Psalm as if it were true. Just imagine the king sitting there in all his pomp and glory and hearing – or perhaps even himself chanting – “Do not put your trust in princes, in mortals, in whom there is no help.” I wonder how many contemporary world leaders would be willing to subject themselves to such a ceremony even once, never mind annually?

I have been once in my ministry a Mayor’s Chaplain in a local authority. Part of the duty of such a chaplain is to attend a banquet put on by the mayor to which the mayors and leaders of neighbouring authorities, the High

	<p>Sheriff and Lord Lieutenant and other such dignitaries are invited. I was put on the top table and asked to say grace. The prayer, which we shall use ourselves a little later on, was for all those employed by the local authority who provided food and drink for those citizens who really needed it. I said the prayer and after the Amen there was a deathly silence. These powerful people, being treated to free food and wine at the taxpayers' expense, did not wish to be reminded of such people at that moment. It took a while – and the consumption of the first bottle or two of wine - for anyone on my table to speak to me. I have not been asked to be Mayor's Chaplain since.</p>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The rich don't like being reminded they are rich; just as King Charles I didn't like the radical slogan "No King but Jesus!" How might the Church speak truth to power today? • The underlying implication of these studies is that whilst there is much spirituality in Christianity it's not just a spiritual faith – instead we're called to change the world. Does this make you comfortable or uncomfortable – why?
	<p>Loving God, who gives food to the hungry, as we eat and drink today, we pray for those serving and eating meals on wheels, school breakfasts and lunches, for our elderly and disabled neighbours eating meals in day centres and residential homes, and those at food banks throughout our area. May we never forget our responsibility to all those who today rely on public service and on private charity for their food and drink. Amen.</p>

Women Undermining Empire



Then the daughters of Zelophehad came forward. Zelophehad was son of Hephher son of Gilead son of Machir son of Manasseh son of Joseph, a member of the Manassite clans. The names of his daughters were: Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah. They stood before Moses, Eleazar the priest, the leaders, and all the congregation, at the entrance of the tent of meeting, and they said, 'Our father died in the wilderness; he was not among the company of those who gathered themselves together against the Lord in the company of Korah, but died for his own sin; and he had no sons. Why should the name of our father be taken away from his clan because he had no son? Give to us a possession among our father's brothers.'

Moses brought their case before the Lord. And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying: The daughters of Zelophehad are right in what they are saying; you shall indeed let them possess an inheritance among their father's brothers and pass the inheritance of their father on to them. You shall also say to the Israelites, 'If a man dies, and has no son, then you shall pass his inheritance on to his daughter. If he has no daughter, then you shall give his inheritance to his brothers. If he has no brothers, then you shall give his inheritance to his father's brothers. And if his father has no brothers, then you shall give his inheritance to the nearest kinsman of his clan, and he shall possess it. It shall be for the Israelites a statute and ordinance, as the Lord commanded Moses.'

Numbers 27: 1 – 11





The Israelites learned that the rule of law matters. This fascinating case, however, also shows that law cannot be too rigid. Even the best lawmaker (God Himself) cannot foresee all eventualities.

Judges need to have the wisdom to interpret the law and adapt it to new circumstances. This is what Moses does. The reinterpretation is radical, giving women inheritance rights (in some circumstances). This case law needed to be retold because it goes against the way that men have thought through the ages. It is within living memory in the UK that the man was the head of the household, expected to fill in the tax return and so on. As an Inland Revenue employee said to my aunt, “Why don’t you ask your husband to help you?” As she said to him, “It’s no use asking him. He can’t count.”

Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah stand up for their rights against the male dominated empire (and even in the wilderness the men of Israel were empire-building). The women’s protest is assertive, clear – yet respectful. Although some suffragettes did turn to violence after a generation of frustration, other female protestors are notable for their peaceful yet forceful methods. Women tend not to riot, but to stage vigils and witness silently to oppression. The Women in Black show the force of women against empires. <http://womeninblack.org/vigils-around-the-world/>

One of the greatest signs of hope today is that so many of the leaders of *Extinction Rebellion* are women. The crisis we face and the indifference of the political and business empires run by the men in power are so great that we men might well be tempted to violent protest. We need to allow women to take the lead – they are far more likely to save us

	<p>all from the apparently irresistible power of fossil fuelled empire.</p>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What changes in the rights and status of women have you seen in your lifetime? • Do you agree with Gethin's assertion that women rather than men are more likely to save us from the seemingly irresistible power of fossil fuelled empires?
	<p>We link hands with each other as a sign of our solidarity with all who are affected by gender-based violence, prejudice and discrimination.</p> <p>We reach out our hands as a sign of our unity with all who campaign for justice across the world.</p> <p>We stretch up our hands as a sign of our prayers for an end to all forms of violence and abuse. Amen</p> <p><i>Slightly adapted from a prayer by the Mothers' Union for the 16 Days of Activism against Gender Based Violence, November-December 2018.</i></p>

A Higher Law than Empire's



In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

And God said, 'Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.' So God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so. God called the dome Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.

And God said, 'Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.' And it was so. God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good. Then God said, 'Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it.' And it was so. The earth brought forth vegetation: plants yielding seed of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening and there was morning, the third day.

And God said, 'Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years, and let them be lights in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth.'

And it was so. God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars. God set them in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth, to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day.

And God said, ‘Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky.’ So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm, and every winged bird of every kind. And God saw that it was good. God blessed them, saying, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.’ And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day.

And God said, ‘Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind.’ And it was so. God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind, and the cattle of every kind, and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind. And God saw that it was good. Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.’ So God created humankind in God’s image, in the image of God, God created them; male and female God created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that

moves upon the earth.’ God said, ‘See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.’ And it was so. God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done.

Genesis 1:1 – 2:2

Earlier, law. Now, order. In modern imperial politics, law and order go together like love and marriage or horse and carriage. That coupling makes us think of the order that is imposed by courts, police, army, “the forces of law and order.”

It’s an insidious assumption, which is why the Hebrew Scriptures challenge it. Law, they say, is a gift from God, not the device of clever human beings. True order is the divine order in creation. Imperial, urbanised societies see nature as inherently disorderly. Grasses are controlled into lawns, flowers into gardens, forests into parks. Creatures who inconvenience us (insects who eat our prize vegetables) need to be massacred. An orderly empire keeps nature under its thumb.

Missionaries who went throughout the British Empire discovered peoples who respected the natural order and lived in harmony with it. The missionaries regarded them as



primitive people, savages. They needed some imperial order to get a grip on nature – and to allow the empire to despoil their earth of its natural resources as quickly and as profitably as possible.

Our generation is discovering that Genesis is right. It is creation which is orderly. The result of exploitation of the earth is climate chaos. The result of our determination to kill greenfly on our roses is that pollination of plants and life itself is endangered. Global warming means that the orderly appearance of predators and prey, the harmony of food and foragers, is disrupted and order is breaking down. We have discovered the limits of imperial power and face chaos instead.

Thank God that those missionaries also took the Bible and translated it into the languages of the people they met, so that they could rediscover in the words of the ancient Hebrews their own heritage of living peacefully with the order of creation. We need those subjugated peoples to come to our disorderly uncivilisation as missionaries of divine order.



- Gethin considers the missionaries that evangelised various countries were, unwittingly or not, agents of empire – what do you think?
- Gethin thinks, however, these imperial agents in bringing the Bible also brought the power to resist imperial policies – the empire was subverted by its own agents. How do you think the Bible is subversive?
- How might you find ways to live more in harmony with the created order of things rather than the imposed order of things we often think is normal?



Look out of the window at whatever part of creation you can see – moon and stars if it is night, mountains or rivers, trees or flowers, animals or birds, if it is day. Remember that God saw that it was all good.

Look at the damage you see to that creation – light pollution, tarmacked roads, manicured gardens. Ask God for forgiveness and invite him to restore the order of his creation.

Session 4 Sing We the Song of High Revolt

Sing We The Song of High Revolt

Fred Kaan © 1968 Hope Publishing Company CCLI 1064776

Tune O Tannenbaum which you can hear here

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DcMdVq_kMP8

Sing we a song of high revolt;
make great the Lord,
his name exalt!
Sing we the song that Mary sang
of God at war with human wrong.

*Sing we of him who deeply cares
and still with us our burden bears.
He who with strength
the proud disowns,
brings down the mighty
from their thrones.*

By him the poor are lifted up;
he satisfies with bread and cup
the hungry ones of many lands;
the rich must go with empty hands.

He calls us to revolt and fight
with him for what is just and right,
to sing and live Magnificat
in crowded street and council flat.

The Magnificat can Undermine Empire



In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.' But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' And Mary said, 'My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.'

St Luke 1: 26 – 33, 47 – 55





When at New College, Oxford, I came to love choral Evensong in the chapel. The excellent choir sang the Song of Mary each evening in a huge variety of settings. As the melodies floated around the beautiful chapel, they spoke of 600 years of choral tradition, the sound of an English empire whose growth, flourishing, and decline had all been planned in this institution more than most.

Very few of the musical settings chosen convey the empire-shaking import of Mary's words. Choral evensong has generally served to bolster the thrones of the powerful, strengthen the imaginations of their hearts and enable them to kick the lowly while they are down. It has been the musical accompaniment to the rape of all parts of the earth once coloured pink on the map – starting with my own country of Wales. Even 'Woodlands', to which many of us in the URC sing the Magnificat, bounces along in a jolly sort of way.

But these words are hardly jolly for most of us. They sound out the doom of all of us privileged by birth, education, or wealth. The hungry will be fed and the lowly will be lifted up. In order for that to happen, the proud must be scattered and the powerful ejected from their thrones. And that means us.

Even the URC used to have an Oxford college and we still have a Cambridge one. We have an ethical investment policy – but only rich institutions need one. We employ people ecumenically (including this author) to influence government – but only powerful people can do that.

When we say or sing the Song of Mary we are proclaiming God's own word of judgement and revolution against

	<p>ourselves. Dare we listen to the true cadences of the Magnificat?</p>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does the pairing of Fred Kaan’s hymn about the Magnificat with the tune used for the Red Flag help reflect the cadences that Gethin sees in Mary’s hymn? (why, why not?) • It is said that in Latin and South America in the 80s repressive governments banned the singing of the Magnificat unless it was sung in Latin. Might there be similar reasons for the English speaking world to set it to exquisite, yet rather inaccessible, tunes? • What do you make of Gethin’s (and Mary’s!) premise that for the hungry to be filled with good things, the rich will have to be sent away empty handed?
	<p>His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. Lord have mercy upon us. Christ have mercy upon us. Lord have mercy upon us. Amen.</p>

Empire is Violent



“But when you capture cities in the land that the Lord your God is giving you, kill everyone. Completely destroy all the people: the Hittites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, as the Lord ordered you to do. Kill them, so that they will not make you sin against the Lord by teaching you to do all the disgusting things that they do in the worship of their gods.”

Deuteronomy 20:16-18





These studies have quarried the Bible for texts which speak of justice and the undermining of empire by the values and purposes of God. Today, however, we come to acknowledge that the seeds of the worst cruelties of empire, and the writing of its history by the victors, are also to be found in our sacred texts.

When the British Empire reached the westernmost parts of what is now British Columbia in Canada, the 19th century was already two thirds past. The imperialists were well versed in how to conquer territory and establish their power, economically, politically and culturally.

The claims of the First Nations of Canada to the land were clearly an impediment to exploiting its natural resources and establishing colonies. The British empire had by now largely outgrown massacres of the kind advocated in Deuteronomy – although European diseases did an effective job of decimating the native population. Those who remained needed to be ‘civilised’.

In Wales, the ‘Welsh Not’ had already developed a way of beating a native language out of children. But it had not been as effective as the UK Government commission which

	<p>recommended it in 1843 had hoped. The people had resisted and the language was refusing to die. So in Canada the children were not only beaten, they were taken from their families and forced into residential schools, run by Christian missionaries (many of them Welsh), to be completely cleansed of their native culture. Many of those languages did die. But some clung on – for example the language in Haida Gwaii (briefly the Princess Charlotte Islands), partially protected by its geography, is now taught in schools and universities. This teaching is inspired – like the oppression – by educational practice in Wales. Even the greatest empires find complete destruction of a people difficult.</p>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many nations are now finding a form of liberation in recovering and reviving their native languages – we see this in Wales and in Scotland where governments have promoted the learning of Welsh and Gaelic in school. In Scotland it’s possible to study at the University of the Highlands and Islands through the medium of Gaelic. Why do empires want to impose one language on their subject peoples? • Why might the writers of Deuteronomy have commanded genocide? What consequences have passages like this had? • Gethin noted that Welsh people who had experienced oppression were instrumental in oppressing First Nations people in Canada. Why might oppressed folk become oppressors?
	<p>Loving God, we pray for those peoples and cultures for whom the coming of the Gospel has been very bad news indeed. We remember with sorrow the Hittites, the Amorites, the Canaanites,</p>

the Perizzites, the Hivites, the Jebusites,
the Maori and the Aborigine,
the Haida and the American First Nations,
the Inca, Lache, Picara and peoples of the Americas
and the peoples of the Amazon under threat today
and with you, loving God, we weep. Amen.

Babylon has Fallen!



Then I saw another angel flying high in the air, with an eternal message of Good News to announce to the peoples of the earth, to every race, tribe, language, and nation. He said in a loud voice, “Honour God and praise his greatness! For the time has come for him to judge all people. Worship him who made heaven, earth, sea, and the springs of water!” A second angel followed the first one, saying, “She has fallen! Great Babylon has fallen!

Revelation 14: 6 – 8a

After this the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go. He said to them, ‘The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest. Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves. Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road. Whatever house you enter, first say, “Peace to this house!”

The seventy returned with joy, saying, ‘Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!’ He said to them, ‘I watched

Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning. See, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.'

St Luke 10.1-5, 17-20



The Book of Revelation is not popular in the URC. We find it sadly lacking in middle class religiosity, with little to offer our aspirational Christianity.

It's our loss, because this book finds in the midst of the horrors of judgement the ultimate hope for the world – "Great Babylon has fallen!" When God announces that all peoples, tribes, languages and nations are to be judged, the angel knows what that means – the empire is over. God has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly.



It was always a mistake to disregard Revelation. In the midst of climate crisis it is fatal. We need to know that God judges the world. He judges those who use up the resources He provided in creation for their own profit. He judges those who even as the earth burns believe that imperial life can carry on regardless. Without that judgement, there is no hope; life on earth will be extinct. But if we open ourselves up to that judgement, it is possible that we might yet be saved.

Contrary to many interpretations of Revelation, we don't have to wait for the end of the world. Jesus saw the signs of judgement and hope all around him. Each time the self-denying disciples of Jesus were greeted with peace, each time they found the courage to do things they thought they

	<p>could never do – such as challenge demons in the name of Jesus – Satan fell from heaven.</p> <p>The fall of Great Babylon, the ultimate defeat of empire, has not yet come. But the diabolical forces which sustain empire can be defeated, in the name of Jesus, one by one. Greed, genocide, misogyny, hatred do not have the last word. They will fall. Then peace will come to this house and this world.</p>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have you ever read, or attempted to read, Revelation? What did you make of it? • Gethin uses Biblical images of God as judge – not popular images in contemporary Christianity. What do you make of the idea of God judging humanity? • Gethin confidently holds that the empires that control us will fall – just as Jesus noted Satan falling from Heaven and the writer of Revelation proclaiming that Babylon had fallen. How might you help the empires that control us to fall?
	<p>Pray today with the TV, radio or internet news turned on or with the newspaper open in front of you.</p> <p>Look for the signs of demons submitting to the disciples of Jesus, for signs of nations, peoples, languages and races facing judgement.</p> <p>Do you see Satan falling from heaven like a flash of lightning?</p> <p>Pray for the day when Great Babylon will fall.</p> <p>Maranatha. Come, Lord Jesus, come. Amen.</p>