

The Ferguson Lectures August 2011

Forbidden Flesh: Subversion & Encounter

Lecture One: A Brief Fling with an Open Future

Introduction

When approached to give lectures such as these, my initial response was to check the header of the email to make sure I hadn't received a request intended for someone else. Even when it became apparent that it wasn't a case of mistaken identity, I took pains to make sure that the organisers understood exactly what sort of kettle of fish they were getting. None of my disclaimers seemed to dissuade them, and here I am.

But I do feel that in all fairness to you as an audience I should rehearse some of my lack of credentials for the task ahead of me. To start with, when on those few occasions it is required, I describe myself as a recovering theologian. When I resigned from my position at Otago University back in 2002, I left most of my theology texts on the office bookshelves with a note to staff and students to help themselves. I think this marked step six of my recovery – being “entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character”. I hope this lecture is not a sign of having fallen off the wagon.

My doctoral thesis was on James K. Baxter¹, the delightfully scandalous poet who combined lyrical majesty with scatological earthiness. He distinguished between two different forms of education; higher learning, and his preferred lower learning². Having experienced both forms of tutelage, I confess to sharing Baxter's view that lower learning is both more accessible and a lot more fun than the alternative. It's perhaps with that in mind that my chosen vocation has drifted from that of a semi-respectable lecturer at Carey Baptist College to a troublesome Catholic writer who identifies more with atheists than evangelists.

These days my energies are almost entirely consumed by filmmaking rather than reflection on Christian faith. I prefer my faith to be the sustainer of my vocation instead of the subject of it. I guess as such I've come to understand my audience as not so much the church as the world. We all have our place to find in life, and for some of us it takes an inordinate amount of time to discover. So any theological reflections I have now are shaped by a different way of looking at the world.

Given such impediments, I was tempted to approach these lectures by employing duplicity: tangling myself in suitably non-linear postmodern abstractions³, thereby giving the impression of profundity while eluding comprehension. But instead I've opted to put the 'practical' back into 'practical theology' and respond rather candidly

¹ M. Riddell, *Funding Contextual Theology in Aotearoa – New Zealand: The Theological Contribution of James K. Baxter*, Otago: University of Otago, 2003.

² James K. Baxter, 'Essay on the Higher Learning', pp.61-64 in *The Spike*, quoted in J. E. Weir, ed., *Collected Poems: James K. Baxter*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) p.xxiii.

³ “This word [postmodernism] has no meaning. Use it as often as possible.” M. Featherstone, *Consumer Culture & Postmodernism*, London: Sage, 1991, p.1.

to the creeping perversion of Christian thought that has made it both oppressive and anachronistic in the Western world.

It was Alfred North Whitehead who suggested philosophy should emulate the flight of an aeroplane⁴. The journey should begin on the ground in the real world, before ascending into the skies of sustained reflection. And rather than remaining aloft or departing into the stratosphere, the aircraft only completes its journey when it once again returns to the earth, where real people live and breathe and pursue their goals. We might usefully suggest that the role of the practical theologian (if the term is not an oxymoron) is akin to the entire life of such a plane, with many journeys into the heavens, but spending most of its time on the tarmac.

We live in interesting times. The claim of Yeats that the centre cannot hold⁵ has become an all too literal reality for the citizens of Christchurch and Japan. Both in the recent history of Western thought and in the affairs of the church, we may suspect mere anarchy has been loosed upon the world. In order to set this scene in a more immediate fashion, I thought I might turn to one of the more prolific theologians of my generation: a young man by the name of Leonard Cohen.

[Play 'The Future' montage]

Cohen sets a mood much better than I could. Of course you could take it as apocalyptic nonsense of the kind espoused by Tim LaHaye⁶. But I think it's more of an ironic postmodern riff on the fractured framework we deal with on a daily basis, in which we experience the "breaking of the ancient Western code". We ain't in Kansas anymore.⁷ To put the crisis of Western Christianity in perspective, the Church is a solid part of the past of our culture, but at present it doesn't look like being a substantial part of the future⁸. This, by the way, is a fact I wish to assume rather than argue.⁹ If you have serious doubts about this I suggest that you may be more of an observer than a participant in contemporary culture.

I inhabit a world where Christianity is regarded not only as a joke but a synonym for abuse and intolerance.¹⁰ It's a realm in which image trumps text, where connection supplants relationship, where perception supercedes reality, where gaming is a

⁴ "The true method of discovery is like the flight of an aeroplane. It starts from the ground of particular observation; it makes a flight in the thin air of imaginative generalization; and it again lands for renewed observation rendered acute by rational interpretation." A.N. Whitehead, Gifford lectures delivered in the University of Edinburgh during the session 1927-28. *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* (1929, 1979), p.5.

⁵ W.B. Yeats, 'The Second Coming', *Michael Robartes and the Dancer*, Churchtown, Dundrum, Ireland: The Chuala Press, 1920.

⁶ Tim La Haye & Jerry Jenkins, *Left Behind Series*, Illinois: Tyndale House, 1995-2007.

⁷ "Everything seems to slip: our landscape, our values, our way of life – and so the security of meaning, the sense of being at home in a world we can understand and deal with, that they bought.", Langdon Gilkey, *Society and the Sacred: Toward a Theology of Culture in Decline*, New York: Crossroad, 1981, p.16.

⁸ "Christianity is very firmly perceived as part of the old order, and therefore something to be discarded rather than trusted for the future." John Drane, *Evangelism for a New Age: Creating Churches for the Next Century*, London: Marshall Pickering, 1994, p.15.

⁹ My arguments are set out in my book *Threshold of the Future: Reforming the Church in the Post-Christian West*, London: SPCK, 1998: "The end result of the collapse of plausibility structures for Christianity is the practical consignment of the religion to the rubbish heap of historical forces which have passed their use-by date." p.8.

philosophy of life, where experience rules, and where spiritual reality is sought and valued. It's also a domain in which the church is devoid of credibility, respect or participation. The presence of the church in Western society is akin to that of an anorak bore at a party – justifiably isolated and often becoming resentful that no one wants to listen.¹¹

It is this crisis of credibility for Christianity, our own ground zero left by the collapse of Christendom,¹² that is the wasteland from which these lectures depart. I should say that I've designed these lectures as a complementary pair. Tonight I'd like to look at the internal resources the faith might need to draw on in order to reconfigure itself. Then Friday night, if there's anyone still listening, I'll move on to survey those aspects of interface between church and world that are in urgent need of reform.

That's by way of an introduction. Let me also add that the lectures are intended to be provocative, stimulating, disturbing and unsettling. I find for myself that I'm more likely to think about something when I disagree.

Responding to Crisis

All of us have our own mechanisms for responding to crisis. Some of us shut down, others opt for escapism, and a few brave souls confront the new situation head on. As a generalisation, institutions deny crisis. The church is an institution.¹³ Therefore it engages in denial.¹⁴ There is no crisis. The clergy are still drawing salaries. We have a new sound system in our church. The Bible is still a best-seller. And if by some accident, the ecclesial institution is forced to face its crisis, the strategy is to manage it in such a way that the hierarchy survives. Survival is the purpose of an institution.

So much for the church. How about faith? How about the long and persistent interplay between humanity and the divine? What of the history of God in the world? I want to propose that Christianity is relatively unique in the history of religions in that it is a self-subverting tradition.¹⁵ That is to say, when the chips are down and the institution

¹⁰ "Modern historical, philosophical and scientific thought has come into conflict at so many points with traditional Christian teaching that the latter has been losing its power to convince ordinary people (to say nothing of the intelligentsia)." Geering, *The World to Come* p.66. See also John Shelby Spong, *Into the Whirlwind: The Future of the Church* (Minneapolis: Seabury Press 1983) pp.16-29.

¹¹ "Like an aging dowager, living in a decaying mansion on the edge of town, bankrupt and penniless, house decaying around her but acting as if her family still controlled the city, our theologians and church leaders continued to act and think as if they were in charge, as if the old arrangements were still valid." Stanley Hauerwas & William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony*, Nashville: Abingdon, 1992, p.29.

¹² As Callum Brown concludes in *The Death of Christian Britain*, "what emerges is a story not merely of church decline, but of the end of Christianity as a means by which men and women, as individuals, construct their identities and their sense of 'self.'" Callum Brown: *The Death of Christian Britain* (London: Routledge, 2001), p.2.

¹³ "The Church as institution is characterized by endurance, stability, and by the rules of the game followed by its members. It runs the risk of losing the beat of history, of stagnating, of forgetting its primary function of service, of fostering passivity, monotony, mechanization, and alienation." Leonardo Boff, *Church: Charisma and Power – Liberation Theology and the Institutional Church*, trans. JW Diercksmeier, London: SCM, 1985, p.48.

¹⁴ See Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*, London: Routledge, 1969.

¹⁵ "Jesus presents a new way of faithfulness that completely subverts the dominant way." Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press (2nd ed.), 2001, p.97. See also Kenneth Leech, *Subversive Orthodoxy: Traditional Faith and Radical Commitment*, Toronto: Anglican

threatens to control what it perceives as danger to its own survival, the living spirit it carries in its belly ruptures the regulatory strictures and enables a form of evolution.

There's a kind of IED – an improvised explosive device – buried within the tradition. It's always present but seldom activated, for good reason. It requires a set of circumstances to arm the device; circumstances that generate a genuine crisis for the survival of the faith. In the history of the Judaeo-Christian tradition, we might look at situations such as the settlement of nomadic peoples in Palestine, the period of Babylonian exile, the inclusion of the Gentiles, the desecration of the Temple, and the abuses of medieval Catholicism as periods that generated explosive reform. Here I'm not talking about institutional reform, but a reconfiguring of self-understanding.

It's what might be described as theology in extremis. A kind of radical reframing that is normally locked behind glass with the warning: "In case of emergency only". My thesis is that we are in such an emergency situation currently in the West, where Christianity is crumbling with a haste not seen since the collapse of Russian communism.¹⁶ Of course the church could seek to hide from the crisis by ignoring its surrounding culture. It might indulge in some cheap escapism through Pentecostal smoke and mirrors. It might seek to manage the crisis like the Vatican, desperately seeking a reverse gear¹⁷.

None of these strategies are credible or sufficient in a world in which "there'll be nothing you can measure any more." It's time to break the glass and resort to crisis theology.

The Future

Let's begin by talking about the future. While Cohen may be right that "it's murder", that's not an inevitability. To state the obvious, perceptions of the future are projections from the present. Such projections tend to one of two poles – either toward that of a closed future, a la Harold Camping, or an open future, as touted by Steve Jobs¹⁸. To generalise, things are either getting better or they're getting worse. The evidence for each option can be made compelling. Naturally the future is unverifiable until it becomes the past.

It's by now a preacher's cliché that the Chinese character for crisis combines the elements that stand for danger and opportunity. The most interesting thing about this

Book Centre, 1992.

¹⁶ "The situation is, therefore, quite new. It represents a veritable uncharted sea for theology, where neither the menacing rocks nor the clear channels are known..." Langdon Gilkey, *Society and the Sacred: Toward a Theology of Culture in Decline*, New York: Crossroad, 1981, p.13.

¹⁷ "The Catholic Church is seriously, possibly terminally ill and only an honest diagnosis and radical therapy will cure it... the church's resistance to reform, its secrecy, lack of transparency and misogyny are at the heart of the problem." Hans Küng, as quoted in *The Christian Century*, 'Theologian Küng says only radical reforms can save the Catholic church', May 07, 2011 by [Anli Serfontein](#).

¹⁸ "Here's to the crazy ones, the misfits, the rebels, the troublemakers, the round pegs in the square holes... the ones who see things differently — they're not fond of rules... You can quote them, disagree with them, glorify or vilify them, but the only thing you can't do is ignore them because they change things... they push the human race forward, and while some may see them as the crazy ones, we see genius, because the ones who are crazy enough to think that they can change the world, are the ones who do." Steve Jobs.

aphorism is that it is false. In good postmodern fashion, however, that shouldn't deter us from adopting the truth portrayed by the falsehood. A crisis provokes response. And the options tend to be binary. When a culture such as ours reaches a point where even the last tree that's left can't be stuffed up the hole in it, the reactions divide along the lines of defensiveness or openness; fear or embrace.

Conservatism is a defensive position in relation to the future. It seeks to preserve what has proved useful and valuable in the past against forces that threaten to destroy it. When the Barbarians are at the gate, it is perhaps time to guard the treasures against violations. In the right circumstances, conservatism is an entirely appropriate response to an uncertain future. We can all be grateful for those cultural artefacts and artworks that were protected during the Second World War by a small but determined team.¹⁹ And the great majority of us are conservationists if not conservatives when it comes to looking after natural resources.

The counter position to conservatism is, in my opinion, not liberalism but radicalism. This is a philosophy that while recognising the apparent dangers of the future, acknowledges that it presents an invitation to participate in something worthwhile. Radicalism is the sifting of an inherited tradition for clues to negotiating a previously unknown situation. This is a looking back not to preserve but to equip. Other generations have faced threats and despair before. How did they respond in such a way as to enter the so-called promised land of the future, even if it is rumoured to be ruled by giants?

It will come as no surprise that I believe our present circumstances at the threshold of the twenty-first century call for radicalism rather than conservatism. Those such as Pope Benedict who are hauling on the reins of the Church do so in good faith – but that good faith is entirely misguided. More than that, it is an encouragement toward the annihilation of Christianity as a contributor to Western culture.²⁰ Forgive me for suggesting that the treasures a contemporary conservatism seeks to protect are authority, wealth, power and status. It is not surprising that those who have it should want to retain it.

As a travelling companion of Process Theology²¹, I believe in a God of the open future. It is the openness of an uncreated future that provides hope for humanity. Whatever spiritual journey any of us may subscribe to, it is a journey of becoming – one that requires the element of possibility rather than blind fate. With Moltmann, I depend on the notion that “the goad of the promised future stabs inexorably into the flesh of every unfulfilled present”.²² This understanding posits God as luring us into a

¹⁹ See *The Monuments Men: Allied Heroes, Nazi Thieves, and the Greatest Treasure Hunt in History*, New York: Center Street, 2009.

²⁰ “But we have now come to the end of Christendom. We are nearing the end of the global supremacy of the Christian west. We are even seeing the collapse of conventional Christianity.” Lloyd Geering, *The World to Come: From Christian Past to Global Future* (Wellington: Bridget William Books 1999) p.4. See also Douglas John Hall, *The End of Christendom and the Future of Christianity* ed. A. Neely, W. Pipkin, and W. Shenk *Christian Mission and Modern Culture* (Valley Forge, PA.: Trinity Press 1997).

²¹ See John B. Cobb & David Griffin, *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition*, Louisville: Westminster, 1976 for an overview of Process Theology.

²² Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology*, trans. J Leitch, London, SCM, 1967, p.21.

future as yet uncreated and therefore unknown. I find this more in accord with my experience than a God who calls us to return to the past.

Given that all theology is a legitimation of experience, how might we reconcile this approach to the legacy we have inherited? Can we move forward with the wind of the Spirit at our backs? Can we make our exploration an act of radicalism rather than liberalism? I now want to turn to the nub of this lecture.

Forbidden Flesh

In reading Christian tradition from the perspective of contemporary Western society, I believe there are a number of enabling texts we could dwell on. The transition from the wilderness to the inconveniently occupied promised land, Elijah's valley of dry bones, the dislocating period of Babylonian exile, or the musing of Jesus about new wineskins – a reflection that would have been sufficient for his crucifixion without any additional evidence. But instead I want to focus on what is arguably the single most subversive text in the entire canon.

It is the account of Peter's sojourn in Joppa, as described in chapter 10 of the book of Acts. On the surface it is the story of Cornelius, the Gentile. But in truth it is a conversion experience for Peter. To summarise for those of you who may not have an encyclopaedic knowledge of scripture, the chain of events starts with Cornelius. An earnest seeker after God, despite the fact that to the followers of Jesus he is an infidel, Cornelius receives a visit from the angels. Interesting enough so far, with the reminder that divine work extends far beyond whatever boundaries might be imposed upon it.²³

The angel instructs Cornelius to travel to the nearby village of Joppa, where at the house of a local tanner he will find Peter. The next day, in his lodgings in Joppa, Peter is praying on the roof of the house. Deep in contemplation, he nods off – as you do. In his dreaming state, he has a vision. A sheet descends from heaven, containing animals of various kinds. And then Peter hears a heavenly voice saying, "Rise Peter, kill and eat." But Peter, recognising the poisoned chalice, refuses on scriptural grounds. He knows that the food being offered is deemed unclean by the God-given law. But the voice insists: "What God has made clean, you must not call profane."²⁴ This is repeated three times, lest the point should be missed.

And there you have the detonation of our IED. In one incident, the entire bedrock of scripture is relativised. What has been given as holy writ and observed faithfully, now turns out to be transitional. To the delight of Pentecostals everywhere, living experience of the voice of God trumps exegesis. In this exchange, Peter is the one exhibiting orthodoxy by championing the received tradition. Unfortunately he makes the mistake of seeking to correct God – somewhat like offering Eric Clapton a few tips on how to improve his guitar playing.

²³ See John Drane, *What is The New Age Saying to the Church?*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991. "The overwhelming majority of people who get involved in New Age spirituality are engaged in a serious search for God. They're searching for the transcendent." p.213.

²⁴ "The distinctive feature of the ministry of Jesus was that while it was open to everyone it was directed primarily towards those whom the orthodox, the religious establishment, considered to be beyond the fringes of respectability." Athol Gill, *The Fringes of Freedom: Following Jesus, Living Together, Working for Justice*, Homebush West: Lancer, 1990, p.23.

Of course there is a point to this deadly subversive encounter. While Peter is still struggling to make sense of it all, there's a knock on the door. He finds the Gentile Cornelius eager to learn more. After a bit of storytelling Peter gets to witness the Holy Spirit descending on Cornelius and his entourage. Suddenly it all makes sense. That which was previously unclean is now clean. People who were previously excluded are now included. Eyes, minds and hearts that were previously shut are now open. The ongoing work of God in the world is moving on, and it's time for people to get with the programme.

Theology in extremis. At watershed moments in the history of humanity, the game changes.²⁵ It had seemed to Peter that he knew what the rules were. Now he's forced to reconcile three things: his knowledge of scripture; the vision of God speaking; and his experience with Cornelius. In that nexus, something has to give. The result is the broadening of the seemingly fixed boundaries. From now on it's going to be recognised that what God is doing in the world through Jesus is a whole lot bigger and deeper and wider than had been thought.²⁶ To stick with the movement requires a substantial rethinking of what's acceptable and what's not.

Riffing²⁷ the Tradition

I'm not suggesting we exegete this passage, and there will be those in the room better qualified to do that than I am. An alternative approach is to improvise, using the tradition as the underlying melody. Let's look at the historical assumptions that underlie Peter's encounter with Cornelius, and fiddle about with possible harmonics for our own situation.

1. Closed Community

Peter operates with a shared set of parameters that defines who God's chosen people are. The people of God are those who are defined by Torah, and the male members are easily distinguished by virtue of circumcision. Jesus is the Jewish Messiah – a Jew sent to Jews to bring them to completion. All of us know who's in and who's out. And the starting point for any such definition is that the ones making it are in. The prerequisite for defining 'them' is belonging to an 'us'²⁸. Pretty much every human activity follows this pattern, and the worst offenders are religious traditions. The church has made a career out of persecuting or despising or patronising those who fall outside its umbrella. It's difficult to conceive of a situation in which there's no 'us and them'. And yet, as James K Baxter pointed out, "The wind blows in a thousand paddocks, inside and outside the fences".²⁹

²⁵ In *Threshold of the Future*, I outline some provisos for responsible appeal to theology in extremis – it should be responsive, radical, communal, creative, and constructive. See p.30.

²⁶ "It seeks to liberate the soul and the body, individuals and social conditions, human systems and the systems of nature from the closedness of reserve, from self-righteousness, and from godless and inhuman pressures." Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology*, trans. J Leitch, London, SCM, 1967, p.223.

²⁷ While technically referring to an underlying musical phrase on which a performer may improvise, in contemporary usage the term 'riff' has come to mean the improvisation itself.

²⁸ See *Social Psychology of Inclusion and Exclusion*, ed. Dominic Abrams, Michael A. Hogg and José M. Marques, New York: Psychology Press, 2005.

2. Fixed Rules

Peter knows what's acceptable and what's not acceptable. That is to say, he lives out of an ethical, social, legal and religious framework that is prescribed. There's no need to waste time working out what's right and wrong because it's all laid down in black and white. And not by human legislature, but from the very hand of God. For example, certain foods can be eaten and others not. Whether there's a reason for it or not doesn't matter – it's the way things are. Many of us assume we know what's right and wrong as well.³⁰ And the church presumes to declare that it knows God's mind on these matters. This can be useful in sorting out the good people from the bad people. The good thing about fixed rules is that they can't be changed. We all know, don't we, that God approves slavery but doesn't like women?

3. Outsiders and Fringe Dwellers

The impetus to understanding on Peter's behalf is driven by the spiritual exploration of Cornelius – a person who is an outsider. It is his quest for meaning that catalyses the reframing of the tradition, not Peter's. If we know our own story we will recognise that time and again wisdom and insight come not from the centre but from the fringes, and often from those who are regarded as beyond redemption.³¹ Could this simply be coincidence, or is it a reminder that God is essentially the God of the stranger and outcast? How can we be open and alert to voices that challenge from the periphery?

4. Forbidden Flesh

Luke Skywalker confronts the dark side, only to find that the enemy he's battling is his own father. Both in human psychology and human history, the tendency to dualistic thinking is endemic. Peter has his own battle with forbidden flesh, which represents crossing a line for him. Not surprising then that he's a little angsty about being invited to go where he's never been before. How many of the church's enemies are genuine threats, as opposed to projections of the dark side of the ecclesial inner life? What do our enemies teach us about our own fears and shadow side? Is it possible that redemption may mean going where we've never gone before?

5. New Possibilities

The genuinely new is by definition unknown. How then are we to prepare for it? The dimensions of the new experience can't be used as guidelines because they haven't yet transpired. The best that can be done is to draw on analogous narratives such as Acts 10. These help to communicate that it is possible to experience massive theological shifts without betrayal or disaster. The cultural

²⁹ James K. Baxter, 'Song to the Holy Spirit', *Collected Poems: James K. Baxter*, ed. John Weir 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995, p.572.

³⁰ "Structure, authority, ritual and control are the religious enemies of the Christian faith. The longing for order and security are powerful human forces. They continually seek to reassert themselves within the life of the church." Mike Riddell, *Threshold of the Future*, *op cit*, p.50.

³¹ See Dave Andrews, *Christi-Anarchy: Discovering a Radical Spirituality of Compassion*, Oxford: Lion, 1999, pp.75-96.

and historical setting of humanity is in constant flux, and at certain junctures the realignment of faith demands seismic disruption. While we might resist change for the sake of change, the history of God suggests that our journey will inevitably lead to new territory.

6. Progressive Revelation

Whether or not you subscribe to progressive revelation, there's few alternatives to that interpretation of Acts 10. The game plan has changed in a very significant way. As the text tells us, what was previously described as unclean must no longer be regarded as such. In terms of the self-understanding of the church and its mission in the world, new horizons have been opened up. God is doing a new thing, and consequently the thinking of the people of God needs expansion and revision in order to make sense of it. Of course it might be possible that since that time God has had no other fresh thoughts. Yeah, right.

Some of you who have survived parenting will have felt the responsibility of tackling the difficult territory of what is euphemistically called 'the birds and the bees'. In doing so, it's important not to jump the gun and deliver the whole nine yards to a mystified toddler. The young child's question "Where do babies come from?" should not be treated as an opportunity for detailed instruction in sexual techniques, nor a lecture on moral responsibility for contraception. The revelation might be premature. Is it too much to suggest that in a similar way, some things are only meant for the church when it has grown up?

The Way Forward

We started this meandering journey with Leonard Cohen's anthem to the future. There he suggests "things are going to slide, slide in all directions". While this is an estimable forecast, the mere prediction of tumult doesn't necessarily presage disaster. On the personal level, anyone who goes through a major life transition experiences the feeling that their whole world is collapsing. Which, to a certain extent, is true. Their previous matrix of comprehension is disintegrating, and there is that terrifying nihilistic limbo between the demise of the old and the emergence of the new. In fact, in cultural terms, that is precisely what the term 'post-modern' means.

In troubling times, the church is in danger of betraying its roots by becoming a cultural fallout shelter – a place for those bruised and broken by fractured foundations to immerse themselves in a warm bath of nostalgia. The water is scented with a faint whiff of Christendom, from days of glory past. While all this might provide some temporary respite and comfort, we would have to wonder if providing an ecclesial day spa is the intended role for a community that bears the name of Jesus. It would pay to take some interest in the waters in which we're bathing. That foul soup carries the stench of the torture and oppression of innocents; the diminution of women; the theme song for the holocaust; the sexual abuse of children; the legitimation of war; the oppression of every sort of minority; the persecution of dissenters; the abuse of authority and the accumulation of power.

The challenge before us is to overcome the fear of the future, and give up our museums of cultural power for the sake of risking authenticity. It may well be that the storm we resist is God's invitation to partnership. We travel across the border, or we stop travelling altogether. If we are to regard the future with hope and anticipation, and cross the threshold, it will bring cultural and theological dislocation. Like Peter, we will need to confront our own resistance to the rules being changed part way through the game. Our encounter with the surrounding world and with God must allow new insights. We have a self-subverting tradition that at least provides a model for such a strategic evolution.

All of which is by way of foreplay. Those who want to go all the way will need to attend Friday's lecture where I want to express specific aspects of ecclesial praxis that might be up for grabs. The more astute of you will have already picked up some clues as to where we're headed with this. The second instalment will mark out some of the territory to be explored in the realm we're entering. Following that there'll be a free-entry burning at the stake, to which you're all warmly invited. Thank you for your attention.