CHRISTIAN IDENTITY AMIDST GLOBAL CONTRADICTIONS

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John W. de Gruchy
University of Cape Town

My wife and I are part of a Christian community that lives together on a farm called Volmoed in the Hemel en Aarde (Heaven and Earth) Valley near Hermanus about 120 kms south east of Cape Town. Volmoed ("full of courage and hope") is a place of retreat that is linked to the Community of the Cross of Nails based at Coventry Cathedral. Its mission is to provide hospitality for those who are working for reconciliation, justice and healing in society. This is a very different environment to those in which I previously lived and work, first as a city pastor, then as a staff member for the South African Council of Churches, and then for thirty years as an academic teaching at the University of Cape Town. Yet there are continuities between these different phases of my life, and each has contributed perspectives and insights to the topics I wish to explore in these two lectures on Christian identity in today's world.

Some people speak of Volmoed as "God's place," a little piece of paradise in today's world. But towering over our valley of vineyards and olive groves is a mountain which early Moravian missionaries named "Babilonstoring" or the "Tower of Babel." This is a daily reminder of the counterpoint to our concern for justice and reconciliation, hope and healing, for Babel in the biblical story represents not "God's place," but the final stage in the saga of human and social collapse which began with our primordial parents' disobedience to the will of God. As a starting point, I want us to revisit Babel in order to explore some of the global contradictions that face us as we see to express our Christian faith and identity.

Revisiting Babel

The story of the building and eventual collapse of the Tower of Babel, told in Genesis 11, has been variously interpreted. For some, it represents God's judgment on all human attempts to create unity amongst peoples and nations and, for this reason there are those who use it to condemn such institutions as the United Nations. In South Africa the story was likewise used in the past to justify apartheid and condemn all attempts to create one nation out of the diversity of race and ethnicity. But these interpretations miss the point of the story and result in attitudes and actions that are both problematic and dangerous to global justice and peace. The story is really about the mortal danger of human arrogance and self-interest ("let us make a name for ourselves") that ignores morality and justice leading inevitably to divine judgment ("let us confuse their language" Genesis 11"4-8). When peoples and nations try to play God they will inevitably collapse and be scattered in confusion, just as Adam and Eve's disobedience resulted in their expulsion

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from Paradise. This is that story retold but on a larger canvas. In other words, it is a prophetic warning against corporate arrogance and idolatry, against the attempt by some to dominate others through the abuse of power.

The truth of this ancient myth has been regularly proven in the course of human history. St. Augustine revisited the story to ponder its message as the mighty Roman Empire collapsed around him in a heap of rubble. The cities, empires and civilizations we build so successfully, and which many assume will last indefinitely, sow the seeds of their own destruction. New world orders arise with great promise, but sooner or later they begin to falter and eventually collapse in disarray and disorder, as a result of arrogance and folly. We are deeply conscious in South Africa that the ending of apartheid created a new and far more just order, but it did not bring in a utopia. Much hard work is needed to make it succeed, otherwise it will not fulfil its promise.

Globalization was heralded not long ago as holding out new hope and promise for humanity after the demise of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. It held out the promise of one world united in the hope of peace, yet cultural and economic imperialism, the promotion of democracy but its denial when inconvenient, and the disregard for diversity and difference, amongst other factors, seriously undermined globalism's capacity for good. This does not mean that globalisation is no longer a reality with tremendous potential. But it does challenge false hopes in its ability to achieve a just economic and peaceful world order. And now many observers, some formerly true believers, are no longer so sure about its future. "The last year," wrote John Ralston Saul in 2005, "has seen an acceleration of the agony of Globalization – an acceleration far greater than I could have imagined. Abruptly it is not uncommon for well-known experts to lament or boast that it is over or slowing or in deep trouble."[1]

Babel represents the global scene in its totality, but it is comprised of many local societies which, increasingly linked together, contribute to the whole in different ways and at varying pace. No one has documented this more eloquently than Jared Diamond in his book starkly titled *Collapse*, the subtitle of which sums up the argument: "How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed."[2] For Diamond, all is not doom and gloom. There are good news stories of success, and there are steps we can take as communities and individuals to prevent collapse. But the possibility and tragedy of societal demise is nonetheless an omnipresent global reality that is evident in many localities. And though the factors that lead to collapse, whether of towns and cities, nations and regions, empires and civilizations, are multiple and often seem beyond our control, we humans are ultimately responsible because of the decisions we make. In particular we seek short term solutions and satisfactions that lead to long term disasters.

Our beautiful Hemel en Aarde Valley, by way of example, with its rolling vineyards, olive groves and especially its fynbos ecosystem that has

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[1] {Saul 2005:xi}
[2] {Diamond 2005}

taken millennia to develop, is threatened by alien trees imported into South Africa in the nineteenth century from Australia to satisfy immediate needs. This is but one illustration amongst many of a global ecological problem that faces us all and increasingly makes us fear for the future of the planet. The catalogue of others need not detain us for we are all aware of the balance sheet of our corporate woes which range from the HIV/AIDS Pandemic to global warming, from the War on Terror to the growing gap between rich and poor.

Many global problems stem originally from a lack of knowledge and awareness, but others are problems we have created for ourselves, too often wilfully ignoring the lessons of history. Niall Ferguson in his book *The War of the World,* which documents the consequences of the First World War for the rest of the twentieth century, concludes on a very sober note. We are, he declares, "our own worst enemies." He continues:

> We shall avoid another century of conflict only if we understand the forces that caused the last one – the dark forces that conjure up ethnic conflict and imperial rivalry out of economic crisis, and in doing so negate our common humanity. They are forces that stir within us still.[3]

This, I suggest, is the context in which we have to consider our identity as Christians. In doing so, we need to note in anticipation Ferguson's comment, that the dark satanic forces that plague our world "negate our common humanity." For it is precisely that "common humanity," that should help us define our Christian identity and mission and to do so, as I shall suggest in the next lecture, in ways that can be described as a Christian humanism. But first we need to locate ourselves within the global context, for we do not stand outside it as observers looking on from a distance; we are participants, often trapped its contradictions yet, hopefully, also seeking to live as those who seek to build a better world.

Locating ourselves in Babel

Shortly after agreeing to give this lecture I went to see the prize-winning film appropriately entitled "Babel" (2006) in the hope that it would speak to the global contradictions that characterise our world. I was not disappointed. It is a story of four families, two of these, the Moroccan and the Mexican, are poor and powerless, the other two, the one from Japan and the other the United States, are by comparison, wealthy and privileged. In a previous time before globalisation had speeded up cultural interaction, their lives would, in all probability have remained separate from each other, at least at a personal level. But through a series of events, triggered off by the pastimes and wants of the privileged, and the desperate needs of the poor, their lives are inextricably bound together. As the events unfold, the viewer watches in horrified anticipation, for tragedy looms large from the beginning.

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[3] { Ferguson 2007:646}

Brilliantly directed by Alejandro González Iñárritu, Babel is about more than an obvious clash of cultures or civilizations that characterise our world, and has done for centuries. It is about the contradictions inherent in the situation, and the ambiguous consequences that result from our choices or lack of them. Tourism, for example, again demonstrated in the film, can bring benefits to a poor country, but it can also have destructive results. Providing work and a home for illegal migrants from Mexico offers them a better life even as servants of the privileged, but it is full of uncertainty and danger, of cultural alienation, and can end in despair or worse.

The privileged are not exempt from life-threatening problems. They all have their own pain to bear. The couple from California are desperately trying to deal with the cot death of a child; the Japanese father and daughter are struggling to come to terms with a mother's suicide, congenital deafness and alienation from each other. Their involvement in the drama is largely the result of trying to deal with such pain, trying to drown it out whether through tourism or sexual gratification. The pain of the poor is different. It has to do with their poverty, their lack of resources and access to power. They are trapped by the circumstances of their birth; for them there is no way out. But, ironically, the disintegration of their lives is a result of gaining access to symbols of privilege and power, a gun and a motorcar, but not the capacity to handle them.

What is clear, more so than before because we now have the analytical tools and the information – and the insights of a movie director -- on which to base our understanding, is the extent to which access to resources and power makes the difference between life and death. In some senses we are all victims, but without this access some victims always remain so, and others though life-threatened are airlifted out of danger and nursed back to health. Some families are reunited because of it; others are devastated for lack of it. The truth is, in a world of enormous resources and plenty, the poor are not only always with us but generally getting poorer, and their access to health care, education and food is often worse now than before. I would also hazard a guess that Brad Pitt and Cate Blanchard earned more for their roles in Babel than the Moroccan father and his two sons, though they too were leading actors. That is not the only global contradiction, nor is it the complete story, but it underlies all else.

In analysing this contradiction it is important for us to own up and locate ourselves, and especially to do so as we consider our Christian identity. I cannot do that for you, but I can do it for myself, and I can ask you to reflect with me on what sociologists call our "social location". The truth is I am immensely privileged in my own context, a beneficiary of colonialism and apartheid, and wealthy in comparison with the vast majority of the world's population. Living in South Africa I am reminded of this day by day. Materially I lack for little; I have good health insurance and a good pension, and am able to travel, pursue my passion for woodwork, eat out when I choose and do much else beside. And I am privileged to be invited to such splendid places as the University of Virginia to enjoy the excellent hospitality you have provided.

All this has serious consequences for understanding my Christian identity and vocation, for I do so from a position of privilege compared not only to the vast majority of my neighbours but the vast majority of other Christians who live in lands torn apart by conflict, oppressed by racism and discrimination, and degraded by poverty. In other words, when I speak of my Christian identity I need to acknowledge my privileges and find a way to deal with them, something that would not be true for Christians in many other contexts who are not only poor but also facing severe restrictions and possibly martyrdom. It is always harder for the likes of us to enter the kingdom of God than for those who have nothing else to depend on but their trust in God; it is equally true that to those who have been given much, much is required in return.

There is another message that comes through loudly and clearly in "Babel," another dimension to the global contradictions, about which I am speaking, and the divisions of the world into the privileged and the poor. We usually think of the developed world as providing aid to the developing and poor nations, as though the latter had nothing to offer. Yet in the film, and in my experience and that of many others, the wounded tourist's life is saved by a wise old peasant woman and a rural barefoot doctor, though in the end still needing specialised treatment in a well equipped hospital. The same couple and their privileged children likewise are dependent on their illegal Mexican domestic worker, whose love for the children is as great as it is for her own son. There is, despite poverty and lack of privilege, a warmth in relationships, a caring and compassion, and a willingness to help without receiving payment or reward, that is too often missing amongst the privileged. Is that not also a global contradiction? That those who have so little give so much of themselves to others? We do not have to romanticise poverty to recognise that this is so. Money, power and control of resources do not solve all our problems, and those with a great deal of it are sometimes the most miserable and certainly the less generous.

For reasons such as these I am increasingly unhappy with the division of the world into the "developed' and the "developing nations." Developed in what sense? Certainly in terms of wealth, science and technology and the fruits of modernity; but is not a great deal of this the result of colonial and imperial exploitation on a massive scale, and have not the developed nations been the creators of weapons of mass destruction and leaders in the degradation of the environment? Is spending billions of dollars on war and a minute fraction of the budget on meeting the goals of Millennium Development, a sign of moral advancement or immoral selfishness? And is there not a spiritual hunger and emptiness in the developed world which belies that designation, if by developed we mean nations that have acquired wisdom and achieved greatness? And are not the so-called "developing nations," despite all their own failures, nonetheless rich in cultural assets and resources both natural and human, and well endowed when it comes to wisdom, humanity, creativity and the gift of hospitality? And would they not be in a far better position today if it were not for global imbalances that drain away so many doctors, nurses, and other skilled professionals to meet the

needs of the developed world to the severe cost of the countries from which they come and where they were trained? They may go willingly in search of a better life, not like slaves who were forced away from home, but they go because given the power of those who control and manipulate the wealth of the nations, it is concentrated in a few places not distributed amongst the many. And is not much of this identified with and defended in the name of Christian values?

But there is another major element in the equation that we have to confront in affirming our identity as Christians. This is the fact that Christianity has become identified by many with the West, what used to be called Christendom, despite the fact that the vast majority of Christians now live in Africa, Latin America and Asia. And, as we well know, we have to affirm our identity as Christians at a time of the resurgence of other religious faiths and of Islam in particular, as well as a time of rampant secularism for which all God-talk is a hypocritical delusion. Given the legacy of Christendom, all of this demands, I suggest, that we affirm our identity not in a triumphant and arrogant spirit, but in a modest and chastened way.

A Chastened Affirmation of Identity

The followers of Jesus of Nazareth were first labelled "Christian" in Syrian Antioch. But in carving out their identity in relation to both the womb of Judaism, the culture of Hellenism and the political dominance of Rome, Christians were not all of one mind. Nor could they always or easily be distinguished from other citizens or slaves of the Empire. The writer of the Letter to Diognetus in the second century eloquently stated how at least some Christians saw themselves:

> …Christians cannot be distinguished from the rest of the human race by country or language or customs. They do not live in cities of their own; they do not use peculiar form of speech; they do not follow an eccentric manner of life… at the same time they give proof of the remarkable and admittedly extraordinary constitution of their own commonwealth. They live in their own countries as aliens… Every foreign land is their fatherland, and yet for them every fatherland is a foreign land…They are poor, and yet make many rich; they are completely destitute and yet they enjoy complete abundance… To put it simply: What the soul is to the body that Christians are to the world… It is to no less a post than this that God has ordered them, and they must not try and evade it."[4]

Twenty centuries later, do we recognise ourselves in this portrait, and if not, how do we see ourselves? And, as importantly, how do others see us?

Two millennia of Christian history have left us with a legacy that is at the same time exhilarating and noble, yet shameful and burdensome. There is no reason to write off the great contribution that Christianity has made to

[4] {Diognetus 1963:216-216}

the life of the world in so many ways simply because it has also been a source of shame in other ways. But we cannot today affirm our Christian identity except in a modest and chastened way. Our track record, good and even remarkable as it may be in many respects, simply does not measure up to our creedal confessions.

The litany of crusades and inquisitions in the name of Christ continues to haunt us, as does the connection made between Christianity and slavery, colonisation, racism, apartheid, and gender discrimination. So it is difficult for us to convince the world today, as the Letter to Diognetus did so many centuries ago, that Christians "uphold the fragile fabric of the world." Indeed, ever since Constantine began to conquer the world under the sign of the cross, we have had to contend with a contradictory legacy that has defined our identity before the eyes of a critical world.

The prophet Mohammed came to the conclusion, in 7th century Arabia, that neither Judaism nor Christianity could save the world from tribal chaos and ethnic confusion, the fruits of Babel, the mythical predecessor of Babylon and in some senses Bahgdad. Thus it became imperative to engage in a jihad that would bring the warring tribes together in a new configuration, the Ummah of Islam in which all would be brothers and sisters united in doing the will of Allah. Undoubtedly contemporary Muslims feel the same, though they are divided in how they are to pursue the path laid out in the Quran.

In the light of this, I cannot help but reflect back on the extent to which we Christians have acted in ways that not only deny our faith and betray our Lord, but also undermine our own cause in legitimating ethnic division. Consider the fact that it was Latin Christianity by embarking on the crusades that seriously weakened Greek Christianity through the sacking of Constantinople, and thereby prepared the way for its collapse and the subsequent conversion of Turkey to Islam. Consider the possibility, so perceptively argued by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, that the expulsion of the Jews from fifteenth century Spain, was the beginning of the demise of Christian culture itself in Europe. Consider the fact that it was American Protestantism that fought against itself in the Civil War, each side believing that it was doing so to preserve Christian civilization. And the same was the case in the Anglo-Boer War in South Africa where devout Afrikaners fought a British imperial army supported by the churches back home.

Despite this appalling record, Western Christianity entered the twentieth century with great promise not least because European world dominance was understood as enabling the spreading of Christian civilization. After a century and half of remarkable missionary advance around the world, culminating in the birth of the ecumenical movement, Christianity's future both religiously and culturally was seemingly assured. But then, in a moment of madness, the so-called Christian nations of Europe slaughtered each other on the battle fields of France and Belgium, both in the name of the Christian God. The First World War was undoubtedly the catalyst for speeding up the decline of Christianity in Europe, even though the seeds had long been sown intellectually and politically. And not only did this madness destroy much of

what was great about Europe, it dragged the rest of the world into the fray, and then, with even more devastation, did the same again thirty years later, culminating in the Holocaust.

No wonder the newly Christianised peoples of Africa and Asia looked on with bewildered gaze as developed nations dug their own grave; no wonder, as Bonhoeffer again already perceptively noted, a dormant Islam took notice and considered how it would need to come to the rescue of a world that Christianity had not only failed to save but had contributed to its damnation. And now, once again, we find ourselves in a situation in which so-called "Christian nations" are waging war in such a way that the consequences for Christianity can only be severe. However much we may say to a sceptical world that Christianity cannot be identified with any nation and its follies, it is nonetheless true that the rest of the world equates the two in ways that erode faith in the Christian gospel.

But it is not simply people in the so-called "developing world", people beyond the boundaries of the West, who have become disenchanted with Christianity. There are many people today in the West who have renounced the Christian faith in which they, or at least their parents were nurtured, in part because of the inroads of secularism, but also in part because they no longer wish to identify with that legacy. And, understandably they draw out the inference that the God Christianity proclaims must be a delusion. Thus part of the problem we have in understanding, constructing and affirming our identity as Christians there is a woeful and often wilful ignorance of what Christianity is really about. If, for a pre-Christian world the gospel was novelty, and if in Christendom the gospel became common place, in our post-Christian context, the gospel is deemed irrelevant, something belonging to the past. We have outgrown it. This is not as true, let me hasten to add, in many countries where Christianity continues to grow apace, as in Africa and Asia, and has a vibrancy that is often remarkable. Nor is it true for many others around the world who have discovered or recovered the message of the gospel and begun to live it in new ways and new forms of community.

Reconstructing Christian Identity

Earlier in this lecture I reflected on the movie "Babel"; as we move towards the end, let me share some thoughts on that remarkable Scandinavian movie "As it is in heaven." It has played to packed audiences in Cape Town these last several months and, how unusual today, received standing ovations at the end. Directed by Kay Pollak and set in Sweden, it tells the story of a world famous musician and conductor, Daniel Dareus, who experiences burn-out and decides to return to the remote village where he grew up. Although seeking to remain anonymous and drop out of his previous existence, he is soon recognised and persuaded to train the local church choir. A more unlikely bunch of singers is hard to imagine, but Dareus with consummate skill liberates them from the dull conservatism and domestic violence of their surroundings, moulds them into a community and transforms their singing. This does not go down well with the local church pastor who resents Dareus' success and opposes his methods. Dareus is sacked from his position, but

the choir continues to grow in size and quality, while the congregation dwindles. And the pastor meanwhile is shown to be, by his own wife, a guilt-ridden hypocrite. Eventually the choir travels to Vienna for an international choral competition which ends in a magnificent, Pentecostal outpouring of voices blending in harmony, while their conductor, who has had an accident on the way to the auditorium, lies dying but able to hear their singing reach its peak even in its absence.

Why do I tell the story here? For me it portrays, on the one hand, the decay and death of a Christianity that is trapped in its past , while on the other hand, the vibrancy and power of a Christianity that has been liberated to become a source of redemptive power in the world. Not everyone will read the movie in this way, many will see it is an attack on Christianity, and many of those will applaud the result. I was certainly embarrassed by its powerful critique of bad forms of church life, but I was even more excited by its vision of what Christian community can and should be and, in my experience sometimes is. It is a vision of the church as the harbinger of a world in which God's justice and peace becomes a reality on earth "as it is in heaven."

The message of the movie resonates well with the vision and hope which Dietrich Bonhoeffer expressed in his *Letters and Papers from Prison*, and especially in his sermon on the baptism of his godson Dietrich Bethge:

> It is not for us to prophesy the day (though the day will come) when people will once more be called so to utter the word of God that the world will be changed and renewed by it. It will be a new language, perhaps quite non-religious, but liberating and redeeming – as was Jesus' language … it will be the language of a new righteousness and truth, proclaiming God's peace with humanity and the coming of God's kingdom.[5]

At its heart of Bonhoeffer's vision and the message of the movie, is a theology of the cross which speaks to us of divine wisdom and power revealing itself in suffering love, and a theology of the Spirit that works itself out in the healing of relationships, human flourishing, the renewal of community, and service – in short, a Pentecostal reversal of the confusion of Babel.

So how are we to reconstruct Christian identity today given the contexts in which we live and amidst the global contradictions that confront us? Whatever else we may say, we must surely re-affirm that our identity as Christians is a gift of grace rather than something we earn or construct for ourselves. But it also has to do with following Jesus Christ, it is a matter of discipleship and obedience otherwise grace would be cheap. Christianity identity, in other words, is a gift of grace appropriated and worked out in the daily task of living faithfully. This is fundamental to all else. Within a world of contradictions, we seek to follow Christ as sinners who are justified by grace. Irrespective of the particular church tradition to which we may belong, this is surely something we share in common.

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[5] {Bonhoeffer 1971b:300}

Having asserted the primacy of grace and the call to faithfulness, common to all Christian traditions, we then need to recognise that our Christian identity is also a matter of personal choice, historical circumstances and social construction. By this I mean that if we were born in Greece the likelihood is far greater that we would be Greek Orthodox not Methodist, though we might choose to become Pentecostal. In other words, our identity as Christians takes on a character that is different from other Christians despite our common baptism. But this is not the only way in which our Christian identity begins to vary from that of others. For each of us is embedded in a particular culture that has shaped who we are, and for many of us that culture, while it may have at one time been Christian in ethos, is now more likely to be secular in character. In fact, the odds are that we are more the products of modernity and post-modernity than anything specifically Christian. So while it has always been true that being truly Christian has required some personal commitment and not just being born into a Christian environment, given the world in which we now live and the contradictions around and within us, we have to be even more committed to and diligent in constructing our identity as Christians.

In doing so, I have not been able to find a better way of expressing how I understand that identity than by reference to the time-honoured designation: "Christian humanist." In my next lecture I will develop this understanding of being Christian in more depth and detail. But in bringing this lecture to a conclusion, let me indicate the direction in which I am moving.

Part of the reason for choosing this designation is that it locates our identity as Christian against two forces at work in the world that are, I believe, destroying its fabric. On the one hand, we are faced with the resurgence of forms of religion which, for want of better words, we describe as militant, fundamentalist, right-wing (terms which are not always easy to define), which are not only undermining true religion, but also human solidarity and the common good. Ironically, in the name of God they are trying to force us all to become one on their terms. Jonathan Sacks, the Chief Rabbi in Britain, in his book, *The Dignity of Difference* perceptively writes: "Fundamentalism like imperialism, is the attempt to impose a single way of life on a plural world. It is the Tower of Babel of our time."[6] And it is no less idolatrous. On the other hand, we are faced with forms of secularism that are equally destroying the fabric of the world. Promoting values that encourage individual greed at the expense of the common good, licence at the expense of genuine freedom, and icons that are idolatrous rather than reflections of the dignity of a humanity as created by God. This, too, is a tower of Babel, a secularist imperialism powered by globalism.

The term "Christian humanist" has a long history and certainly predates what we now refer to as "secular humanism." For example, most of the scholars of the Renaissance were Christian humanists, Erasmus and Thomas More, being the most celebrated. But prior to them and certainly from then

[6] {Sacks 2003:201}

onwards to our own day, there have been many Christians who have espoused the values of Christian humanism and not a few who have claimed the term as well. And these have certainly ranged across communion, tradition and denomination. What has united them has been a common reading of the gospel which may be summed up by saying that in Christ God embraced humanity and sought to restore its dignity in all its fullness.

It is *Christian* humanism, because it is founded on faith in Jesus Christ as the truly human being, the Word become flesh; and it is Christian *humanism* for precisely the same reason. For why did God become a human being if it were not the case that God loves humanity so much and seeks to restore us as icons of God? Christian humanism asserts the dignity of being human, and therefore of every human being. This is not a new fad; this is the gospel of Jesus Christ.

From this perspective our being Christian is not our primary identity; being human is. We are human beings before we are Christians, and we belong to the human race before we belong to the Christian Church. If that be so, it is even more true that we are human beings before we are American or South African, New Yorkers or Capetonians. God did not create us Mexican or Japanese, he created us men and women in his image, and Christ did not come to make us Christians or Americans, but to redeem and restore our humanity as sons and daughters of God. Whatever else our Christian identity is about, whether through baptism, confession or denominational allegiance, it is ultimately about our common humanity and therefore our solidarity with all of humanity both in suffering and in hope.

But the next affirmation is clearly the critical corollary. Our identity as Christians is not unimportant, quite the contrary. It is precisely because of our Christian commitment that we recognise our shared humanity with the rest of the planet, and not just with our fellow human beings but with the environment within which we live. In other words, being Christian is not of lesser significance for us, something we can simply put aside; being Christian determines the way in which we see the world, the way in which we relate to others, especially those different from us, the way in which act, and therefore the values we espouse. We may be human beings before we are Christians, but because we are Christians we have accepted the responsibility of becoming human beings who are being conformed to the One who, for us, is the truly human one, Jesus Christ. This means that we cannot escape from the world and its contradictions into some spiritual sphere untouched by human struggle and pain, or into some cocoon woven by individual self-interest and protected by privilege.

On the contrary, our identity as Christians is constructed as we relate to the world and other people, and especially to people who are different from us whether by ethnic background, religion or class. It is in relationship to “the other” that we discover who we are; not in ways that lead to alienation and conflict, but rather in ways that build a common sense of humanity and serve the common good. After all, is not the church meant to be a sign of the new humanity in which all people can find a home rather than an enclave that

excludes others on grounds that have nothing to do with the gospel and the embrace of Christ? Understood in this way, Christian humanism is nothing less than an affirmation of the truth claims of the gospel.

For much of the first part of my lecture I have painted a picture of the world on the edge of the abyss and societies on the verge of collapse. I don't believe that the picture is exaggerated; it is reality as we know and experience it. But Christians are called to live in the light of the resurrection, and for that reason Christian humanists turn their backs on cynicism about humanity and live as agents of hope. We therefore welcome and foster every sign of hope for our world amidst its contradictions, but we do not ultimately put our faith in new world orders and messianic visions of utopia, anymore than we believe that technological advance itself will save the world. Our faith is in the much more hidden reality of a new age heralded by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ that enables us to live in hope. We certainly acknowledge the sinfulness of humanity, but we believe more strongly in the redemptive power of God and the dignity of humanity; we certainly recognise the injustice, oppression and inhumanity of our world and our own part in them, but we believe more strongly in the ultimate triumph of justice, freedom, and love. In that hope we seek to be Christians amidst the global contradictions of our time.