The Kingdom Vision

A talk given at the AGM of the Episcopal City Mission, Massachusetts, June 2005

I feel greatly honoured to be invited to be with you this evening. And I hope that what I have to say from across the Pond is of some service to you who are clearly so committed to engagement in the fight for God's justice in the city. I feel I'm here more to learn than to expound. So perhaps we can journey together.

In 654 AD St Cedd came by sea down the east coast of England from Lindisfarne to bring Christianity to the East Saxons. What we now call Essex (from East Saxon). Cedd arrived to find the ruins of an old Roman Fortress there. So he and his monks used the stones of the fortress – the remnants of the old oppressive culture – to build a beautiful cathedral for God. And it stands there now, on the water's edge at Bradwell. Small, but serene. It's the oldest functioning Saxon church in Britain. And it's from there that I take my name as Bishop of Bradwell. And that was in 654 AD.

We can picture St Cedd turning those Roman fortification stones of oppression over in his hands, gauging their shape and size) and then building them into a new structure – something beautiful for God.

And here in 2005, some thirteen hundred years later – we meet to celebrate the gift of justice and liberation for the poor and excluded of Massachusetts Diocese. Because the oppressive walls still have to be torn down. And in their place you, the Episcopal City Mission – are building something beautiful for God.

But before focussing too much on the beautiful, let's pause for a moment longer, and focus on the nature of oppression. Indeed, let me share with you a personal testimony to oppression. Now, I'm sure you'll all agree with Cecil Rhodes (after whom Rhodesia was named) when he remarked that "to be born an English Man is to win first prize in the lottery of Life." You don't agree? How very odd.

When I was young child in school, the teacher would point at the globe and say, "now children you see that on this globe, a third of the world is coloured pink. They are the parts that belong to you." That was the British Empire. We children learnt that the Empire would bring the benefits of our British industrialised economy; parliamentary democracy; and of course, the glories of the English language – that tool for world-wide communication to those who had not been as lucky as we. Now, the question is this: "was that a stupid thing to believe?"

For consider,

1. The people who created that philosophy were some of the highest intellects of the time. They were not stupid.

2. Were they then immoral people? – But good people of faith were some of the folk in the forefront of the building of that Empire.

3. Were they then in it for what they could get out of it? – Thousands of women and men gave their lives sacrificially for this ideal of Empire.

So perhaps, after all, it is too simplistic to say that oppression and injustice are always the result of lack of intellect, moral failing or even selfishness.

I want to argue this evening that injustice is very often caused by blindness – a blindness that convinces people just like you and me that what we are doing, is just fine. I'll jump in my big car and drive off. I may be killing the planet, but I'm blind to that. Future generations will see it – so, they can see to it. We're not unjust today – we just use lots of oil. We don't build Empires today – we just do Globalisation.

But consider these facts. The United Kingdom could fit into the USA about 40 times over – it's a tiny island with relatively little natural resources; yet it remains the fourth biggest economy in the world. How do we account for that? I'd like to think that the UK is rich because we Brits have a natural superiority, or a God-given right to wealth, but even ***we*** don't believe that any more.

No, surely it has to do with the inheritance of Empire – that old-fashioned English form of Globalisation. We're told we no longer have a British Empire but maybe it's just gone underground? Or been re-branded? otherwise, how come we're still so rich?

So, let's have a look at this 'globalisation': what exactly is it? I believe it to be a dynamic interplay of three spheres of influence – Technology, Politics and Economics.

First, Technology.

In 1837 the telegraph was invented. In 1927 Lindbergh flew non-stop over the Atlantic. The Ocean had become 'the Pond'. In 1993, the year William Clinton came to the White House, there were about 50 registered websites. And now? 400 million, and rising as I speak.

Modern technology makes the world smaller and our markets bigger. It makes possible the division of the globe, with research and management largely in our rich part of the world, and heavy production in 'the elsewhere'. Did you know that everyday the USA imports 1 billion dollar's worth of goods more than it exports?

Technology sends not only goods, but also human beings, travelling across the globe. There are now more Muslims in the UK than we have Methodists and Baptists added together. And that migration means that the cities are more full of difference now than ever before. Different cultures, different languages, and different religions. All met together in urban, contested space. Handle that well and we have a rainbow culture; Handle that badly and we have the makings of civil war.

For most people modern Technology means the World Wide Web. But hang on a moment. Did I say 'World Wide'? But 80% of the world's population has never made a phone-call. And in the UK and USA, web-access divides along lines of ethnicity. That's Technology for you.

Now link that with Politics.

In 1989 the Berlin Wall fell – the world no longer divided East and West. A good friend of mine was working for western military intelligence. He said to me, "with the Soviet Union gone, we'll just have to find a new enemy if we're going to hold things together." Prophetic words. So in 1989, the global influence of the First World was ratcheted up. And in addition

to this came the political alliance of Margaret Thatcher, Helmut Kohl and Ronald Reagan. (the un-holy Trinity?) These three together helped to construct a Neo-Liberal politics. The battle cry was, and is, T.I.N.A. (Tina) 'There is no alternative' to market-forces.

But I promised you a third engine of globalisation alongside Technology and Politics, and it is, of course, Economics.

In the 1760s the Stock Exchange was developed in a London coffee shop. (Starbucks, eat your heart out) Not until the 1980s were the Stock Exchanges de-regulated. The economic 'Big Bang'. And when coupled with the newly available technology, it sent the markets into overdrive – 'Turbo-capitalism' had arrived! At the click of a computer key, capital could now chase cheap labour-markets round the globe – investing and dis-investing in the wink of an eye. Very unsettling for any local community.

So, these three – technology, politics and economics – together make for Globalisation.

But my description may make it sound rather abstract and 'virtual'. Not much to do with Urban Mission! So here comes the connection. We can think of these three, technology, politics and economics as "the software" of globalisation. But to make it happen in the real world, that software will need the hardware of screens, machinery, people and locations. And that's where cities and urbanisation come storming into the very centre of our picture. You can't have Globalisation without Urbanisation.

Cities are the hardware of globalisation.

The Greek and Roman Empires knew that. In order to grow, they built cities as their trade and command centres. The early Christians knew that. In order to spread the Gospel, they spread out from city to city. Paul targeted the urban centres.

The British Empire knew that. It used to be London, Liverpool, Manchester or Plymouth. Now it's places like New York, Tokyo, Bangalore, Sao Paulo, London, and here in Boston.

These cities are among the 'command centres' of globalisation. Networked to other cities across the globe, some contain the headquarters of the grotesquely powerful trans-national corporations and finance companies. And this of course gives those World Cities a distinct social style, manipulating the global system through a bureaucracy of banking and currency transaction, insurance, advertising, law and corporate drive.

And this globalising urbanisation brings many benefits - scientific advance as never before. Millions have been lifted out of poverty. Knowledge has spread. Our global cities sustain a great array of sub-cultures, producing a rich urban pluriformity — a kaleidoscope of cultural colour, sounds and tastes. The glories of Cosmopolitanism!

For those who love cities, like me, it's just great!

But, as you who are involved in City Mission know only too well, this is only one side of the picture. These advantages, as wonderful as they are, are ***only for the few.*** What of the marginalised millions, that people like you seek to serve in our cities? – cities around the world?

These people are at the mercy of injustice, they suffer pollution from the excesses of the global rich, but excluded from the benefits of the global market. They suffer spatial

segregation (they are 'gated') They have poor health and education services, and above all, sheer poverty. And all this whilst being bombarded by the adverts of the flaunted affluence and power of the few.

So where are we going wrong? Why is this wonderful globalised market place letting down the oppressed even in our rich world cities?

First, the Market is brilliant at creating wealth in abundance. But some people don't have the money to count in the market-place. So market forces cannot translate those people's need into effective 'demand'. We therefore need the market, but tempered by caring politics. Our cities need better governance.

Second, competition is of course necessary for any market to flourish. For cities to compete for global investment they have to entice. To look good, cities often embark on wholesale bulldozing of old communities. In their place comes re-development to attract an altogether different class of people, with new skills, new life-styles, and high, taxable incomes. But these new people rarely also have community-building skills. The old communities, having taken generations to build, are demolished at a stroke. I call this, 'Social cleansing'.

Birmingham is the UK's second largest city – it was my home for 20 yrs. In the mid-eighties they engaged in an ambitious physical regeneration of the downtown area – attracting conferences and tourists and middleclass managers to the new commercial hub. But that depleted the available budget for education, health and housing. The wealthy city centre has become more wealthy, but Social deprivation has vastly increased in the outer areas of Birmingham.

Global market-place competition, means that some win and some lose.

Your projects and programmes speak volumes about the injustices which arise as the outcome of unfettered and aggressive competition. You know all about it: Good, hard-working people, under the heel of poverty; lack of affordable housing; substance abuse; gun crime; discrimination and hatred; social exclusion. We in the UK share these social evils with you.

Question: "why is it that rich countries like our can't solve these issues at a stroke? The easy answer is: "because people in power are selfish, evil and stupid" But, like the child in the classroom of Empire, I just don't believe it's that simple. In fact, I suspect these injustices persist largely because those who have the power to make real changes are blind and need healing. As Jesus put it: 'forgive them Lord, for they know not what they do.' Not only that: but I suspect it's also because those who are held in the grip of injustice don't understand it either. I firmly believe, that this is where our Christian faith can, and must, play its important part. Even as Jesus does, we must heal the blindness of those born blind. I want therefore to take another stone from the fortress of oppression and turn it over in our hands. I want to look with you at the question of Culture.

A culture is an amalgam of all those markers that make for a society – dress, language, architecture, institutions, values – markers of belonging and meaning, which help frame our mind-sets.

Culture.

Of course, we're so much part of our own culture that it's difficult for us to see it. They do say that whoever discovered water, it was not a fish. We may not see our culture clearly, but it will surely shape our sense of who we are and what we do with our lives. And precisely because culture is that powerful, then a culture which is not seen, analysed and critiqued, is the most dangerous thing on earth. It will control us. And that is why a Godly culture is the most beautiful thing on earth. And Christians have learnt to call that Godly culture – the "Kingdom of God."

In case we think Jesus was meaning something whimsical when he spoke of the 'Kingdom of God', let us remember that he was living in a society overwhelmed by the urbanised, global culture of the Roman Empire. Jesus travelled through the farms of Galilee where the Romans had developed a suffocating international 'agri-business'. Recent archaeology and biblical studies are teaching us all about it. On the Sea of Galilee, the Romans developed salt-packing factories. This benefited their global trade in salted fish, and fish sauces. Canny merchants therefore forced the local fish prices down. That in turn made the impoverished fishermen quite radical. Others were disaffected who had been made to leave their indebted farms and vineyards to work in the salt-packing factories of those smoke-stack cities such as Magdala. From Nazareth, Joseph and Jesus, carpenters and masons, would find work at nearby Sepphoris and Tiberias – the latter, a city built specifically to integrate Herod's Galilee into Rome's global trade-structures. For Rome's footprint of influence and trade spanned the known world.

So, Jesus lived in a Galilee where there was a tussle between local Palestinian culture and the dominating culture of an overwhelming global power which emanated from Rome and was personified locally in Jerusalem and the Empire's lackeys, the Temple hierarchy. The resultant Culture, which people, like fish in water, took for granted, was the cause of so much injustice and misery for the people. That's why Jesus spent his ministry not only helping those who were the subjects of injustice, but engaging in a cultural battle against the causes of so much of that injustice.

He brought sight to the blind – because they, like us with our gas-guzzling cars – just didn't see it. So he deconstructed many of the corner stones of their culture – the stones of the old fortress: He deconstructed the Sabbath law, Purity Codes, Samaritan exclusion, Taxation structures, absentee landlordism, labour relations, Family and Community norms, hierarchical temple worship, Herodian and Roman monarchy, widowhood, poverty, Pharisaism. These were cultural issues and Jesus challenged them and instituted instead his new Godly culture – and called it "the Kingdom of God".

So in the same manner, we too must find out the ways in which today's dominant globalising, urbanised culture supports injustice – critique that – and then learn to live lives from the alternative Kingdom of God cultural perspective. So our task is not simply to set up liberating programmes. It's good to do that. But then again, all people of good-will can do that. There is something distinctively Christian that we must do in addition. I believe that our distinctive contribution is this distinctive way of being in the world – the "Kingdom of God" way.

So my intention, in these final minutes, must be to sketch out briefly what I mean by this 'Kingdom of God' culture – this Kingdom way of urban living.

The word 'Kingdom' is, of course, itself one of the old oppressive stones of the fortress. The word 'Kingdom' is usually indicative of male patronage – 'kings' – of racial power and brutal

oppression. Jesus knew that better than we do. He felt through the palms of his hands the pain of what the Herods and Rome meant by 'Kingdom'. Yet, he grabs hold of that filthy word 'kingdom' with all its cultural undertones of oppression; and he deconstructs it. He pulls that fortress apart and reshapes it, so that his Kingdom becomes a sign of Justice, Peace and Inclusion. He subverts the word and the culture for which it stands.

This is a Kingdom *"of God"*. It therefore starts in awe of God. And awe of God drives us to repentance. Jesus in Mark's first chapter, sets out his Manifesto with those words: "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is close at hand!" Repentance translates Mark's word *metanoia* – which really means a "new mindedness", a complete turning around of our lives towards a new mind-set. In other words, repentance means "Cultural re-orientation".

So what would such repentance – such cultural re-orientation – look like?

Take an example:

The word 'Commodification' – turning everything into a commodity – with a price tag. In our culture, the market rules everything. Even basic human rights like Health and Education, everything is brought down to dollars. Decisions about people's welfare are finance-driven. Even people get costed, they become commodities. Costed in and costed out.

In the Book of Revelation chapter 13, the mark 666 was placed upon the forehead for only one reason and I quote – it "made it illegal for anyone to buy or sell anything unless they had been branded with the name of the beast or with its number." That's verse 17. Forget what the movies say, the New Testament clearly states that 666 is about brands – logo's - for use in the market-place. Where everyone is given their price, but not necessarily their value. How many urban kids do you know in your ministry who are oppressed by brands – who don't think they will be anyone if they don't have the right brand? That's 666. It takes away your God-given identity.

So it's interesting that the New Testament word for 'Church', *ecclesia*, was the word for an assembly *in the market-place*, at which the whole community decided upon community issues together. Together. And it gave you back your true identity by wiping out the old brand with a new sign on the forehead – the redemptive sign of baptism, the cross.

The Church *ecclesia* was to be an alternative, non-commodifying way of being in the market-place together. Worshipping the Man for Others, not worshipping the Market. The Kingdom of God culture demythologises the Market so it can take its rightful and proper place in our society – but where **its** mark is not on everything! Just one example of how, in our City Mission, the Kingdom of God perspective helps us critique the cultural water we swim in for the benefit of the poor. That's Repentance.

But a Christian's awe in the face of God brings about not only repentance but also an awareness of God's abundant Grace. As we've seen, the Culture that surrounds us day by day, is largely a culture of market place economics. And our economy is predicated on scarcity – remember all those demand and supply graphs in school economics lessons? But God's economy, says Jesus, is not predicated on scarcity but on abundance, extraordinary generosity and sharing, "70 x 7!" And that leads us to ask, "When God is so liberally generous, why should people who live in the same city and make it go round, get such uneven shares?"

Here in the USA just 1% of your population owns more personal wealth than another 95%. The UK is not much better. And that inequality treats the majority of human beings as of little worth, and it increases the risk of de-stabilisation. So it's dangerous. There is abundance in God's creation, and wealth creation in our cities is beautiful, but not at the expense of the poor.

The Kingdom of God starts with Awe of God, and that leads to Repentance and Gracious sharing.

But awe of God also makes us aware of God's otherness. And in our global, cosmopolitan cities you never know what otherness you're going to meet next! It's more than just exciting! I wish we had time to speak about ethnicity, about class, and about gender differences. Because the city is the place to learn about differences – and otherness. Its cosmopolitanism teaches us about God's otherness.

But awe of God, finally also alerts us to our sinfulness. And in the city of today sinfulness is global too. When we see a city kid dealing drugs, it's a local symptom of a sinful global trade. The prostitute in the doorway, who has been illegally imported from Eastern Europe by a global trafficking cartel. We hear the hand-guns in the street – again, the tip of an iceberg which is global, international gun crime.

But remember, when Jesus is crucified, it's very local. He confronts evil in one bad place, Golgotha, but Golgotha thereafter forever represents all bad places. It's as if in the crucifixion, global evil gets funnelled down to this particular localised spot. God nailed in the bad place by the global Roman Empire – by universal sin. And by addressing and being victorious over that local expression of evil there, he is forever victorious over all evil everywhere.

And that means – and here's the beauty of it – when a Church runs a very local drop-in centre, or a shop-front street ministry, it is local, but like the cross, it is also confronting the global forces of evil. So when we're working at our local programmes, we must be aware that we're also addressing global issues. Then our local ministries become parables in action.

To make that overt I believe that alongside every urban project or programme we should set up a Christian reflection group – reflecting on the work of the programme to see what God is teaching us through it. What is God teaching us about the subtleties of oppression – and what is the programme teaching us about God? and God's ways to the world? In such a Christian reflection group we learn these truths, then we change and develop our project accordingly, so that it can point even more clearly to these new Kingdom truths, for all the world to see. Giving sight to the blind. Sight to the oppressed – that they/we may be empowered with awareness. Sight for the oppressor – that they/we may be brought up short. Our projects become Sacraments of something much bigger than themselves – shining out in the dark. Mind-changing – perhaps life-changing – perhaps history transforming.

Final question:

"How is this Christian reflection on our projects to take place?"

A simple model:

It always begins with worship. In worship we let the light in. We 'Praise Open' the situation and let in the Light.

Next, we listen. We are attentive to the Stories, the fragments of experience and wisdom gathered from the excluded and the alienated of the city even gathered from the rich and powerful of the city too Churches enable the powerful and powerless of the city to meet and listen to one another. Really listen.

Then, those diverse story fragments can be woven together, in the light of the Gospel worship, to form a Vision of a city for the many not just for the few. A sustainable and just city.

Then our vision will lead to action:

Action to honour the wonderful creativity of the market place whilst also reinstating the regulating politics of care.

Action in the thorny questions of international migration. And in this, Europe and the States can learn from one another.

Action to enhance the integrity and strength of Civil Society. That's building up the capacity of local communities themselves to govern well, to create wealth, to sustain it and to share it.

Doing our action-theology this way – all our City Mission Programmes will follow in the train of the mission and ministry of Jesus.

Jesus, who turned the city's cultural values on their head by riding in on a donkey.

Jesus who cured the man born blind. Not arguing about whether it was the parents to blame – he just cured the blindness, to God's glory.

Jesus, who learnt to understand the complexities of the oppression of Empire by sitting and debating with those who collected Rome's taxes.

Jesus, who learnt about poverty by becoming one of the city's poor and marginalised.

In order to build the Kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven, let's tear down the walls of the old oppressive fortress together and build with those stones a cathedral – something beautiful for God. For, as the letter to the Hebrews says,

"There is no permanent city for us here; we are looking for the one which is yet to be. ….. Keep doing good works and sharing your resources, for these are the kinds of sacrifice that please God."

Well, those words are all about the "Kingdom of God" culture.

And City Mission can only say "Amen" to that.

"AMEN."