

Sunday Morning talk given by the late Dr John M Maitland in 2012

It really is lovely to be back in the fellowship here and I want to thank you for it today and over the years. I know that there are people here who I should be listening to. So I am very privileged to be able to speak this morning and as you know the subject is: "Into Every Culture".

Now what is culture? One of the best definitions I've seen is, 'it's the way we do things around here.' But if you look at the dictionary you get all sorts of things. Elements of culture, ideas, values, activities, art, knowledge, relationships and so on and so forth — a culture is learnt from those around us; from our families and so on. It is often subconsciously absorbed. A culture is a group thing. A group of any size, nations down to families and the smaller groups very often have a variant on the culture, a sub-culture if you like. And individuals, we as individuals, usually behave in line with our culture and sometimes we belong to several sub-cultures.

So starting in the Old Testament we see a culture established. At first a family, Abraham was called by God, meaning not just Abraham the guy, but his family; and he was chosen and called by God. And the whole story was told and re-told from generation to generation and it all became part of the culture. And that family became a nation and God said, "You are chosen by me." Meaning that that nation belonged to God, was precious to God and God had a purpose for them; he had a job for them to do. God wanted that nation to be a blessing to the whole world. God wanted to bless the whole world through them.

And he gave them three important things: he gave them the law, which included the Ten Commandments, much of it given through Moses in the desert. He gave them the land of Israel, which God had promised to them beforehand. And finally, inspired by King David but built by Solomon, God gave them the temple. This little bit of history is quite interesting about having David as King; the people of Israel had God as their King and they were led by men called Judges, holy men. They had no King as such like the nations around them, so they asked God for a King because the surrounding culture had influenced their thinking and their feelings and they said, "We want a God like all the people around us." And God said, "Okay, but on your head be it."

Come to the New Testament and the culture was obsessed with the land, the law and the temple, because they had been given by God it proved that they, the Israelites, were the people of God, chosen by him and they were convinced that God was going to raise up an Israeli strong man who would lead Israel back into conquering the world around them. They were obsessed with their culture.

Then Jesus came and challenged that culture straight on. He broke the law. He did healings on the Saturday, when it was strictly forbidden to work. He broke the social norms. He chatted up the Samaritan woman at the well and asked for a drink and she was shocked because culturally the Jews hated the Samaritans. They were sworn enemies.

And he was very laid back about the temple. He said to the woman, "The time is coming when you will worship the father neither here, nor in Jerusalem," where the temple was, "but worship in spirit and in truth. And he claimed to be that

great leader that Israel was expecting but he didn't behave that way as far as the culture was concerned. He kept breaking the rules.

In fact he claimed to be God, which is culturally outrageous. He said, "No, your culture, though basically religious, pious, ethical, will not get you right with God. But," he said, "I will." No wonder he got himself tortured to death, which is not really very culturally acceptable for a great leader appointed by God, is it?

And then he came back from death, thus God proving his authenticity over against the culture. And Jesus has been challenging all cultures for the last two thousand years, including our own. Now quietly and privately, after he'd risen from the dead, he gave instructions to his disciples. They were to take up what Israel had neglected. They were to be channels of God's blessing to the world. "Go," he said, "into all the world and preach the good news." All the world meaning into every culture; go and meet the people where they are, where they are living their culture, and preach the good news.

What is the good news? The good news is that Jesus is alive, he has risen from the dead; Jesus is the one who he says he is. He is the Son of God, one with the Father. And Jesus is Lord, the top power in the world and in all creation; so that wherever the Gospel goes, the word goes out: repent, think again and believe the facts about Jesus. Re-pent, think again and start trusting Jesus rather than your own culture.

Jesus came to bring a new culture, the culture of the Kingdom of Heaven where Jesus is willingly allowed to be in charge of our lives. And the culture of God's kingdom is a spiritual culture adopted by groups and individuals and lived out in our physical culture. And it's very often the opposite of our natural, physical culture. We call it being counter-cultural.

For example the idea that you should love your enemies is pretty well counter-cultural throughout the world, isn't it? So the culture of the kingdom is lived out by new ideas, new attitudes, new behaviour — so much so that the Christians in the early days in Acts were called People of the Way because their way of life was so different. And templates for the new way come from places like the Ten Commandments, the Sermon on the Mount, the life of Jesus and other places in the Bible. These do not give us the way into the kingdom but they get us into the ways of the kingdom.

So when we get to the book of the Acts, there is a massive challenge to the Jewish cultures and the penetration of many other cultures as well. In Acts Chapter 1, Jesus has risen from the dead and he talks about the Kingdom of God. Then he said the Holy Spirit was to come on them. Well, in their Jewish culture the Spirit was for kings, leaders, prophets, and so their culture told them this was the time for Israel and the temple to become internationally powerful again, even though they were a Roman colony.

"No," he said, "the Spirit is now for all my disciples. All those who give their lives to me. The Spirit now means a time to tell the world about me, spreading it out from your own culture, including the Samaritans," remember them, culturally hated by the Jews, "and then to the ends of the earth," into every culture.

Then the Holy Spirit came in Acts Chapter 2 and used the apostles with great power, both in preaching and in miracles. It is the Holy Spirit that drives the Gospel and the new culture of the Kingdom.

Acts 8, Philip went to Samaria, remember them? Acts 8, Philip gets taken to meet an Ethiopian. Acts 9, Peter raises a woman from the dead, the lowest form of life in the Jewish culture, they wouldn't be bothered with that sort of woman. Acts 10, Peter is sent to a Roman officer, a Gentile if ever there was one. It was a roller coaster of change.

Then enter Paul; Paul was a highly trained, extremely devoted Jewish religious leader and he met with the risen Jesus and was revolutionised. And Jesus gave Paul his mission to be to the non-Jews. He was facing a whole raft of cultures and sub-cultures. And he often started by saying, "Okay, I see your culture, that's fine, but you are missing something and I am here to tell you what it is. It is Jesus, the Jesus who died, who rose again and will come again. And when he comes again he promises to bring a new heaven and a new earth. The lion will lie down with the lamb."

I understand that you can go to a zoo in the United States where they've got it worked out. You can see the lion lying down with the lamb, absolutely wonderful. The problem is you need a new lamb every day!

But history warns us that natural cultures can cloud and corrupt our ideas of kingdom culture. For example, the Pope, a bit like the Israelites of old, decided that the Church needed to be a Kingdom and he needed to become something like a King. And then we got the whole idea of Christendom and these ideas were corruptions of the idea of the Kingdom of God.

For over two thousand years Christians have been taking the Gospel into every culture and because the Kingdom of God is a spiritual culture it can penetrate into every culture. Now catastrophes like the Rwanda massacre, which is supposed to be a very Christian country, show us how the penetration of the culture of the kingdom can be very shallow.

Now this is partly due to the modern missionary movement of the last hundred and fifty years, because it was so often associated with colonial expansion. Attaching itself to the wrong kind of kingdom, arriving with a lot of cultural baggage and we confused our culture with the kingdom culture. There was a good deal of hubris of pride and arrogance about it. You see, eating with a knife and fork is no more godly than eating with your fingers, but that's the level we got to.

In 1973 a Taiwanese writer was praising Mao Tse Tung, he was a Christian writer, praising Mao Tse Tung and the Communist revolution and saying, "This is part of God's salvation history." Confused.

In Africa some indigenous Churches mix up their own culture and their own spiritualist beliefs with kingdom ideas. We call it syncretism. It is confused. In 1980 Pope John Paul gave this warning, "Kingdom reality can be found among people everywhere to the extent that they live Gospel values. But this is incomplete unless related to the Kingdom of Christ and his coming again."

In the 1900s there was a great Japanese Christian called Kagawa. He was a big evangelist and a great social reformer and he wrote this, 'I am grateful Shinto, Buddhism, Fusionism. I owe much to these faiths. Yet they utterly fail to minister to my heart's deepest need. I was on a long road, weary, footsore, through a dark, dismal, tragic world. Buddhism teaches great compassion but who since the beginning of time has declared, "This is my blood of the Covenant, which is poured out for many and for the remission of sins?"'

A transcript from an article in *'The Times'*, and here it is, an atheist journalist talking about the necessity for the culture of God's kingdom to penetrate African cultures today. It is powerful, it is absolutely spot on and it is part of my sermon, so do read it afterwards, not now.

But we do need to go deeper than this. Paul, as we have seen, took the Gospel of Jesus' Kingdom into all sorts of cultures. He saw the clashes. In fact he suffered personally in many of them. And he came to the conclusion, after all he'd been through, that this is not just a competition between cultures. It is a spiritual battle. As he says in Ephesians 6, "Our struggle is not against flesh and blood but against rulers, against authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in heavenly places."

So our mission today, your mission and mine, is to extend the Kingdom on Earth so that Jesus will be honoured on earth above everything and everybody else and today, in this country, our mission is a spiritual struggle; we fight against dark powers and evil forces in our own culture. We live in a post-enlightenment culture where we are so enlightened that we do not need God.

Have you ever heard people say, "You wouldn't think, in this day and age, that such and such could happen?" Maybe we use this expression ourselves, you wouldn't think that in this day and age — what do they mean? Behind that is the idea that we are improving all the time and that we have improved to such an extent that you wouldn't expect the old things to be happening.

But that's not true. That is a lie. We fight against dark power and evil forces. Karl Marx said that man is the perfect being and capable of defining his destiny and establishing utopia on earth. It is a lie; we fight against dark powers and evil forces. The culture we actually live in is very different. Worldwide, the minority, that's us, live in luxury; while the majority suffer the injustice of poverty. And left to itself this wealth will trickle up, not trickle down.

As Naomi Klein writes, 'Greed has trashed the global economy.' We were reading an e-mail recently about the Christian healing teams healing on the street; not allowed to claim that God can heal the sick. We've been hearing stuff in the news this week, there are aggressive secular arguments against Christianity from Dawkins downwards. And we have a Jihadist Islam around the world wanting to impose its culture on us, on everyone.

Here is Peter Mulinde, a Ugandan, born a Muslim, converted, became a Pastor, preached the Gospel, taught about Israel and because of that he had acid thrown in his face. Yes, we fight against dark powers and evil forces so that we need more than ever the power of God's Holy Spirit to challenge the culture with the Gospel of the Kingdom.

We still have the same weapons that they had in the book of Acts: the word of the Gospel and the power of the Holy Spirit. Listen to this quote from a book called, 'The Message of Mission.' "We have to demonstrate the power of the Gospel to free from sin and guilt and to transform human nature," even human culture. "If our Churches are paralysed by inaction or irrelevant action, it is usually because the Gospel has not been experienced in all its fullness as a living reality by many who profess to be Christians."

Yes, and so as we do fight against dark powers and evil forces in our culture are we held back by our own culture, by our lifestyle, by our habits, by a lack of discernment. What is our culture? What is God's culture? By our lack of experience in the real power of the Gospel to transform lives, by a lack of expectation of what God can do and will do, by a lack of humility to learn from God and unlearn the old culture.

Is the Gospel held back because it has become Jesus plus instead of Jesus only? Because extra obstacles and burdens are added to it, extras from our own culture and from our Church culture. So as we fight against dark powers and evil forces, let's just wait quietly before God and search our own hearts.

Your Kingdom come, O Father, in the United Kingdom; and your will be done in us and through us. Lord enable us, your servants, to speak your word with great boldness and stretch out your hand with miraculous signs through the name of your holy servant, Jesus. Amen.