Globalisation & Christian living

A talk given at 'Wellspring 2005' – Kent

'To celebrate Christ in a world of fear &cynicism'

I've been asked to share with you all some thoughts about this very popular word 'globalisation', to reflect on how globalisation might be affecting our lives here in this part of the world and to suggest a few Christian responses. And the best place to start to address all that is to ask what this word 'globalisation' means.

In 1996 an oil tanker went aground on the Welsh coast. She spilt 65 thousand tonnes of American crude oil. But although it was Welsh water and American oil, the ship was actually built in Spain. It was registered in Cyprus, but was now flying a Liberian flag. It was currently being managed by a firm in Glasgow, Scotland but had been chartered by the French. The captain of course, was Russian. and the crew was Filipino. That's globalisation for you!

The word 'globalisation' was first used in the 1970s to advertise American Express cards, so you can see immediately that it's going to have a lot to do with money – but I think it's best to think of it as a dynamic of not just economics, but three factors: Technology, politics and economics. So let's look at each in turn.

First: Technology.

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'.

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 we're a more mixed community than ever before. Different cultures, different languages, and different religions. 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.

Now link what I've said about Technology 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. (remember that 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. The Market place rules: OK!

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

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, finance 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.

Put these three together and you've got Globalisation.

'These three – technology, politics and economics – and the greatest of them all is economics.'

Let me explain.

Just before the Big Bang, 90% of international trade transactions around the world was in the form of industrial capital – what we may generally think of as 'real things' – cars, refrigerators, food products, and so on. The remaining 10% of transactions was in the more abstract area of 'finance' – numbers on pieces of paper. After deregulation, by the year 2000, the whole thing had reversed! Now, despite the massive overall increase in international transactions, 90% are in abstract finance – electronic pulses on a screen. That's all. We have turned trade into a virtual reality.

Every day one and a half trillion US dollars are traded on the currency markets, and just 4 days of this trade is equivalent to the total annual world trade in goods and services. And to make matters worse, 95% of that finance trading is purely speculative – it does not create anything that's real.

Trade is now so abstract that when anti-globalisation protesters attack firms like Nike and McDonald's, they are in fact only addressing ten percent of the problem. [*The Global Gamblers: British Banks and the Foreign Exchange Game* (War on Want, 1999)].

But it's clever. This way the UK doesn't have to make things any more to keep rich. It just has to hog the money markets. And that it does from the old Roman City of London – just one square mile of our capital city. That's why it's so risky for western governments to propose Third World Debt remission, because debt remission follows a philosophy of giving preference to production over financial transaction. That could ruin us.

But does any of this matter to the ordinary family in the UK? It does, because now that economics is global, collapse in one nation could mean global melt-down (think of the 1920s and 30s). So when Anderson and the Enron Oil company got into trouble, notice that it had little to do with oil production – what rocked the world was people playing games with the finances. Round the world, house prices rocketed and pensions plummeted. No suburban street in Britain was un-affected. That's globalisation! [not new: Jesus experienced early example of it]

So let's spell out what globalisation actually does to us, day by day – what sort of culture does it create around us? And therefore what sort of people is it turning us into?

1. **It is crucial to remember the rule: "Globalisation requires Urbanisation".**

The software of Technology, Politics & Economics needs the hardware of the urban.

Globalisation is not new just faster: Roman & Greek Empires knew this. Early Church knew this. British Empire knew this. Today: New York, Tokyo, London. [Asia builds size of London every 6 months] We are living in shadow of Global city so we are wealthy at present. (although Northern Way core cities proposal). South East: 29K new houses per annum; £45bn required for infrastructure; Proposal for Development Tariff on each new build (because Section 106 agreements lame) [perhaps housing development now our only industrial production so it may be driving regeneration as much as globalisation is].

2. **In this globalised culture, Short-term Change is the norm.**

Time was when a worker was respected for remaining with one company all their working life. Percy and Florence Arrowsmith recently celebrated their 80th wedding anniversary – it's in the Guinness Book of Records. Percy had worked for the same solicitor's firm for 63 years. Now, because capital moves so fast, employers prefer their work-force to keep up with that capital and job-hop. it keeps their research team abreast of advances being made in competing companies. and it introduces new blood and new ideas. So today, life-long commitment will count against you, whereas flexibility and mobility are essential for survival in the work-place.

No wonder then, that personal relationships go the same way. Young people will often now have a series of partners and ideas of marriage, house ownership and family, may come much later in their lives when a little more stability may set in. Even then, they'll see marriage as a contract, not a covenant.

While those in work continue to job-hop, the more settled retired generation therefore become the natural leaders of the ongoing local settled community life – including the local Church. In my diocese in Essex, the average settled church member is now sixty one! This means the style of worship and church activity will reflect the preferences of that older generation. They even talk of 1950s-style music as 'modern hymns'.

3. **Globalisation also turns everything into a market-place.**

Philosophers of 'post-modernism' say there is today no 'meta-narrative' – no story to which we all give assent. They have obviously never visited Lakeside or Bluewater! They would see that shopping is **the** story. We are born to shop.

And this means we see subjective choice as the ultimate good. I choose a spirituality which suits me – I 'shop around' and choose one which offers me benefits. for example, one which helps me with my stress. Not one like Christianity which might 'cost' me, and is intent on making me more questioning and stressed about myself or my society. People will buy a cross, it's a good logo, but you can't 'sell' Crucifixion.

Things have changed for the parish priest too. To begin with, you can no longer rely upon people knowing who you are or how you fit into their world. When I was still a parish priest, I remember knocking on one door, dressed in black shirt and clerical collar to receive a ready welcome from the couple who grabbed their bag and bustled out onto the pavement with me. I was a little non-plussed by this behaviour, until they asked, "well, where's your taxi?"

The global market has also taught us to be more competitive. It's a culture which tells people to be more thrusting and self-confident. But if people with **bad** impulses are taught to be more self-confident, we're in for trouble. Self-confidence is a dangerous commodity in the wrong hands.

So, Urbanisation, Short term change, Market place – everyday encounters with globalisation.

4. **Global Culture impacts our search for Identity.**

The global economy has by and large, solved the problems of production. It uses the Third World to produce, while our role in the west is to manage the system and consume the goods. It is therefore necessary to change the personalities of westerners from being the 'metal-bashing' producers of yesteryear, into self conscious consumers. In this, advertising plays a central role. So do the celebrities, whose consumption we are supposed to emulate. The language-styles, the dress, the clubbing, and even the latte coffee, are all aspects of a 'theatre of surfaces' which helps us become avid consumers. If they called it 'coffee with milk' it would not entice us to buy. My son-in-law is a TV film producer. He reminded me: "The Ads are no longer there to sponsor television, Dad, TV programmes are there to get you to watch the Ads."

So whether you live in a gentrified terrace and drive a Lotus, or sit in a housing estate kitchen reading a celebrity magazine, the global market is controlling your life-style and helping to model your identity.

I stood in the Lakeside Shopping Centre with one of the directors of a well-known retail company. He held up two white shirts and asked me, "Which one is better quality?" The answer was plain, even for me to see. "But we sell this other one for three times the price because it's got a brand label on it". A shopper with her family had been listening in on the conversation. She agreed with all he said. But she still bought the substandard, branded shirt. "My boy won't *be* anybody, if he doesn't have the right brand". - would not be anybody !? It's about selling you your identity! Youngsters are expected to negotiate a whole series of identities today, choosing from any number of sub-cultural styles, sexual preferences, family and partnering life-styles and different presentations of themselves. A market-place of identities to purchase. And to guide the choices – very few moral co-ordinates left to help. Morality is largely what feels right for you at his particular moment. Morals have become just another fashion choice. Just another market place.

5. **Globalisation makes us bump into one another more.**

Global finance means that Pakistan has to use no less than 60% of its annual national budget to service its debt to the rich west. That makes the country so unstable that it uses another 25% on military expenditure. That leaves only 8% to be used on education and health. 8%! Little wonder that any aspiring Pakistani is going to get on a plane and come to the rich west. Globalisation makes us bump into one another. But whether that bumping into one another in the shopping mall or in the hospital, or on the tube, is a true meeting, well, that's altogether another question.

But globalisation does mean that more than 130 million people now live outside their country of birth. If that is handled badly it will mean strife and violence. However, it can be great. In 2002 the Queen's Jubilee was celebrated with a procession past Buckingham

Palace, representing the cultures of the Commonwealth. Did you see it on the TV? It was great to hear the music, see the colour and share the wonderful mix of cultures. But most participants did not have to come to London for the show. They already lived there. The Commonwealth lives in London now it's the cosmopolitan city, as never before. It's great! However, just a few days after 11th September 2001. I sat with a group of Muslim men in Leeds. They feared the white youths who were now sneering at them and accusing any Asian person of being a terrorist. So we decided to start meeting properly and get to know one another. Out of an evil act of terror, God creates opportunity for togetherness, and sharing of wisdom.

Globalisation throws us all together, but it might tear us all apart. Because the global market-place primarily teaches us to compete against one another. Yet it also has the potential to help us collaborate with one another.

6. **And what of Human Consumption?**

I'd always wanted to see the Houston Astrodome in Texas. I had read that it uses as much energy to run its air conditioning units as is needed by a city with a population of ten thousand people. When I turned up they were demolishing it, to build a bigger one. Just before they brought in the congestion charge, Central London traffic was moving at an average speed of 8 miles/hour. The same as that achieved by the horse-drawn carriages of the 1880s. We need ask ourselves if the creation of so much waste and stress in the global system and in the lives of individuals is worth the cost. A '24 by 7' life-style, relentless work-pressures, email overload, and the cattle-truck grind of daily commuting – is this quality living? I need say no more. Some would argue that if we don't like things this way, it's easy to change it. We have choice. But in a market-led culture, choice is expressed through decisions to purchase or not to purchase. Which means that, if you want a choice – a vote – in this culture, you've got to have money. Politics used to be about regulating that in some way. But regulation of the market is precisely what we have recently voted to be rid of.

So there we are, at least six major ways in which our everyday lives are affected by globalisation, affecting our cultures and so affecting our identities.

However, it's not all gloom and doom.

David Richards, an urban priest friend, was hailed from across the road by his Roman Catholic colleague. "I was sixty on Sunday!" It only transpired later that he was not talking about his birthday but the fact that he could now number sixty different nationalities in his congregation really something to celebrate!

I love being near a global city like London, and enjoy giving thanks for it giving thanks for all the employment, wealth-creation, housing, architecture, artistic achievement, the supportive services, cosmopolitanism and energy. The global city can be full of vitality, full of experiment and invention. It can be outward-looking, expansive, industrious, and open to the world at large – offering hope for the future.

So there are many benefits, but the problems that come with globalisation are also manifold and must be addressed. So how is the Church to respond? What should we Christians do? Let's list some things.

First – Question Globalisation

We must remember that globalisation is still a contested concept. Not *everything* in the world is determined by the market, as the globalisation mind-set would have us believe. The commentator Galbraith, has even asked, and I quote: "Does Globalisation exist or has it been invented to allow the politics of economic entry into other countries?" So first, remember that globalisation is not caste in stone: it may just be a false myth. And even if it is all true – it may not last. The imposition of trade barriers, or the re-regulation of finance, may reverse the whole process.

Second – Christians must admit that we are affected and therefore must respond.

The Church Council meeting may be taken up with discussion about the new hymn book, but the members cannot ignore the homeless addicts who are taking over the churchyard, nor the kids who are trying to steal the amplification system, nor the mentally ill woman who sits at the back of the church crying all through the service. The issues of health, poverty, illiteracy, employment, and so on, simply will not go away. And they are all linked into the culture of globalisation and its mind-sets. Have you noticed that since globalisation really hit British farming, that the suicide rate for young farmers has sky-rocketed? If a Church Council refuses to make choices about these issues – if we don't act, then our witness says: "God likes it the way it is."

Third – Christians must use their pastoral expertise.

The Church has a long history of pastoral care and loving service to those in need. We must do more and more pastoral projects and good works. However, compassion, care and loving service, are attributes which we thankfully share with all humanity. So anyone and everyone can and should offer care, pastoral support and run projects. There is however something in addition to pastoral care and not instead of it, I hasten to add – which the Christian faith can bring, and which is distinctive.

What Christians can distinctively do is to endeavour to live the 'Kingdom of God' way. Jesus in Mark's first chapter, sets out his Manifesto with those words: "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven/God is close at hand!" And Repentance translates Mark's word *metanoia* – which really means a "new mindedness", a complete turning around of our lives towards a new mind-set. Trying not to think the way globalisation controls us to think but seeking the mind of God in our prayers and in our worship and in our fellowship life together. So, as an example, take a central theme of globalisation and look at it from a Kingdom of God perspective – let's repent it:

We've talked a lot about the Market. In our globalised culture, the market rules everything. Even basic human rights like Health and Education, everything is brought down to pounds and pence. 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. 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 washing

away 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. Because, market place 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!" Kingdom of God living starts with Repentance and leads to gracious sharing.

And finally, when we come close to God in our Kingdom of God living, through our prayers and worship, we wonder at God's holiness and that alerts us to our sinfulness. And sinfulness too is global. When we see a young kid dealing drugs, it's a local symptom of a sinful global trade. The prostitute in the doorway, has been illegally imported from Eastern Europe by a global trafficking cartel. We hear of hand-guns in the street – again, the tip of an iceberg which is global, international gun crime.

Kingdom of God living confronts all this sin the same way Jesus did. For remember, when Jesus is crucified, it's very local. He confronts global evil in one local, 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 global sinfulness. And by addressing and being victorious over that local expression of evil, Jesus is forever victorious over all evil everywhere. And that means – and here's the beauty of it – when a Church group runs a project which tries to confront evil or need locally – they are addressing global evil at its heart. When a Christian tries to live the Kingdom of God way, it may be very local but, like the cross, their life also confronts the **global** forces of evil, alienation, of separation. A loving life, is a life with global consequences.

Even our parish projects become Sacraments of something much bigger than themselves – shining out in the dark. Mind-changing – perhaps life-changing – perhaps history transforming. Because remember, our God is not just global Our God is Universal!

AMEN.

+ Laurie Green